

Linda Shirley: the dyke behind the mike

I let them know that I'm a lesbian and that we're not looking for small minds at KBOO

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

You know this voice. Linda Shirley, the 'dyke behind the mike,' every Friday night on KBOO, spinning records for three hours, playing women's music from Meg Christian to Michelle Shocked.

If you've listened even once, you know the voice, like 100 yards of Boston asphalt, the

Profile

A's and R's paved flat and wide, dry humor streaking through it like the big white line in the center of the road.

"I'm terribly honored to be Miss June Centerfold," she deadpans, then proceeds to interview the interviewer: How'd you get to be a writer? Are you a lesbian? Where are you from? She does not mince words or pause much between questions.

Shirley isn't shy on the other side of the microphone, either. In the uncommon position of interviewee, she delivers the kind of hyper monologue that radio demands — one brisk round on lesbian music and how it's changed, then switches the subject, easy as flipping a disc, to her new-found technological confidence. Click. Portland as cultural wasteland. Click. Olivia Records' new look. Click. Life as a lesbian single parent of a 15-year-old daughter.

Behind the voice is Linda Shirley, expatriate from Boston. She began her KBOO career as a volunteer who could barely plug in a radio and worked her way up to hosting a show, running for the board of directors. For the last four years she has been KBOO's coordinator of volunteers and special events.

She plans to leave at the end of June, to run Girlfriend Productions full-time, bringing lesbian artists, musicians and writers to town. Why? Because she thrills to that kind of challenge, pulling disparate pieces together to make an event. Because she is a self-described "egomaniac Leo." Because, as any radio host knows, eventually the show ends and a new one has to begin.

"I've always been into music; music is something that really influenced me. One of my dreams was to be a disc jockey in a lesbian bar. But when I lived in Massachusetts and Arizona, I'd never heard of community radio stations. When I moved to Portland, one of my lovers was doing a jazz show on KBOO. I started doing Womansoul about seven years ago. It started out to be mostly lesbian music, but through the years it changed to be lesbian-positive and women's stuff. I can't possibly play three hours just of lesbian music. I would fall asleep.

"In the old days, if you would party up and play, say, Gladys Knight and the Pips, people would call up and say, 'You know, the Pips are men.' People were so intense that those three hours be really pure. Now our guideline is that the woman be the featured artist.

"Radio is accessible. Everybody's got a radio. There are 66 community radio stations across the country. They bring together the most incredibly diverse groups of people. Some real sexist pigs, some people who, politically are just . . . confused. And they come together to create this radio station that really does respond to people versus profit. You have so much freedom to do programming that you're just not going to hear anyplace else. And I love women calling me up and loving the sound of my voice on the radio at 10 o'clock at night.



Photo by Jay Brown

"There are more mainstream women artists now — especially in the last year and a half — whose music is important and whose lifestyles reflect a political stance that I like and who, as Alix Dobkin calls it, are not sexually accessible to men. Tracy Chapman and Melissa Etheridge are two that stand out for me. So I'm playing a little more mainstream. I'm mostly into rhythm-and-blues and soul. With the blues, historically, the sound is kind of 'beat me, fuck me and I'll still write you bad checks.' These women's voices are fantastic, but historically, the lyrics suck. There are more and more blues singers coming up who have a little more sense than that.

"What have I learned from doing radio? On a real concrete level, I am technologically really astute. When I first came to KBOO, I could turn my stereo on. If I moved, I couldn't get it to work. I never understood outputs and inputs. So it gave me a lot of knowledge. That's what KBOO does. Besides being a radio station, it's a real training resource.

"I had been on welfare, and I hadn't really had a straight job. So this threw me into a straight job. It threw me into the position of being someone who hadn't had a lot of power in the structure, and then suddenly having a lot of power. It gave me a lot of skills and calmed me down a lot.

"Also, I had never played with boys. I would probably have considered myself a separatist; my choice of who I hung out with was always women, always lesbians. But some of my closest connections at KBOO now are men. It loosened me up a little bit about that. Plus I made a lot of good connections. Working at KBOO was a real gift for me, a luxury, and now part of my motive for leaving is that it's time for someone else.

"I started Girlfriend Productions last fall. I had produced little concerts here and there. I decided to really focus in on doing it full-time because we were missing so much good shit; it was just not happening. I've got a flair for it. I like doing it, you know. I love going out and leafletting. I'm not much into the stars. But I'm into sharing the music and the experience.

"Coming from the east coast, Portland, to me, has always been kind of a cultural wasteland. [My girlfriend] gets *Sojourner*, the Boston magazine; every fuckin' night there's somebody coming to town — authors, poets, musicians, speakers. We need these women to be in our faces, these women whose ideas and whose music shaped part of our lives and whose words sometimes more adequately reflected our experiences than our own words

did. I think we need to see these women. We need the exchange. I think it's really important.

"There is a lesbian culture. There are writers, there are musicians, there are poets, dancers. Women who reflect our lives, who share the same values, the same experiences. Without culture, you lose your roots. You're kind of wandering through this map of blandness.

"One thing that is really irritating to me is that this music has never been called 'lesbian music.' It's always been called 'women's music.' Now it's not even called women's music. All the press stuff that Olivia sends out now is called 'independent music.' Of course, what they're trying to do is expand their audience, trying to cross over. They're trying to share their music with more people and make more money.

"It's a shame. It's always been a toss between selling out and buying in. Holly Near has done it very successfully. Holly Near built up alliances with all these different groups. She and her label have been instrumental in bringing to us the new music from Central America. She has made alliances with these people who support her. Still, you go to a concert, it's 90 percent lesbians.

"I see the last five or six years as being a lot of circles of twos. The community was very couple-oriented. Now you read *Just Out* and there's 40 fuckin' groups — women who like fish, lesbians who like science. And women are going out to those. Women are starting to come out of their little circles and really want to connect and network and be with other lesbians. That's kind of how it was back in the 1970s.

"In small communities like Portland, it's really hard to be an out lesbian and to feel good about it sometimes. You read the papers, and you see the lies they tell about us. You see women in the Marine Corps getting sentenced for having 'affection' towards another woman. You see all these things, and you

think, 'God, I'm a piece of shit.' We need women to say, 'No, you're not a piece of shit. You're great. You're wonderful. You're beautiful. You've made an incredibly good choice in your life, and let's celebrate it.'

"I think it's exciting on radio to have a woman on the air saying 'dyke behind the mike.' When I was growing up, or even when I was in my 20s, if I had had a radio station with a lesbian saying she was a lesbian and having a good time and playing music, I would have been . . . thrilled. So I try to be out there as much as possible. On the radio, and in my job. I do these volunteer orientations where anyone who's interested in being involved can come to hear about it, and I let them know that I'm a lesbian and we're not looking for small minds at KBOO.

"People are always amazed that I'm a mother. I have pictures all over my office and they say, 'Who is that?' I say, 'That's my daughter,' and they go, 'You're a mother?' Yeah! And she's even heterosexual. Coyote is an incredible child.

"I think children of lesbians . . . I think our daughters are incredible. I think they're going to be on the vanguard of some kind of progressive thinking when they get to college. With sons, it's dicier — from teaching them how to pee standing up to teaching them how we choose to be with women, but we don't hate them. I've seen some numbers put on boys, where the anger towards men just flows over to the sons. It's hard. I'm glad I had a daughter.

"I think these families we create are really important. We need these short people in our lives. We can't be a whole family of the same height. We make great parents. Coyote's friends are more impressed with the fact that she calls me 'Linda' than with the fact that I'm a lesbian. I know there's a lot of homophobia and racism and sexism in the younger generation, but I see a little glint, a little dent in their armor, that they're willing to listen more.

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