

Michigan on my mind

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Well-known musician Ferron confirms Michigan's vanguard role: "What starts at Michigan ends up in the public in five or six years."

Whether it's work on race and class awareness or insistence on sign language interpretation, many of the practices that are taken for granted in feminist enterprises around the country were the subject of testing and turmoil at Michigan.

Beneath the methodical process of eruption and resolution of conflict lies an abiding commitment to connection that's often missing in the larger world. Susan Allborell says, "It's my family, truly. We've stood around knee deep in mud, we've screamed at each other, but it never changed the fact that we love each other."

That abiding sense of connection—to a place, to a vision and to one another—has brought Michigan to its 25th year at a time when the closing of lesbian-feminist bookstores and other institutions is all too common. In a sense, the festival is a time capsule, preserving some of the energy of those years when "liberation" was still an overt goal.

"You have to understand what it was like in 1976," says Karen Dodson, who traveled to the first festival from Chicago. "It was lezzie fever. It was an incredible upwelling of grass-roots energy: You could put one lavender flier up in a city of 3 million, and 500 women would find out about it."

The festival is an odd sort of time capsule, though, one that's popped open every year. "The women who were there in the beginning have kept in mind that the women's movement is fluid and that it needs to change to survive," observes Breedlove. "There are constantly new generations coming up and the younger women have taken the responsibility to make Michigan theirs as well."

The resulting diversity may be the key to the longevity of the festival. From the range of musicians—"The artistic span from Kay Gardner to Tribe 8 shows enormous breadth," comments Krissy Keefer—to the smorgasbord of athletic, cultural and educational activities—try the ever-popular kissing workshop—to the parade of differing ages, ethnicities and aesthetics, diversity at Michigan is a reality, not rhetoric.

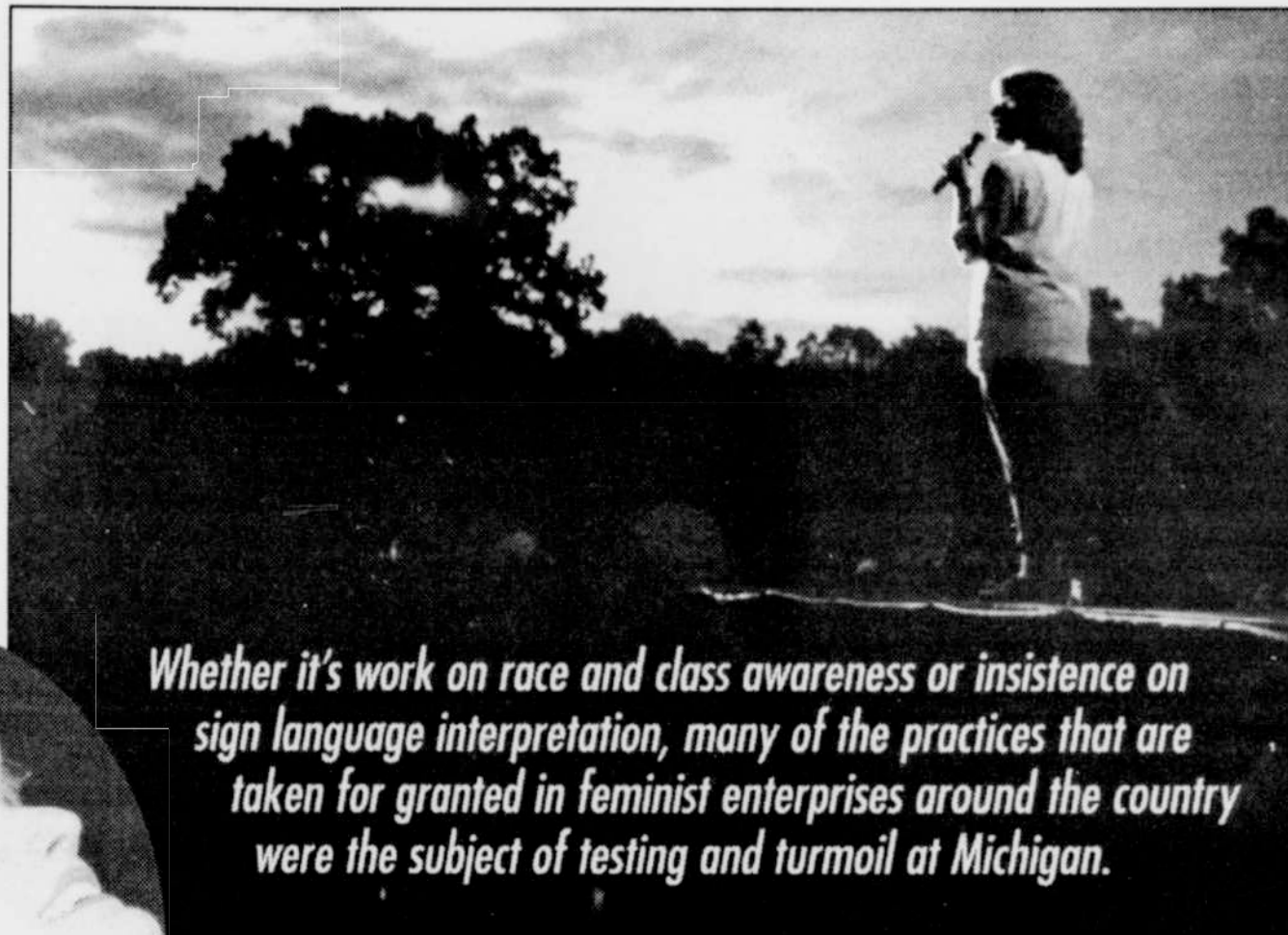
"It happens here on the land," Keefer concludes, "in the mosh pit of our lives."

What makes this grand social experiment work? Sandstrom, who's doing doctoral

research on the subject after many years as a pioneer in women's music, has a theory: "None of these things would happen if not organized around women's music. It's a performance space, and each of us is always performing our identity. All of those hard issues can get played out in performance."

The transcendent energy of music that's connected to our experiences as women and created in a space of our own making, this is the beat of the festival's heart. Which brings us to the performing artists.

A sampling of artists scheduled to appear includes longtime festival favorites Holly Near, Toshi Reagon & Big Lovely, Teresa Trull and Barbara Highbie, Mary Watkins and Kay Gardner, Suzanne Westenhoefer, Edwina Lee Tyler, Ferron, and Rhinannon. Newer to Michigan but beloved by today's multigenerational audience are bands such as Tribe 8, the Butchies, Straight Ahead, Bitch and Animal, Kindness, and Latin American All Stars. Theater, dance and spoken word will be well-represented with Holly Hughes in *Preaching to the Perverted*, Marga Gomez in *Jaywalker*, Sister Spit's Rambling Road Show, the Dance Brigade, Between the Lines Dance Co., Kathleen Hermesdorf and



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Suzanne Westenhoefer

Dominique Zeltman. Solo music sets to watch for are Melissa Ferrick, Catie Curtis and Kinnie Starr. And a surprise set by the Indigo Girls has recently been added to Wednesday night's lineup. For many artists, Michigan's 25th anniversary is both a personal and cultural milestone.

Toshi Reagon, now a popular headliner, remembers: "I first came to Michigan when I was 16 with my mom [Sweet Honey in the

Rock founder Bernice Johnson Reagon]. I couldn't even get onto the open mike stage."

For Ferron, "It's the reunion of our tribe. It's the young meeting the elders; it's the passing of the torch in some way."

Lynne Breedlove goes so far as to say, "My entire life's been changed."

Life-changing experiences on a sliding-scale ticket. "It's magical," says Amoja Three Rivers. "It's like Christmas was when I was a child, something I look forward to each year."

For 15-year-old Jezanna Garza, going to Michigan has been an annual event since she was a baby swaddled on her mother's back. "Michigan moves you; adults, kids, we can all feel it," she says. "When I'm there, I feel free. The festival taught me to stand up for my rights. It comes from knowing I have that safe place to go back to, that I try to take with me out into the world."

As a woman who will come of age during the festival's third decade, Garza has one warning: "If you go, you're never going to be the same."

■ For more information about the MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL, check out the Internet at www.michfest.com; write to WWTMC, P.O. Box 22, Walahalla, MI 49458; or call (231) 757-4766.

HOLLY PRUETT is a free-lance writer spending the summer in Michigan; she still has a house in Portland and swears she'll be returning home before too long.



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