

MUSIC

Those fabulous Dyketones

Looking back on the country's first out lesbian band

BY KATHY BELGE

Back in 1977 Portland, almost by accident, a lesbian cultural phenomenon was born.

One afternoon after a rehearsal of the gay and lesbian Ursa Minor Choir, Naomi Morena, Char Priolo and Linda Besant started jamming to some oldies. "They should start a '50s group," someone threw out. Priolo joked, "Yeah, we can call ourselves The Dyketones."

Other choir members Sierra Lonepine Briano, Katharine English, Kristan Aspen and Mary Rose soon joined in. Someone asked them to perform at a New Year's Eve party.

"It started out as sort of a joke or folly," remembers Briano, who lent vocals to the band. We never had any intention of doing more than the first new year's dance, [but] we were so popular, all the dykes were begging for more."

The Dyketones were born with context intact—an idealized sock hop at Dyke High complete with character personas. A little comedy, popular '50s dance tunes and a whole lot of loose-lipped fun made the band one of the most successful lesbian acts to date. Nearly 27 years later, the group (now known as The Fabulous Dyketones) still performs for a week each year in Provincetown, Mass.

Priolo (vocals, percussion) is the only founding member still with the band, but many of Portland's finest lesbian musicians have performed with The Dyketones. According to Priolo, they were the first out lesbian band in the country.

In addition to playing music, the band acted out skits and embodied the butch/femme dynamic of lesbian relationships in the '50s. Each of the performers played one or several characters. In late '70s lesbian feminist circles, butch/femme roles were often criticized as being an expression of the patriarchy, so when Priolo and her band mates dressed for their first concert, they weren't sure how they were going to be received.

Aspen (flute, piano) says she worried that a person who grew up with those roles may have felt put down. They needn't have worried. The Dyketones were a hit from Day One.

Songs like "My Guy" became "My Dyke," while "Great Balls of Fire" became "Great Breasts of Fire." One of Morena's (lead guitar) fondest memories is from the first performance, when the band only knew about eight songs and played each of them three times. "Women started to take off their clothes and storm the stage," she says. One rather zealous fan streaked "around the stage. She was our first groupie, though I am not certain who she went home with that night."

Briano, an artist and organic farmer who lives in Gaston, remembers well that first night, too. "Everyone was drunk. Someone did a striptease on stage. The crowd went nuts. They were pulling us off the stage and tearing our clothes! Too bad we can't get that kind of action now."

The popularity of the group came as a surprise to all its members. Bass player Niobeh Tsaba and drummer Maia McNamara



The Dyketones perform at Darcelle XV. From left: Kristan Aspen as Betty Anglo, Katharine English as Little Lila, Char Priolo as Chucky Linguini, Naomi Morena as Chevy Chavez and Linda Besant as Sally Sweetwater.

soon joined, and The Dyketones were playing regular gigs around Portland and the Pacific Northwest.

"The rehearsals leading up to the performances were often the most fun," McNamara says. "I remember laughing until we cried at some of the antics."

If it was a time of excitement and harmony, it was also a time of chaos and infighting. "We had a lot of fun and fights," notes Aspen. "Too much drinking. Too many Scorpios for the band to survive."

Aspen, who now serves as the development director at Bradley-Angle House, has mixed feelings about her time with The Dyketones. "It was a joke, but people took us so seriously." She had spent seven years writing and creating original music about women's culture. "It was depressing in a way to see masses take '50s pop culture so seriously," she says. "It was the epitome of sexist crap."

Morena, who also still lives in Portland and works as a probation officer, remembers it a little differently. "We offered a release from all the political intensity that was smothering our abilities to have fun and get over ourselves," she says.

Tsaba, who has since transitioned to male, enjoyed the butch roles. "For me, as a man who was living in a body perceived as female...performing in The Dyketones was the only opportunity I ever got to almost just be myself," explains the Portlander.

The group played occasionally at Darcelle XV. "The dressing room was like a playground full of every kind of costume and accessory," says McNamara, now a reference librarian in Madison, Wis. "The campy style and drag outfits that

were part of The Dyketones made Darcelle's an ideal...place to play."

Morena remembers: "I loved how they rigged up a big flashing Dyketones sign and how solemn Sierra looked singing 'You Are My Special Angel.' And Betty Anglo [Aspen] dressed in a bathing suit and doing a baton routine to goddess knows what song."

Briano, who played several characters, says she loved the standup comedy part of her routines. "I have to admit that I enjoyed the fame for what it was worth."

Outside the Northwest, The Dyketones played at the West Coast and Michigan Womyn's Music Festivals and gigs in Vancouver, British Columbia. "Gay and straight, they loved us!" Tsaba maintains.

In 1983, much to the dismay of other band members, Priolo copyrighted the name and changed it to The Fabulous Dyketones, essentially creating ownership of the band.

"It happened after I left the group. When I heard about it, I was very disappointed," shares Tsaba. "The Dyketones belonged to the Portland lesbian and women's communities. No single person owned the concept or the name.... We had always made...decisions in a collective or consensus-based way, so it seemed mind-bogglingly out of step with the group as I knew it."

Morena adds: "Adoration does funny things to people.... It's easy to see how one may get stars in their eyes from the strange and unusual attention one receives as a celebrity."

Priolo told *Just Out* she took the band over because no one else wanted to do it or put money into promoting it.

Regardless of the feelings, The Dyketones continued. They traveled across the country five times, playing gigs on their way to and from Provincetown and eventually settled in the gay mecca. More than 70 women have played with the group through the years.

At age 60, Priolo says she no longer has the energy for a full-time band and a full-time job, so The Fabulous Dyketones limit themselves to one week a year now. But they've left their mark.

Priolo tells stories of old women coming up to her with tears in their eyes because they could now dance with their girlfriends to the music of their youth. Young women have told her they had been inspired to start bands of their own.

Tsaba thinks The Dyketones helped build bridges in the community. "We got to perform for a very wide-based audience: gay, bi and straight, men and women, all races, ethnicities and genders. All those folks were...dancing on the same dance floor in front of us. It made me feel hopeful that the tide would turn against the anti-gay rights faction in the Portland community."

Concludes Morena, "Playing rock 'n' roll in a black leather jacket with a band of big-haired beauties—it doesn't get better than that!"

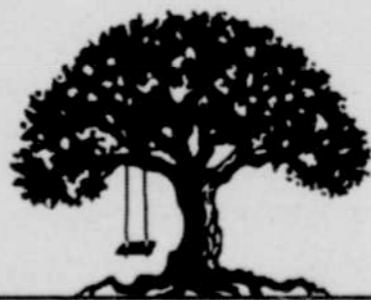
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