

off our backs

a women's newsjournal

michigan womyn's music festival

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michigan womyn's music festival

Eight thousand women descended upon the wooded expanse of Hesperia, Michigan for the 6th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) on August 13-16. Although the festival eschews "star" billings, the performers most familiar were Meg Christian, Alix Dobkin, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Terry Garthwaite, and Alive! In all, 16 groups performed. Face the Music, who handled interpretation for the hearing-impaired, gave a graceful and sensitive performance that enhanced the music.

The festival, which has grown steadily in attendance since its inception in 1976, was characterized by a spirit of cooperation and respect for the property and its temporary inhabitants. A great deal of credit is due the eighty or more organizers for their smooth coordination of an undertaking of this magnitude.

To the uninitiated MWMF spectator (which I was), these four days of proceedings were an overwhelming, but very appealing, array of stimuli: tents of all shapes, colors, and sizes, women of all shapes, colors, sizes, and interests (like snowflakes, no two of us are alike, and the MWMF provided a wonderful setting for us to celebrate our diversity), music that ranged from the San Francisco new wave sounds of The Contractions to the *a cappella* harmonies of Sweet Honey in the Rock, and the occasionally heavy rain that dampened some sleeping bags but was no match for the sheer buoyancy generated by 8,000 celebrants. Even when the rain brought the Friday afternoon stage music to a halt, the music continued in the open tents organized for jam sessions. The jam tents were surrounded by music-starved women who enjoyed an impromptu, but aurally pleasing afternoon.

The musical presentations were ably emceed by Maxine Feldman, who kept the audience entertained with a repertoire of magical tricks, one-liners, historical allegory, and general stage patter. She also handled the necessary task of exhorting spectators to volunteer for 4-hour security shifts, each shift consisting of 100 women. There seemed to be little problem reaching the quota during the day, apparently enticed by priority status at the food line, but volunteerism declined noticeably during the evening hours, because the more well-known performers were scheduled at this time and ironically but understandably because nighttime is potentially more dangerous. I personally heard of only two instances where security was called into emergency action: the first was a report by the organizers that some men had been firing shotguns near the festival site (no injuries or damage, merely a manifestation of the deflated male ego in action); the second incident occurred when the ever-vigilant security volunteers, hearing a woman screaming nearby, investigated and found two women apparently at the height of passion.

Although the rains on Friday postponed virtually all of the afternoon musical events and the evening performances lasted until the wee hours, there were plenty of alternative options. For those lacking the wherewithal, stamina, or inclination to party at their campsites (although I swear some people seemed rooted to the spot), there were the merchants' tents and surrounding area. Wares of every description were displayed in the finest tradition of the traveling emporiums: Lesbian tube socks, jewelry, assorted amulets, menstrual sponges, hand-painted goose eggs, tattoo parlors...all different yet singular in purpose: the care and feeding of women's culture.

Care and feeding of the multitudes was admirably accomplished by the festival coordinators and volunteers. I made a mistake this year by not giving the food line a proper chance. Don't get me wrong; I checked out the available fare, but being a novice, I had feared starvation and had brought a cooler stocked with perishable items. The sight of the seemingly endless food lines confirmed what I perceived to be my worst fears; the reality was that, once again, the coordinators had streamlined the system to a mere 20-minute wait. The food was delicious: plenty of fruit, breads, tofu, salads, and the like, mixed in giant garbage cans (clean, naturally). A human chain transported scores of watermelons from the food tent to their proper station. Women chatted and tapped their mess kits in metallic harmony. Best of all, there were even leftovers.



The MWMF has become synonymous with variety, as evidenced by its international following, and its scope was broadened this year by the addition of two political tents. One housed political materials for distribution; the other served as a center for workshops ranging from an analysis of the security system to a broad-based discussion of S/M by a support and safety group. This workshop was by far the most heavily attended of any I observed. The political tent was packed by about 200 people, a third of whom were practicing or considering the practice of S/M, the remainder who were either curious or who had ducked in from the Friday evening deluge and joined the large crowd gathered. In any event, there seemed to be very few defections during the almost two-hour meeting.

There were nearly 150 general workshop slots (although many were repeated each day) throughout the 4-day festival, and the topics reflected the incredible potpourri of issues germane to women. Among the issues covered were music (naturally), health, dance, sexuality, disability (see article on the Disabled Lesbian Conference, this page), self-defense, white racism, and spirituality.

I was continually amazed by the well-organized yet relaxed character of the festival. Obviously five years of experience with the MWMF had some bearing on the coordination of functions necessary to ensure that everyone's basic and entertainment needs were met, but although it seems obvious, a principal reason for the continued success of the MWMF was precisely that it was by and for women in general and lesbians in particular. The feeling of having a safe place to be, to create, and to enjoy the talents and company of other women, temporarily apart from the power plays, blatant sexism, and hierarchical hype of the real world was a special gift. Although thousands of women attended, a sense of privacy was also evident. Pervading the utopian aura of the festival was the marvelous realization that we were, if fleetingly, inhabitants of a women's world. I doubt there were many participants who weren't somewhat empowered by the prospect.

by nancy fithian



disabled lesbian conference

Immediately following the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was the Disabled Lesbian Conference, held from August 17-19 at the festival site in Hesperia, Michigan. *oob* staffer nancy fithian talked with conference organizer connie panzarino and compiled this report.

Approximately 40 women from all sections of the country gathered for the Disabled Lesbian Conference. Some 300 women had been contacted and had applied but many were unable to attend.

The conference was divided relatively evenly between disabled and abled women and consisted of a dozen workshops germane to both groups. Some workshops were mixed groups of disabled and abled women, some were restricted to disabled women, and others were divided into groups of similarly abled participants. Workshop content was more a free exchange of ideas than a consciously structured format, and each was small enough to allow for spontaneity; however, each sought clearer definitions of disability and ableism.

Disabled participants found it difficult to define themselves as disabled because of the implications of "helplessness" perpetrated by the patriarchal nature of our society and the mass media. Women who had been institutionalized for emotional or psychiatric reasons did not view themselves as disabled solely on the basis of having been institutionalized.

Groups of similarly abled women met separately for three hours to discuss definitions of ableism. When the groups were reunited, they found that they had reached a consensus regarding how abled people view the disabled members of our society.

Generally, abled women (and society in general) oppress disabled women by an amalgamation of fear and power attitudes. Both abled and disabled women recognized that abled women often regard their differently abled sisters as perpetual children rather than as women both capable of contributing to society, and, as women, doubly oppressed by it. Abled women must realize that the damage caused by treating disabled women in an infantile fashion, and recognize that the oppression inherent in our attitudes is the most pernicious form of disability that exists.

As an outgrowth of the combined group discussion, workshops concerning abled fear/power attitudes toward disabled women were held the next day. Other workshops included a discussion on Sexuality and Body Image for disabled women only, a workshop for disabled women on anger and how to deal with it, and a tripartite workshop encompassing abled women who were in lesbian relationships with disabled women, abled women who sought intimate friendships with disabled women, and disabled women who discussed their lovers and intimate friends.

The last day of the conference was a discussion of methods of community outreach. Participants suggested contacting agencies such as Easter Seals and the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation to publicize the validity of the conference. Issues of accessibility and transportation were suggested as issues to be discussed at the community level. Communities should address the issue of ride networks for differently abled citizens. More consciousness-raising groups, especially for abled people, are also imperative.

A major success of the conference was the growth of a network of disabled lesbians. Half the names of a 350-member list were compiled at the festival and conference. The network is especially important because one of the greatest difficulties faced by disabled lesbians is outreach. Many women are still in the closet or inaccessible by mail. A network could help to alleviate a related problem--funding.

The location of next year's conference has not yet been determined, but will probably be held at a university. Many women felt although the festival coordinators had done a good job on organizing differently abled space, 8 days of camping was a bit much.

In general, the conference was termed a success. Connie Panzarino commented, "Each of us found at least one other person we could share problems with and talk to...Abled women were open to learning, growing, and wanting to get past their fears and talk about them."

Connie Panzarino wanted to express her gratitude to the women who helped make the conference a success. Arachne Rae was a coordinator both at the conference and the MWMF; Joyce Weissberg handled attendant care and financial aid; Pamela Maynard, Janet Pearl, and Marjorie Anderson also donated much of their time. The flyer was designed and donated by Ellen Turner. Food and shelter were provided by the coordinators at the MWMF, and two nurses stayed on and became a part of the conference.

Women wishing information on the disabled lesbian network should contact:

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