

# Michigan on my mind

In praise of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, still going strong after 25 years

BY HOLLY PRUETT



Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

Goddess worshippers, stage divers, RV-ing women, riot grrrls and women of every preference and persuasion are gearing up for the 25th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival; upwards of 8,000 women from around the world are expected to attend during the week of August 8 through 13.

Over the last 25 years more than 50,000 women have made the pilgrimage to this lesbian phoenix that rises from the ferns each August, and for them "Michigan" no longer represents that state in the Midwest sandwiched between two giant lakes. Instead, "Michigan" represents a state of mind, a place where what's scarcely possible in the greater world becomes possible and is celebrated for one week each year.

"It's an exuberant celebration of our lives where we can love who we are as women," says Krissy Keefer, collective member and artistic director of Dance Brigade and Wallflower Order.

Michigan demonstrates what women can create when provided the space—and, some say, what the world might be like if it were run by women. "The festival shows that it's possible to create a sustained reality with shared values, even when our ways of expressing those values aren't all the same," says Papusa Molina, who will travel from Mexico for her 15th festival.

Lynne Breedlove, lead singer of Tribe 8, who

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feared "some kind of hippie-dippy experience" when the band first played Michigan in 1995, now considers the festival "a model for the whole world." She says: "It's my dream future." But first and foremost, it's a party. Festival

attendees will enjoy 40 performances, hundreds of workshops, a film festival, a crafts fair and the 650 wooded acres that are home to this perennial women's village. The lineup of performing artists will knock your socks off, whether those socks are worn in Doc Martens, Birkenstocks, platform thigh-highs or Keds.

We'll get to the artists in a minute. First, consider the stages on which they'll perform. They are out, way out, in the woods: the lush green woods, so full of oxygen that anything can happen.

"Women get an experience here that's crystal clear

because it's so pure," says 25-year veteran Karen Dodson. "They can feel what it's like to have their energy less diluted."

This sylvan territory is a place where sisters were doing it for themselves long before Aretha and Annie ever thought to sing a song on the subject.

In 1978, still married but following her first female crush to the festival, Amoja Three Rivers marveled at the sight of "women taking care of all the business themselves. It was the year of the tornado," she recalls. "There were women up on the stage scaffolding and the lightning was like a strobe light. These were not scared women. These women were shouting back to the thunder."

With women handling everything from sound to security and plumbing to Popsicles, the festival is an annual antidote to the culture at large that, as far as many feminists are concerned, continues to deny women's abilities, ethics and basic worth. For the girls who've grown up at the festival, says 17-year-old Amber Jones, "It's so empowering to know I can do that! Seeing women so strong in their womanness, living on their own without men, is an incredible thing for a young girl to see."

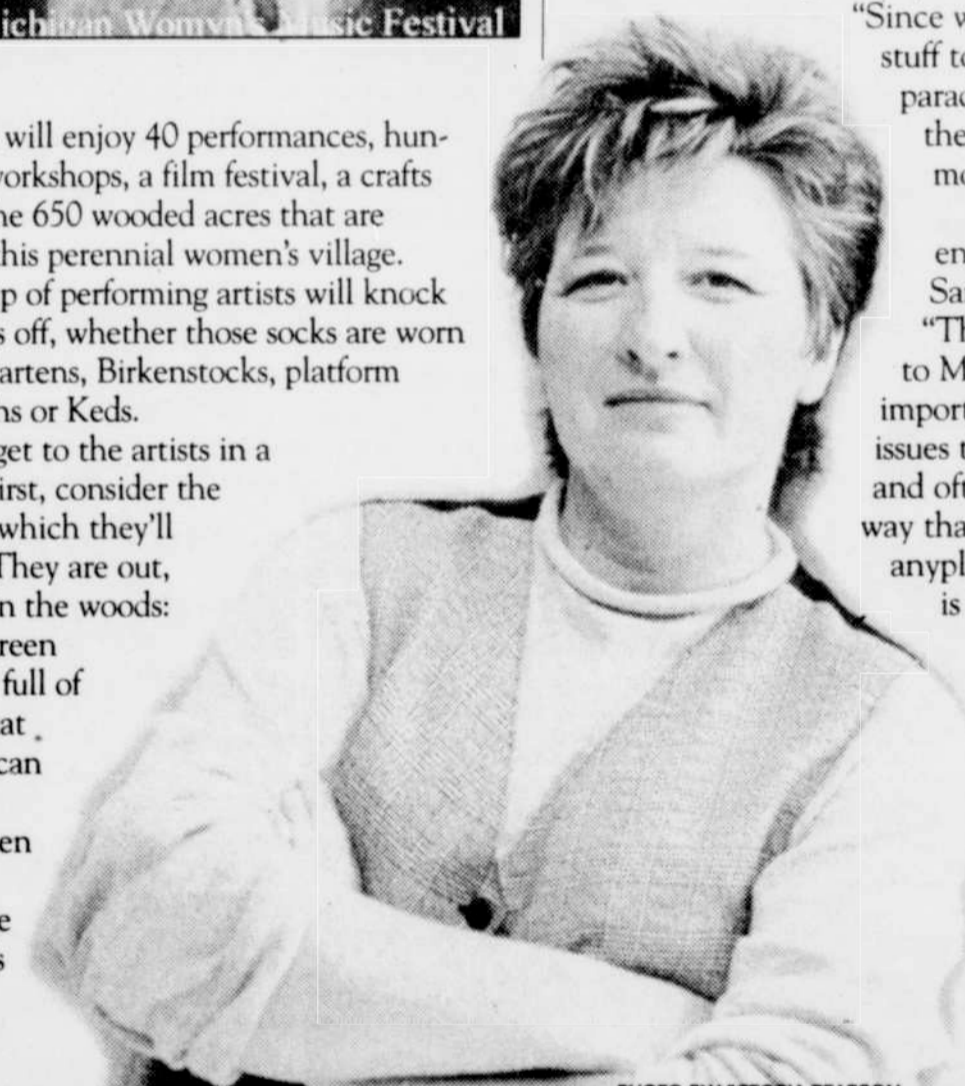
That's not to say it's a perfect place. Michigan has long been recognized as a petri dish: a place where different cultural strains germinate and grow into a larger, complex organism. The storms that rock the land aren't all on the weather map.

Singer Holly Near observes:

"Since we bring all our stuff to the party, it's no paradise—though there are heavenly moments."

Longtime sound engineer Boden Sandstrom says, "The issues brought to Michigan are what's important to women, issues that are discussed and often resolved in a way that doesn't exist anywhere else, and then is taken back to communities around the world."

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Ferron reunites with her tribe

PHOTO BY VICTORIA PEARSON

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