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25 years of music

Harmony Amid Sour Notes

Women's music, gay choruses raise spirits during tough times

by Pat Young

There they were, on the cover of the first issue of *Just Out*, The Dyketones! A group of lesbians wearing butch/femme attire acting politically incorrect. What started as a lark was such a hit that the group performed for several years. It was definitely a break from the seriousness and hard work that women had been doing in the 1970s to create a space for women's music.

Women's music emerged in the 1970s with the help of Olivia Records and women's music festivals. It was a time when women could start to think of themselves as musicians as they created and performed their own music. Oregon has a rich history in women's music. Groups that formed in the 1970s and early '80s include the Ursa Minor Choir, Izquierda Ensemble, Baba Yaga, Mercy, Motherlode, Musica Femina and, in 1986, the Portland Lesbian Choir.

staff who knew about women composers," says Aspen. "So that was very gratifying to feel like we had brought some consciousness and acceptance of women in music to a very traditional and scholarly field."

By the time the Portland Lesbian Choir formed in 1986, the queer community in Portland was in full swing. Still, it wasn't easy for folks to be "out," so it was a serious decision for the choir to include the word "lesbian" in its name. Some of the women who attended early meetings quit when the final name was chosen because they did not feel comfortable being out. Being inclusive has been—and still is—a cornerstone of the organization's philosophy. It is a nonaudition choir open to all women.

The choir is community. It is family. It is a safe place for women to come out, socialize and enjoy music. It has performed for a variety of causes. It has also been active in protesting the anti-gay bal-

lot measures that have been such a part of Oregon's political scene.

"We've been going since 1986, and we'll be going for quite a while longer," longtime member Sparky Lindsay says. "For the last few years, we have kind of informally called ourselves 'PLC the Next Generation' because we have a new generation of singers who have joined us. *

"We have a

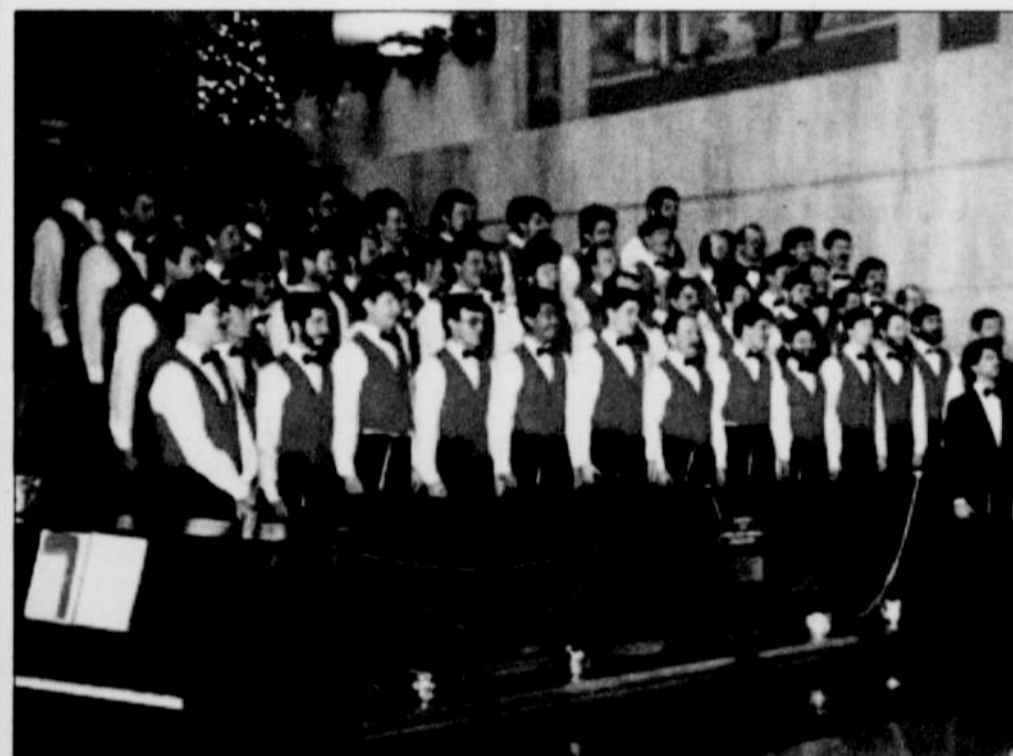
wide range of people from novices to some very skilled singers, and we have a lovely sound. We still have the politics of the '70s. No one is ever turned away from a PLC concert for lack of funds. Pay what you can. We really just want people to come and have a great time."

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus also has members of the next generation. When co-founder Steve Fulmer realized that a new member was so young he had been born after PGMC's founding, he cried.

"It was like, oh my God, it is the new generation. They are here!" says Fulmer.

PGMC, which has 135 members, started in 1980. Fulmer and Gary Coleman have been with the chorus from the beginning. They have told the story of PGMC so many times that they seamlessly move from memory to memory.

On Coleman's wrist, you'll find a bracelet



PGMC performs at the 1984 inauguration of Oregon Secretary of State Barbara Roberts.

"I think all of the work that we did in those early years that was identified as women's music or feminist music opened the way for other artists," says Kristan Aspen, who was a member of several of those groups, including The Dyketones.

Musica Femina is an example of opening doors and making a dent in the established music industry. From 1984 to 1996, Aspen and her partner, Janna MacAuslan, toured the country as a flute-guitar duo. Musica Femina performed classical music by women composers. At first it was a challenge for them to find enough material for a concert: The music was there, but it just needed someone to discover it. MacAuslan and Aspen uncovered the music and shared it with music departments in numerous colleges. After 12 years, it was time to stop touring.

"By then, many campuses had an expert on