

What is the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival?

Five to seven thousand women in various stages of undress, mainly.

The rest? Vegetarian food, great entertainment, camping and controversy. Fondly known as "Michigan" or "The Festival" or (say it with reverence) "The Land," it's a place where you can misspell the word "women" with politically correct abandon, pee in a Port-a-Jane and shop at the Cuntree Store.



Laura Martin parks cars (and motorcycles) every year at Michigan

It's Michigan time

In the largest women's festival in the country still relevant? One Portlander says yes.

For a "Festie Virgin," the lingo might take some getting used to. Frankly, the whole thing is quite overwhelming, and it's impossible to describe in just a few words. The fact is, Michigan can be whatever you want it to be: a spiritual quest, a political war, a love-in, a class reunion, a forest fuck-fest. Or all of the above.

Here's an attempt to narrow it down to basics.

Food: arguably very good. A couple big tents serve as kitchens in which thousands of women are miraculously fed. Bring your hibachi and a cooler full of burgers if you can't take three vegetarian meals a day and long lines for 'em. Contrary to reputation, there is no Vegetarian Police. (There is, however, a woman dressed like the police whose entire festival job is to go around painting women's bodies).

Entertainment: unarguably spectacular. There truly is something for everyone, and you more than get your money's worth. Included is all forms of music from the Indigo Girls to Japanese Taiko drumming to sultry jazz/R & B to spoken word to earnest folk lesbians with guitars. You also see the best in comedy, dance and drama.

On top of all that, there's workshops on anything and everything, from the practical to the hilarious: female ejaculation contests, political organizing, making a plaster cast of your breasts, adopting babies from China, discussion workshops on hotly debated issues in the lesbian community. You name it, somebody has scheduled a workshop about it.

Controversy: The "womyn-born-womyn only" policy of the festival is quite problematic. Wasn't it the Michigan-building, hardcore, second-wave feminists who said gender was nothin' but a social construction? Despite the policy, there seems to be a general acceptance of post-operative transsexual women. I guess there's a fear of seeing penises that aren't 10 inches long, lavender and attached to a harness. Or, more frightening, watching Joe Frat Boy waltz through the front gate saying he identifies as a woman today.

The history of the relationship between the festival and the trans movement is rich and complex. One of the great things about Michigan is there's *always* an issue. Porn: Speech vs. Harm. S/M: Freedom or Abuse? Tribe 8: Pro or Con? Tofu: Nutrition or Oppression? Women on both sides of each issue go, or they boycott, or they protest inside the festival, or they protest outside the festival, or they talk to each other, or they schedule a workshop about it.

All perfectly valid. In my experience, Michi-

gan can be about dialogue. Or it can be a place to draw a line in the sand and yell at someone.

Part of your admission includes one or two four-hour work shifts, and this is actually where much interaction takes place. You might be parking cars in a big field or peeling 50 pounds of carrots with a dyke on the other side of some Issue, strike up a conversation and actually learn something. Michigan is the petri dish where these issues grow, the stage upon which they get played out. Attitudes are evolving—not quickly enough for some, perhaps—but they are, and the more voices raised, the better.

I began going to Michigan 10 years ago as a 20-year-old rural Midwestern girl who thought she was straight. The festival is especially important for those rural and suburban gals who don't have access to the kinds of performances and who don't live in any semblance of diversity that exist in the cities and on the coasts.

Urban lesbians have the luxury of taking this kind of culture for granted—criticizing the festival from afar over a latte, then walking down the street holding hands to see Alice Walker perform a reading. It's pretty easy to boycott the festival from Portland.

For your average Midwestern or rural dyke, though, it's a freeing, mind-blowing event that is treasured and saved-for all year long. Michigan—with all its flaws—is an oasis of lesbian civilization for women living every day in conservative and mainstream culture, and, believe me, these women leave the festival questioning *everything*.

This is why we can't throw out the baby with the bath water. Michigan is vital to feminist and queer culture.

Each woman has her own reasons why she goes to Michigan year after year. For me, the festival experience is infused with a rare feeling of downright bodily *safety*. I can walk around outside buck naked at 3 a.m. When a woman can relax to this extent, it frees up a lot of energy and makes room for a lot of joy.

Is the festival woo-woo? It can be. Is it troubling? Yeah, sometimes. Is it evolving? Constantly. Is it overwhelming? Most definitely.

But it's a party like no other, and one that makes you think. Go and be a part of it—in support or in protest, inside or outside—it is always a *transformational* experience. **IT**

The MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL is Aug. 13 to 18. For more information visit www.michfest.com.

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