

National Women's Music Festival

by Lee Lynch

The midwest was welcome haven from controversy. Perhaps it was all there, under the surface, and I as a guest was spared it. In any case I found the women I met — from New York to Sheboygan Falls, welcoming and appreciative of all the National Women's Music Festival had to offer.

For me, music festivals have been damp or hot buggy treks into a wilderness which distracts from the culture at hand. But NWMF is held on the University of Indiana campus at Bloomington. Participants are housed in



dorms, performers dance, sing, read, talk, in classrooms, auditoriums, lounges. The main stage is a huge balconied hall with excellent acoustics. Across it went Ferron, Toshi Reagon, Judy Sloan, Ronnie Gilbert, Adrienne Torf, Linda Tillery and Band (especially that dynamic keyboard musician Julie Horni in her short white dress and yellow sneakers), Robin Tyler, June Millington, Alive, Beth York,

Casselberry and DuPree, and the Wright Dance Company. At the end of the last performance the festival organizers and crew dramatically ascended on a platform from the orchestra pit for deserved accolades.

I was there for the Writer's Conference, and though writers were not treated with as much panache as the musicians, the conference was well-attended. Ruth Peters, who did an impressively efficient job of organizing cultural events, tells me the goal is to expand the Writers' Conference to the level of the Music Industry Conference which took place just prior to the festival. Future plans include bringing together women authors, editors, press, publishers, etc. for three to four days of intense networking. This, plus a booking period for authors to establish speaking engagements, is a sorely needed event and I am anxious to support it and to see it happen.

Judy Grahn was a featured writer, along with Kate Clinton, who taught comedy writing, and myself. Judy is always an inspiration for me. Looking attractively older and healthier than the thin, intense traveller I first saw read in New Haven fourteen years ago, she still fills an auditorium with a presence I can only call lesbian divinity. Her Common Woman poems have been published and republished, her *Amazon of Wands* (Crossing) is another major work that changed the course of lesbian literature. I am glad to see her reading public growing as this woman's words are like proud clothing we can don again and again to strut and preen in, reminded of our own worth and beauty. Describing herself as the ceremonial dyke she researched for *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Beacon), Grahan brought proof of our gay and lesbian history and culture to us. Her new poetry, like her old, had me crying, so powerfully moving, so deep inside my lesbian psyche does she touch.

I was part of a panel featuring Tony Armstrong, publisher of *Hot Wire**, the women's music industry magazine. She's a hard-

driving professional whose publication reflects that in quality and scope. Jeri Edwards of *I Know You Know**, a four-color glossy magazine of lesbian views and news, spoke too. I enjoyed some time with Jeri, heard her dreams, her ambitions for the magazine. *IKYK* is another needed lifeline being cast to end lesbian isolation. A successful businesswoman, Jeri knows what it takes to build and support an alternative publication. She, with Nancy Singleton and Mary Byrne (Mary also organized NWMF), have more than half their goal of 6000 subscribers. They've accomplished this in less than year. Surely this is a record for a lesbian publication. Jeri, once an art historian who taught at Bloomington, has a nose for what appeals to the greatest number of women and *IKYK* appeals with a wide and innovative range of features.

At another workshop Tracy Baim spoke. Small, surprisingly young for her accomplishments, she's associate editor of Chicago's *Gay Life*. She created and edits "Sister Spirit," several pullout pages in each issue of *Gay Life*, designed so women can choose not to wade through the "jock strap ads." Tracy impressed me as one of a whole new breed of young women willing to unite with men to create a strong gay culture. It makes me wonder, have the older separatists done some healing for us, so the dykes coming up and out can live without so much rancor? Have some gay men achieved such a measure of feminism we can work together with more ease?

The Feminist Writers' Guild* is very active in the Chicago-Indianapolis area and there were many Guild members at NWMF. One workshop addressed the need for the group to provide peer support, advice and programs such as health insurance to those of us trying to survive by writing. Once more, it was heartening to see women like Jorjet Harper, the Guild's new administrative coordinator, working toward professionalism on their own

terms, creating their own structures, meeting their own needs.

Videotaping Judy Grahn and every other performer they could, was JO/ED Video*, a team of two women who drive endless miles each year to preserve women's/lesbian history. They're building a visual archive they're eager to share and thus far have tapes of, among others, Robin Tyler, Rita Mae Brown, Ginny Clemons, Barbara Grier.

Underlying the success of this festival for me was the Sober Support Series, a twenty-four hour women-only space where meetings of Alcoholics, Narcotics, Overeaters and Emotions Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholics were held. Organized by Cindy McCammack, SS was a place with an AA structure where any woman could go for talk, sharing, crying, festival stress syndrome or addiction problems. I spent hours there, working to keep my sanity in a setting where even non-performers were coping with overload. One of the most important hours for me was just prior to my first appearance in a great big lecture hall all by myself in front of a huge number of strangers with a MICROPHONE. I arrived at the Sober Support lounge paralyzed with fear, mute, and left calmed, reassured, less sick to my stomach, on a carpet of good wishes and understanding.

The festival brought together an enormous and eclectic variety of women's energy. At a reception, the Writers' Conference merged momentarily with the concurrent Spirituality Conference. Autographing books were Z Budapest, striking in her flowing clothing; Diane Mariechild, soft, likeable author of *Mother Wit*, and Merlin Stone, another art historian as well as author of *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood*.

We mingled with autograph seekers in a room which also held the visual arts exhibit. It was dizzying to talk to Yvonne Zipter, poet, novelist and organizer of the Writers' Conference; look up to see all that moving visual art; buy books by Judy, Diane, Merlin, from Indianapolis' Dreams and Swords Bookstore owner Harriet Clare (who really knows how to sell books); and move on to a performance by Portland's own Dyketones — that's the kind of vision, maturity and respect for one another's efforts, as well as allowance for one another's mistakes (see Letters to the Editor), that's creating room for us to grow too strong to be put down. Too strong to be silenced ever again.

National Women's Music Festival, PO Box 5217, Bloomington, IN 47402
Hot Wire, 1321 Rosedale, Chicago, IL 60660
I Know You Know, 5199 N. Keystone Ave., S. 104, Indianapolis, IN 46205
Gay Life, 5023 N. Clark, Chicago, IL 60640
 Feminist Writers' Guild, PO Box 9396, Berkeley, CA 94709
 Jo/Ed Video, PO Box 41773, Memphis, TN 38174-1773

Thanks to Tee Corinne for editing this month's column.

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