

## Sharon Hill: Community Organizer & "Devil's Advocate"

by Pat Scott

In growing older, is the Women's Movement growing wiser or copping out? The answer to that depends on your point of view, which among feminists is as varied as those who people the Movement. Women's Studies classes, which have fed and nurtured the Movement, traditionally lambasted "buying into the patriarchy," viewing with suspicion Power, Money and Possessions. That view may have hamstrung women in our society, creating a fear-of-success syndrome, and

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there are those now who question the wisdom of being meekly politically correct. One of the people who questions and tests nearly everything in our community is producer, co-editor, community organizer Sharon Hill.

Chances are, if you see posters or advertisements about Lesbian/Gay Pride committees, International Women's Day, *Rag Times*, Women Musicians Network, feminist performance events, you've run across Hill's name as producer, member, contact person. If there's something you want to know — how to rent a hall, where to find a women's band, how to hire Kate Clinton — you may be routed to Sharon Hill.

"Probably one of my best assets is that I'm a trouble shooter," she says. "If I don't know how to do it, I find out. Or I know the resource people to go to, and to figure out the best way."

And if, as it's said, "Knowledge is power," then Hill is a force in the community to be reckoned with.

"Just in terms of the information that I have. . . . 'the information flow is power because we can effect some changes,' Hill acknowledges. "And I get criticized for it. I think that power and authority are not things women are supposed to have, want or use."

It's intoxicating in its way, this sense of being nearly indispensable: ear to the ground, always in the flow of things. But Hill isn't anxious for the limelight, seeing herself rather as one among many talented and responsible people. She prefers to work behind the scenes to help organize and coordinate diverse factions; facilitate the advancement of a cause, the production of an event; educate. She is the idea person, the starter, but she insists, "You need group support to get things done, to keep going. And you also need the group support, I think, to enhance everybody's abilities."

That the women's community strives to level a mainstream class and caste system, emphasizing equality and communication, Hill applauds. "We have been so careful in the women's community and the feminist community to be consensus-oriented, and I think that's good. I really appreciate that we can make sure that I don't have any more say just 'cuz I have a big mouth and can ramble on forever," she says.

And yet one can drown in words and indecision when trying for consensus. Input by committees or the community sometimes translates into a situation where no one accepts responsibility, no one wants the author-

ity. And without a central point of focus it can be difficult to get things done.

"There's something to be said about giving somebody the authority to just decide; do it," Hill maintains. "There's times when you've gotta act, and there's so many times that we defer or table it, or put it off. In certain situations it can't be a committee sort of thing."

But feminists have been uneasy with authority figures, a central point of control, including and sometimes especially when that central authority is a woman. Women-owned businesses are often more circumspectly observed and heavily censured by the women's community. Those that don't fit into the consensus-mold, especially, may be ostracized. And if community input has been offered but not implemented, there may be unrest. Profit especially is questioned: How much money is a business "making off the community?" These concerns have in the past given rise to threats of "boycott!" and accusations of "capitalist!" and "buying into the patriarchy."

Patience with that sort of verbiage, unchecked and unquestioned, is thinning in some quarters, including Hill's. Women who have bought their own businesses incur substantial financial risk. That one of their aims may be profit is surely understandable.

"The women's community can stop being perceived as downwardly mobile," says Hill. "There was that feminist perception there for a while that if you had a job or were a business person you were selling out. But I think reality or practicality has set in. We have to be able to survive change. . . ." We've learned how to deal with poverty and adversity, can we learn also how to deal with success?

Traditional views and circumstances in mainstream society are being questioned, it's only fair that traditional precepts within the women's movement should be re-evaluated as well and changes, as needed, encouraged. Hill — facilitator, organizer, initiator, devil's advocate — encourages self-examination by feminists, allowing outside influences at least

to intrude, whether or not they're accepted.

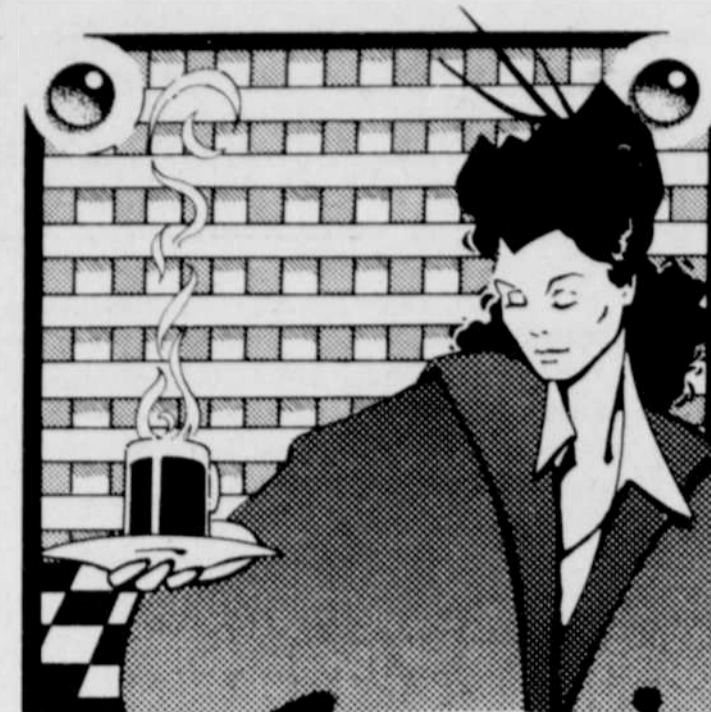
When young and vulnerable "you need a time when you're real closed; you're in a group you feel safe with and there's commonality there," Hill observes. "And when you're ready and you feel secure, you're gonna look for new ideas because it's okay to open up and look around." The women's movement may be at that point in its development.

There are feminists now considering whether we can withstand the onslaught of those fearful influences — Power, Money, Possessions. Can we wield them ethically? Perhaps it's not necessary to compromise our beliefs. There is a time to be separate; but for some this is a time to blend where we can, and through those points of similarity grow stronger.

Hill sees herself as a "crossover," able to bridge several of the groups that comprise our community. "We're so separated," she observes. "But if we join forces in certain situations we're able to be more effective. There are so many common bonds, and we don't utilize them," she sighs. "I like to make sure that people work together and that things happen — that we become more organized. I keep harping on people to not be so closed to things, to listen to other people. We can still work certain things out whether we agree politically or not."

Hill is a great believer in "reality checks" for the women's movement, the lesbian community, any community, and certainly for herself. Talking with friends and new acquaintances is an important aid to keeping her feet on the ground, she maintains. Networking allows her to see beyond the parameters of her own experience. And Hill, the enemy of complacency and stale ideals, passes her questioning and testing on down the line.

"I don't have a particular belief that I want people to hear or believe," she says. "But they have to be aware themselves of what's going on. The issue's aren't all cut and dried."



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