

music

Voice of a Generation

Motherlode celebrates 25 years of harmony

by Patricia L. MacAodha

The hall was brimming with anticipation for International Women's Day. A new band, Motherlode, was making itself known in the Northwest. Its members were writing and performing the kind of music that spoke to a new generation—not just an age-related generation, but a world of women for whom liberation meant being whole and true to themselves, women who meant to find out who they were, women who weren't interested in fitting into anyone's image of what a woman should be.

Motherlode sang about the sense that equality was possible, that overcoming racism was possible, that women could have new and powerful voices in a world with incredible beauty. Women came home from the concerts happier, energized—convinced that the world was changing, that homophobia would soon be a thing of the past. Motherlode sang with a sense of hopefulness, of hanging on and believing. They sang through teenagers growing up, relationships breaking up, beloved parents and friends dying, the world going through war and other disasters.

Their voices never weakened, and their love of music has remained as fresh, sweet and strong as it was in the beginning. Not only are they good musicians, not only do they really have fun singing together, their enthusiasm remains a key to creating and maintaining community.

How did Motherlode start? Two women from Oregon, Kathleen Fallon and Nan Collie, met two women from Washington, Marie Eaton and Janet Peterson, at the 1980 Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, a music camp they still return to each summer.

"We have a lot of our encounters at camps," says Fallon. She and Collie met at a women's music camp organized by Kate Sullivan and Lynnea Brooks.

Eaton and Peterson had been singing casually together, while Collie and Fallon had performed with Ginger Williams as the trio Bittersweet.

The connection between the four, Collie remembers, was instantaneous. Peterson calls it "harmony from the first note." The four sang together at every opportunity for the remainder of

the gathering. Eaton and Peterson performed the song "Motherlode," which became the group's name.

Their first gig together was at Portland Saturday Market. "We played 10 hours on the streets," Peterson says. Later, counting coins, they discovered they'd earned \$100. There was no thought of going back. Not that wealth ever became part of their experience, nor was it their goal. "The important thing has always been the music."

"Music is home," says Collie. "Women's music was exploding, and so was folk music."

Opportunities were everywhere. An especially supportive venue was the East Avenue Tavern on lower East Burnside Street, which Collie remembers as "a welcome, warm place."

When they were asked to open for renowned folk musician Ronni Gilbert, they were nervous about performing at the Northwest Service Center—a gigantic stage compared to the East Ave. All have fond memories of Gilbert and see her as an example to emulate.

In 1983, Peterson "started the Northwest Women's Music Celebration based on the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop model for the purpose of bringing all women together to share music and learn in an inclusive atmosphere." She wanted music to be a shared thing and saw too much emphasis on the performers.

"I felt that we, as women, were missing the things that had brought us together in the past, things such as quilting bees and harvest time," Peterson says. "I felt there was a strong movement afoot to glorify only those who 'made it on stage.' I knew that we, as women, had a lot to offer each other and the world with our songs and singing and music."

Performing has always been a joy, but it is



From left, Marie Eaton, Janet Peterson, Kathleen Fallon and Nan Collie in the early 1980s.



From left, Nan Collie, Janet Peterson, Kathleen Fallon and Marie Eaton at the annual Northwest Women's Music Celebration.

woven into busy lives. Collie recently retired from a 31-year teaching career. Peterson works part time for the City of Bellingham Library, co-coordinates the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and has been an American Sign Language interpreter. Fallon teaches English as a second language and is department head at a Portland-area community college.

Children are threaded through their lives, too. Peterson, Eaton and Fallon are parents, but all four consider the children to "belong" to everyone in the band. Eaton's daughter, Malaika, recently gave birth to a daughter, so, Collie quips, "I guess that makes us Grandmalodes."

Motherlode performs about a half-dozen times a year—"We all wish we were playing more than we are," Collie says—but it's not for the recognition, nor for fame.

"Watching stardom from the outside," says Eaton, "it seemed like the cost people paid was bigger than I wanted to pay, because family and

home is really important to me. I don't need the adulation of thousands of people. I need that spot where that creative space can be nurtured."

The members of Motherlode continue to draw women to music camp, to write songs about life and to bring their own sense of pathos, joy and humor to performances that, while fewer, continue to call them together as band and family. Music, they all believe, is to be shared.

"They say that songs have a life of their own," Fallon says, "and that's really true, because once you write it and put it out there, it doesn't belong to you anymore."

Next month Motherlode will again step up to the microphones to celebrate the unbelievable: With no changes in personnel, the women have been together 25 years as a band. They will perform numbers well known to their audience, as well as new material, because their songs come from life's progressions, the living environment and the hopes of a generation that won't give up on freedom. **jo**

MOTHERLODE presents an ASL-interpreted concert 7 p.m. April 8 at First Unitarian Church, 1011 S.W. 12th Ave. Hang out afterward for cake and conversation! Tickets are \$20 at the door or \$17 in advance from Annie Bloom's Books, It's My Pleasure or Brown Paper Tickets.

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