

INTERVIEW

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Tough questions, frank answers

An interview with **Alix Dobkin**
 Continued from the cover

I didn't know until I began my research for this interview that you're a musician—and a famous one at that. Which came first for you, music or feminism, and how did the two intersect?

Music was as much a part of my upbringing as radicalism. I was raised on folk music, Communist politics, and the belief (learned in Yiddish-Jewish culture) that entertainment should always be educational. I discovered feminism in my 30s.

I've also read that you were married before coming out as a lesbian in the early '70s. Did you think or feel you were a lesbian before you came out publicly? What prompted your coming out?

I was married for about 6 years before discovering feminism, which gave me the political context to come out as a Lesbian, which I realized was what I had wanted to do all along but didn't because:

- 1) I liked
 - a) men
 - b) sex with men
 - c) heterosexual privilege.
- 2) Being so Communist-identified in my youth was "outsider" enough for me. I couldn't bear the thought or the burden of being a Lesbian too. In college I met my first Lesbians who I liked, but whose life I couldn't identify with, since it revolved around bar culture, which I didn't relate to. Plus many of the women scared me and the "life" didn't attract me.

I found the following quote in promotional materials prepared by the women's studies department at Portland State University, where you'll be lecturing: "In 1974 she released the first recording of music by, about and for women, *Lavender Jane Loves Women*."

That seems like a pretty bold claim, to be the first of anything. Where would you place yourself in the history of women's music?

Yes, a "bold claim" and not precisely accurate.... The truth is that *Lavender Jane Loves Women* was the first LESBIAN record album entirely produced by women. It was also the first internationally distributed Lesbian album ever produced on the planet.

My friend, journalist and longtime activist Jim Fouratt (who I hadn't yet met) described my place in the history of "Women's Music" this way: "Alix Dobkin broke the silence, singing loud the word *lesbian* back in 1973. She is the linchpin, the crazy crone who refuses to shut up, singing the praises of women-loving women thousands of times over the years in concert halls, back rooms, cleared fields, women's spaces, rallies and marches all over the world. Alix Dobkin and her coven of mad women birthed the beautiful, liberating noise called 'women's music.'"

Additional "first": I was featured performer in the first Lesbian music concert tour ever in Europe in 1979. (There are probably others, but who can remember?)

Give me your 30-second pitch for feminism in general and separatism in particular. Why is women-only space so important?

When women figured out their personal and global relationship to men and then conferred value upon their own lives, it was called "feminism"—the smartest, most comprehensive, incisive, effective and most fun political analysis there is or has ever been on Earth.

statement suggests the opposite, that MTFs are incontrovertibly male—which seems to contradict the feelings and experiences of many MTFs.

What would you say to clarify your statement and convince me you're not using your vagina-based gender construct to condemn someone whose psychosocial experience of gender is female and whose physical experience is that of incongruity?

First of all, although it seems to work for you, "vagina-based gender construct" does not begin to describe how I define "woman." I certainly accept the existence of a wide variety of identity on the "gender" spectrum not included or recognized in patriarchal sex-roles, however, I am curious about your use of "condemn" to describe my defense of what I consider sacred women's space. Do you consider not being accepted as a "woman" [equal to] "condemned"?

Furthermore, how can you or any nonwoman know what, in fact, anyone's "psychosocial experience of gender" really means? "Female" as

defined by sex-role stereotype? And does this not reinforce that (male-invented) stereotype?

Since men (patriarchy) invented "masculine" and "feminine" and defined everything, including what "woman" means, for the purpose of control and domination, and since men were forced to then project onto women a suppressed portion of male character,* how authentic can their perception of women be? Especially from anyone who was raised male? No, I believe "incongruity" is a much more accurate description of the "psychosocial experience of gender" you describe in addition to the "physical experience" of genuinely transgendered persons.

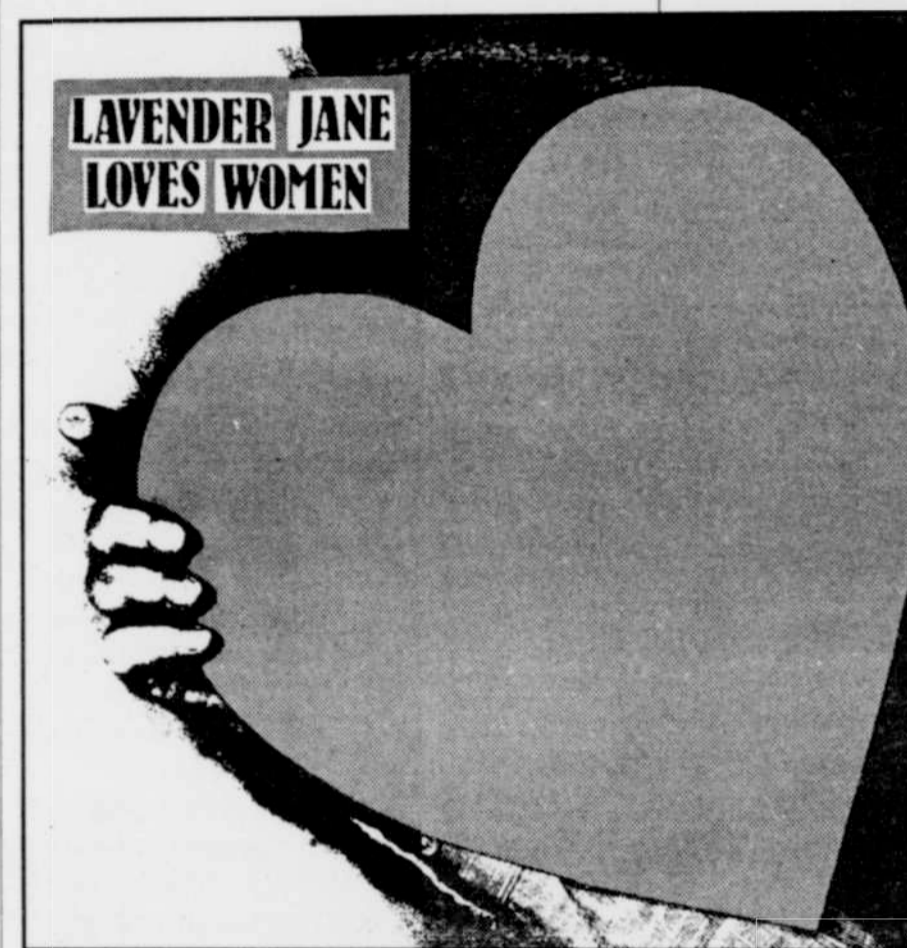
*See "The Verb of Gender & Other 3 Dollar Bills," *Outlines* Minstrel Blood column, Nov. 11, 1998, for more discussion of this proposition.

In the same column, you wrote: "Logical and compelling as our analysis of patriarchy is, not one of us truly escapes."

Is it possible that "women-born" separatism—specifically, the exclusion of trans people who don't fit the authorized definition of "woman"—is a feminist appropriation of the patriarchal tactic of marking the "other" and assigning status by remarking about the other's acceptability?

Christopher! Do you see what you are doing here? Again, I must remind you that since men have been defining everything, including women, ever since the rise of the patriarchy, your question needs to be regarded in the light that here are men doing it again. But this latest reversal attempts to re-establish, as "Passover Revisited" contends, the access men lost (for just a few years) to our (sacred) women's space and women's business.

Men are so entitled that you don't even understand what you are doing, how you are changing the rules when it suits your purpose. Women need to define ourselves, and some of us will insist on doing this no matter what postmodernism, social constructionists, or anyone else says or does.



Women-only space is important for many, many reasons, some of which are that: We can relax and discover, create, invent who we are and have terrific and unrestricted fun together without worrying, thinking, taking care of, defending against, amusing, justifying our existence, trying to impress or soothe the feelings of nonwomen.

Now for the thorny stuff! Portland has a very vocal trans activist community, and the Lesbian Community Project—which is sponsoring the May 5 herstory forum you'll be

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leading—has been struggling with trans acceptance and the granting of membership status to men. As such, I'd be remiss if I didn't bring up your disinvitation to the 1998 Philadelphia Dyke March.

March organizers gave you a hard time over something you wrote in "Passover Revisited," one of your *Minstrel Blood* columns in *Chicago Outlines*. The offending statement was: "For over 20 years now, men have declared themselves 'women,' manipulated their bodies via experimental surgery, and then demanded the feminist seal of approval from survivors of girlhood."

I'm young, queer, a child of deconstruction and I've concluded I have to accept others' gender identities and gender presentations at face value. To me, therefore, a male-to-female transsexual is, was and always will be a woman, even without surgery. Your