Sex and Laughter in Women's Music, 1970-77

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The women's music movement of the early 1970s was created by and for women who came to political consciousness as a result of the women's liberation movement. The music culture that emerged, originally called "lesbian music," gained the less controversial descriptor "women's music" as institutions such as record labels, distribution networks, and production companies evolved to meet audience demand (Lont 1992:242). What differentiated "women's music" from other music made by women of the period was its lesbian focus (in both lyrics and performance contexts). Artists such as Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, and Joan Baez had mainstream success with music that is almost identical sonically with women's music (folk-based, singer-songwriter, solo performance), and which explored topics of interest to women who were benefiting from a world irrevocably altered by the feminist movement, a world that included having sex outside of marriage, earning your own money, ambivalence about family life, and living alone.[1] Outside of the women's music movement, music produced during this period rarely make explicit links with emerging feminist consciousness, but those few songs that did have become anthemic: "Respect," Aretha Franklin's 1967 cover of a song by Otis Redding, "I am Woman," Helen Reddy's 1972 hit, and, to a lesser degree, Honey Cone's 1971 song "Want Ads." Women's music, on the other hand, was created for a lesbian audience to describe lesbian experiences and desires: it was "music by women, for women, about women, and financially controlled by women" (Lont 1992:242). Describing themselves as lesbian-feminists and/or as women-identified-women, the key organizers of the women's music movement used music as their tool to raise consciousness through new venues for women to create, experience, and consume women's culture.[2]

Before I describe the details of the women's music movement, it is useful to contextualize the political and cultural environment of feminist activity in the United States prior to the movement. Feminist organizing in the early-to-mid 1960s focused primarily on including women in the national debates and legislation about civil rights (Davis 1999:55). The National Organization for Women (NOW) represented the clearest manifestation of mainstream feminist political organizing at this time. Founded in 1966, it was the movement's first mass-membership organization, which focused primarily on sex discrimination in the workplace. NOW held the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission responsible for enforcing the Civil

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Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), which had been passed by Congress (Friedan 1985:80). The organization employed a hierarchical organizing structure with elected officials and dues-paying members. This style of organizing is often referred to as liberal or mainstream feminism, in opposition to the next phase of the movement, which was called "women's liberation" (Davis 1999:69).

The women's liberation movement emerged around 1967 and was created by younger women who had become politically radicalized through experiences in the organizing within the early women's and civil rights movements (Collins 2010:178). Women's liberationists fell into roughly two categories: one blamed capitalism for women's oppression, and the other patriarchy. The voices of this latter group soon began to dominate women's liberation groups that were forming in major urban centers across the United States, and these groups were often in conflict with mainstream, liberal feminists about tactics, strategy, and goals (Echols 1989:13). This was nowhere more apparent than in the conflict that arose over the role of lesbians in the women's liberation movement.

Mainstream feminists before 1970 were reluctant to acknowledge or support lesbian identity as part of their political interests and practices, based on sensitivity to the accusation that all feminists were gay (Collins 2010:172). Early NOW leader Betty Friedan called lesbians the "lavender menace," according to the descriptions of Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love in their 1972 book *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman*, who caused rifts in the New York NOW chapter. Friedan's rhetoric incited a protest at the Congress to Unite Women in 1970, where 20 women wearing "Lesbian Menace" t-shirts disrupted the proceedings by reading their manifesto, *The Woman-Identified-Woman* (Abbott and Love 1972: 113–115).[3]

The term *lesbian feminist* emerged in the early 1970s when lesbians involved in women's liberation wanted to distinguish both their personal and political commitments from this movement. In political writing, lesbian sexuality was primarily described in political terms and was acceptable to the larger women's movement only when lesbians deemphasized sexuality and "conformed to a 'female' sexual standard" (Echols 1989:239). This standard was articulated by Robin Morgan, who cited "the emphasis on genital sexuality, objectification, promiscuity, emotional noninvolvement, and course invulnerability [as] the *male* style . . . women . . . placed greater trust in love, sensuality, humor, tenderness, commitment" (Morgan 1978:181).

In the women's music movement, which was itself a lesbian-feminist cultural project, deemphasized sexuality was also ubiquitous in song lyrics and in the separatist contexts in which the music took place. Radical political writings by lesbian feminists from this time (1967-1975) formulated con-

cepts of lesbian desire in an anti-patriarchal, anti-masculine mode, and yet music made by lesbian feminists of the period often treats similar subjects playfully and with humor. This paper presents an analysis of humor in the early women's music movement through a close listening to studio and live recordings—two environments where humor and laughter played a role in the meaning and reception of the music, as well as in the reformulation of lesbian sexuality.

Women's music of this period was created in a complex, non-binary relationship to mainstream cultures, a position that was continually reinforced through the use of humor in music, and the experience of communal laughter within lesbian feminist musical environments. Women's music emerged from a culture that was formulated in opposition to both the mainstream women's movement, as well as to patriarchal values (see Jay, 1999; Brownmiller, 1999; Morgan 1978). In comparing the discourse of contemporaneous radical political texts on lesbian sexuality with music of the period, I argue that the music provided a public expression of lesbian desire that often used humor to speak (or sing) about topics that were not otherwise expressed in political discourse of the era.

Humor was an important feature of the women's music movement, both in songwriting as well as in concerts and festival performance environments that featured music and stand-up comedy. In lyrics, this most often manifests as witty references to specialized, in-group knowledge. Lyrics also include elements of incongruity, relief, and surprise. Because women's music was played and enjoyed by people who perceived of themselves as twice Othered—oppressed by both mainstream society and homophobic feminist culture—the humor of this music informed and cohered community gatherings by calling attention to and mocking these differences, all the while becoming a performative and stylistic signifier of group identity.

The Political Context for Women's Music and Lesbian Sexuality

Alice Echols differentiates between radical feminism and "cultural feminism" in the transition from early radical feminist hegemony in the women's liberation movement to the early 1970s: "radical feminists were typically social constructionists who wanted to render gender irrelevant while cultural feminists were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness" (Echols 1989:6, 243). These two strands of feminism differed inasmuch as radical feminism was a political movement that sought to illuminate women's sameness with men, and cultural feminism was a countercultural movement that defined women as essentially different from men. Women created institutions and businesses such as recording and production companies

with missions that prioritized the creation of women's sanctuaries from patriarchy—not the creation of revolutionary political strategies to destroy it. The language used by radical feminists in position papers and pamphlets which I cite below precedes the flowering of the women's music movement, but there are some similarities (and significant differences) in the way this language evolved as the music movement emerged. The most striking element of difference is the incorporation of humor into this discourse.

Women's music and musical environments were important to the creation of lesbian-feminist solidarity (Davis 1999:269). Women experienced music in both public performance environments (concerts and festivals), as well as on LP recordings produced and distributed by the few women-operated labels; Olivia Records was the first and most preeminent among them.[4] Most of the women involved as musicians, producers, and audience members of these labels identified as lesbian feminists, and many of them had strong separatist convictions, often refusing to play to audiences that included men.[5] Several of the women who formed the collectively run label were involved with the Furies, a collective of radical feminists active in Washington DC (Lont 1999:243). Most of the women in the collective were white (Hayes 2010:3) and middle class, removed from, even if curious about, multicultural expressions of feminism or womanism that occurred simultaneously.

Radical feminists of the early 1970s viewed women's liberation and sexual liberation as mutually exclusive areas of political action (Echols 1989:211). Lesbians were said to reinforce the sex-class system by mimicking traditional male-female gender roles in pairing butch and femme (Firestone 1970:3). The short-lived, New York-based Radicalesbians (a group founded by author Rita Mae Brown and other lesbians disillusioned by lesbian invisibility in both the feminist movement and in the newly-formed Gay Liberation Front) collectively wrote a position paper in 1970 outlining their *raison d'etre*. The text was written in response to homophobic positions taken by reform-minded feminists (particularly in NOW) called "The Woman-Identified Woman" (Radicalesbians 1970). NOW policies reflected the widespread fear among feminist activists that their activism would cause them to be seen as lesbians (Davis 1999:269). Under the direction of founder Betty Friedan, for example, NOW attempted to distance itself from lesbian issues—including omitting the Daughters of Bilitis, America's oldest lesbian rights organization, from the list of sponsors of the First Congress to Unite Women in November 1969. This was the same Congress disrupted by the Lavender Menace activists, most of whom were Radicalesbians (Jay 199:138; Brownmiller 1999:82). The Radicalesbian paper addressed lesbian sexuality explicitly by explaining it as a patriarchal concept. The paper argued that lesbianism is a political, rather sexual choice:

> Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives . . . To have the label applied to people active in women's liberation is just the most recent instance of a long history; . . . For a lesbian is not considered a "real woman." And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation—which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men. (Radicalesbians 1970)

Instead of being defined by sexuality or sexual preference, which they perceived as an external, patriarchal label, the Radicalesbians determined that they should be called "women-identified women," which defines women's connections to one another in a much less concrete manner, using terms such as "energy flow," emphasizing a less distinct and more intuitive relationship:

> Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is the revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution. For this we must be available and supportive to one another, find our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters, not backward toward our oppressors. (*ibid*, 1970)

For the Radicalesbians and the many women-identified-women who came after them, the choice to pursue a lesbian relationship was a political one, challenging heterosexual feminists' assumptions about the nature of political action and their biases against lesbians. Jane Gerhard, in her study of sexual thought and second wave feminism, remarks that the "woman-identified-woman" title emphasized the emotional component of sexuality for women: "In this set of associations, genitality and orgasm were devalued as 'male' and intimacy, sharing, and merging were celebrated as uniquely 'female'" (2001:113).

A stronger statement of this challenge is Charlotte Bunch's 1972 article, "Lesbians in Revolt," published in *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*. This article reiterates, in no uncertain terms, that lesbian-feminists were pigeonholed by "male society" to such an extreme degree that they could barely have a private concept of themselves as sexual creatures, except as it oppressed them:

> Male society defines Lesbianism as a sexual act, which reflects men's limited view of women: they think of us only in terms of sex. They also say that Lesbians are not real women, so a real woman is one who gets fucked by men. We say that a Lesbian is a woman whose sense of self and energies, including sexual energies, center around women—she is woman identified . . . She is important to herself. Our society demands that commitment from women be reserved for men. (1972: 8–9)

In Bunch's philosophy, there is a movement away from the politics of negation—from defining lesbians as women "not getting fucked by men" to lesbians as women-who-love-women, who are woman-identified. This ontological shift is mirrored in lyrics by Alix Dobkin—one of the women's music movement's earliest recording artists and biggest advocates of separatism. Her 1973 song, "The Woman in Your Life" on the self-produced album, *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, encourages (female) listeners to recognize their own self sufficiency as individuals, but especially to recognize solidarity through lesbian relationships, defined as being between women who fundamentally identify with one another. In the second verse of her song a lilting flute melody appears over Dobkin's acoustic guitar. She sings:

> The woman in your life
> Knows simply what is true
> She knows the simple way to touch
> To make your life whole new . . .
> And who is sure to give you courage
> And who will surely make you strong . . .
> The woman in your life is you.
> (1973: liner notes)

Although Dobkin's asserts that the woman in your life, whether she be "you" or someone who is similar to "you" knows "simply what is true," this epistemological statement echoes Meg Christian's 1974 album title, *I Know You Know*. Both encapsulate an assertion of insider knowledge, as well as implication that the performer (and her assumed listener) understand that women, especially lesbians, have a particular connection to one another. The lyrics to this song are typical of the word-play-based humor and dramatic irony for which Dobkin is known. She asserts that "the woman in your life" (who at first the listener might suppose was a romantic interest, particularly because she "knows the simple way to touch") is actually "you." This sentiment reiterates the lack of differentiation between women (woman-identified-women) and also emphasizes the value of self-knowledge and self-reliance. It serves to make the listener reflect on that the quest for intimacy and fulfillment as existing in a partner is somehow less gratifying than self-love.

The women's music movement grew steadily beginning in the late 1960s, through informal networks of performers, producers, women's bookstores, and community centers associated with progressive political activist communities in Washington, D.C. and the San Francisco Bay Area (Taylor and Rupp, 1993; Kehrer, 2010). With the development of a small number of record labels, distribution companies, festivals, newsletters, and magazines devoted to the movement, this music and the political discourse around it became available (although in a limited way) to people outside of lesbian-feminist political and social organizing communities.[6]

The policy of gender-based exclusion to create separatist spaces was (and is) an on-going discussion in the women's music community,[7] and the fractious debate reflects the diversity of positions held by women participating as musicians or audience members in the movement. Fliers advertising performances from the period often advertised concerts by Olivia Records artists as "For Women Only" or "For Lesbians Only."[8] This created friction not only with performance venues and promoters, but also between artists and audience members of different generations. Many older participants came from the labor movement and other progressive, political folk communities, and were consequently more closely aligned with class and labor struggles than with the politics of gender. [9] One of the first women's music artists, Alix Dobkin, was heavily involved with the Greenwich Village folk scene before she came out as a lesbian in 1973 (Dobkin 2009). The musician Meg Christian had been performing in folk venues in Washington, D.C. since the late sixties. She was often fired from traditional folk venues for, as she stated, bringing in the "wrong kind of clientele."[10] The exclusion that openly gay women felt from such mainstream venues contributed to the emergence of alternative, separatist venues, where the (sometimes imagined) oppressor was not allowed inside.

In her examination of the homosocial community of women's music, Judith Peraino demonstrates the meaning that products of the subculture held in the process of identity formation in women's music communities in places such as the Bay Area, New York City, and Washington, D.C. For women who were creating culture outside of mainstream corporate systems: "Women's music... defined a communal space: for the lesbian community, that space consisted of music concerts and festivals... Taken together these spaces provide a context for understanding the production and consumption of the recordings"(2006:154). The separatist performance environments for early women's music were often geographically dispersed, with tours traveling only to large cities and college towns. Mail order became an important element in the distribution networks for the small labels, helping to reach audiences in smaller towns, or who were without mobility in large towns, or listeners who were uncomfortable with public communities of difference.

Additionally, the binary of mainstream/subculture must be interrogated in the context of more recent work on queer music scenes as written about by J. Jack Halberstam. He writes that queer subcultures demonstrate the limits of subcultural theories because they omit consideration of sexuality and sexual styles:

> Queer subcultures cannot only be placed in relation to a parent culture, and they tend to form in relation to place as much in relation to a genre of cultural expression, and ultimately, they oppose not only the hegemony of dominant culture, but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture." (2005:161)

Although "mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture" was not an issue or a threat for the women who created the women's music movement, Halberstam's insights are useful in understanding the contexts for and use of humor within lesbian-feminist musical environments, because these environments were frequently created both in opposition to the patriarchal mainstream as well as in opposition to the mainstream women's liberation movement. Lesbian separatists expressed their identity through both the treatment of sexuality in the music, and its incorporation of humor, creating a significant rhetorical (if not literal) space for difference and solidarity.

Musical environments were important spaces for the development of community identity and values in early 1970s lesbian-feminist communities in the United States.[11] Together with the development of other institutions such as softball leagues, theaters, bookstores, and clinics, music venues (which were often ephemeral, rented spaces) served as a social hub for women who were looking for other women who shared their lesbian-feminist politics and their sexual interests (Lockard 1886:83). Shared identity was expressed in women's music environments through humor that focused around the unique experiences of lesbians, incorporating mainstream stereotypes of lesbian life. Live recordings and archival video from the time show laughter as a central communal experience for women involved with these environments.[12] There is a close relationship between this laughter and the lack of reference to sex and sexuality in this music, and this partially stems from the socio-political context of the women's liberation movement, and the contested position of lesbian identity and lesbian sexuality within it.

I Know You Know

Meg Christian's 1974 recording, *I Know You Know* was the first album released by Olivia Records. The cover of the album contains a black and white photograph of Christian—who became one of the most well-known

Example 1: *I Know You Know* (1974, Olivia Records).

and best selling artists of the early women's music movementwearing bell-bottom jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt [see example 1]. She is propped jauntily, almost elfin in her pixie haircut, on a short pillar, and is surrounded by an ivy-covered wall. In this image, she is —in 1970s contemporary dress standards and in bodily comportment—androgynous. She holds her hands over her bent knees, her fingertips touching, as if to show a scheme in effect. Her bare feet are up on another pillar, and through her dark-framed, owl-like glasses she peers over her left shoulder and out of the frame, toward the title: *I Know You Know.*

Androgyny was embraced by lesbian-separatists in reaction to more traditional butch-femme styles favored in early decades within lesbian subcultures (Kennedy and Davis, 1993: Introduction). Androgynous style represented a rejection of lesbian relationships based on heteronormative models, where one partner was more masculine and the other more feminine. Lesbian-separatist ideas about "true" equality, and of identity formed external to patriarchal structures, emphasized fashion and sexual styles favoring androgyny.

The album title begs the question: I know you know what? Also, who is the "you" in this construction? When this album was released in 1975, Olivia Records was conducting most of their business by mail order and making their recordings available to their roster of artists to sell at their live

performances. Meg Christian's record was the first full-length record to be released on the first lesbian-separatist record label.[13] The title implies that the audience and the performer are in collusion, and that they share secret knowledge. Historian Lauron Kehrer also notes this shared knowledge in her interviews with the Terry Grant (founder of the women's music distributor Goldenrod) who began her career as a fan (2010:4). The cover of this album (see Example 1) is both playful and fearful: the glance over the shoulder, paired with the title, can be read as revealing the anxiety about being outed as a lesbian, as well as the glee in spotting a sister who would recognize one as such. This juxtaposition of anxiety and hope on what is a notable first in the genre of women's music points to questions about how early iterations of this music deal with the topics of sexuality, identity, public perception, and private knowledge—all within the cultural context characterized by homophobia.

I Know You Know begins with the song "Hello Hooray," which was originally written by Canadian songwriter Rolf Kempf, recorded first by folk singer Judy Collins in 1968, and was covered by Alice Cooper in 1973 on his Billboard chart-topping album, *Billion Dollar Babies.* A rousing album opener for all three artists, the song has lyrics that make numerous self-reflexive references to "the show" and "the song"; the audience is "coming here to stay / Each of us an actress / Each of us a play." Christian's version starts delicately, but soon moves into a sweeping, melodic chorus. For Christian, the song quickly encapsulates the inclusively and community-minded ethic of her folk roots, and of women's music concerts in particular. Christian added some original lyrics at the end of the song, which highlight the importance of laughter as a healing, communal act:

> So we will sit and we'll act so prim
> And we will laugh
> After all these years of crying
> And self-denying
> And lonely waiting
> And fears and hesitating
> Yes we'll laugh, yes we'll laugh, yes we'll laugh . . . (1974)

These lyrics depart from versions by prior artists by summoning a communal experience, shared between the singer and the audience. The "we" who will laugh after crying, self-denial and other emotions that come from isolation and oppression in a homophobic world, are not laughing at anyone or anything, but rather letting forth a laugh that celebrates the community that the performance of music can make, and the possibility of "another song"—a song by and for women. This reclamation of laughter implies a joy in finding a common language and shared meaning within lesbian culture.

The subjectivity inherent in humor (that "I" may find something funny, but "you" might find it offensive) is at play here, as is the function of laughter to tame feelings of anxiety.

In her comprehensive analysis of Christian's first album, Judith Peraino states that Christian "attempted to record the political and emotional horizons of a queer sexual identity for lesbian audiences," citing songs that record "very specific emotional details of same-sex desire" (2006:154). By making the emotions of same-sex desire explicit, the language Christian uses to describe it is decidedly modest, and fully in keeping with the political conventions and language of contemporary lesbian-separatism. The desire described in the lyrics is not spectacular, campy, or overtly sexual. This modesty is a political statement about the assumption of lesbian sex as "normal," as defined by and for lesbians, not outsiders.

One such example is "Ode to a Gym Teacher," an up-beat acoustic guitar-based song written by Christian, which describes a young woman's crush on her physical education instructor. Using a lesbian cliché that had made it out of lesbian subculture only through tragic narratives of exposure and scandal such as in the 1961 film featuring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine, *The Children's Hour*, the song makes reference to the commonplace of a student's infatuation for a same-sex teacher. The song reclaims that otherwise-doomed relationship with lesbian-specific cultural referents, recalling a well-known bi-sexual poet ("I gave her everything . . . some suggestive poems for Christmas by Miss Edna Millay"). Although the teacher "will always be a player on the ball field of my heart," the song functions as a nostalgic in-joke more than a clear description of sexuality or desire. As humor theorists Julia Stanley and Susan Robbins write, much lesbian humor works through what they call 'theft' of language, "playing off heterosexist assumptions and institutions," taking patriarchal myths and subverting them within a lesbian context (1977:26). This happens again at the line "and though graduation meant that we had to part," which Kehrer recognizes is accompanied by a melody that sounds like it is taken from the "Funeral March" of Chopin's Piano Sonata No. 2, which was frequently used to mockingly reference death, especially in animated cartoons popular in the era, such as Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes and Merry Melodies* (correspondence with Kehrer, 2010).

There is subtlety in Christian's description of the emotional connections between lesbians, their friends, lovers, and families, and the effect is that of a draping of gauzy romanticism over the struggles and celebrations of women-loving-women (Peraino *ibid*). Gentle metaphors and romantic descriptions of a kind of disembodied love-relationship begin to make more sense in relation to the descriptions of lesbian sexuality that were expressed

by contemporary lesbian-feminist social and political thinkers. Replacing discourse about sexual relationships with discourse on relationships of support and strength based on equal struggle against the oppressive patriarchy, both the lyricists and the political theorists of this period opt for metaphors and descriptions which exclude the explicitly carnal. Although emotional connections and political solidarity between women were acceptable, and in some cases even considered a lesbian political position, lesbian desire was a contested subject.

Humor and Release

By creating separatist performance environments, women's music musicians, promoters, technicians, producers, and audience members were able to create what they considered to be temporary utopian spaces in which influences of patriarchy (and its attending oppression) were absent. Scholars Janet Bing and Dana Heller have explored the role of humor in lesbian cultures, and their characterizations are appropriate for reading the contexts of women's music performances. Bing and Heller show how humor creates insider and outsider status as well as community identity, helping to unburden people of the oppression they feel in the outside world:

> Whether consciously or unconsciously, much of lesbian humor challenges the dominant culture by rejecting its definitions of and presuppositions about lesbians, and by making lesbian experience central to its understanding of normalcy. (2003:158)

The fact that this kind of joking takes place within a "safe" context of women-only and/or lesbian-only space allows a kind of freedom for emotive expression, both in relation to the social formations of the environment, as well as the lyrical content of the music. Humor also simplifies the complex relationships between lesbians and non-lesbians by making statements and assumptions about what lesbians know, and by contrast what non-lesbians don't know.

In describing one important performance context, the festival culture of the women's music movement, scholar Bonnie Morris recognizes that "festivals are humorous events. They offer real situation comedy because most of us don't live like this year round. We do indeed poke fun at our recognizable archetypes . . ."(2005:180). These events became a crucible for humor by placing women with similar reference frames and social expectations together. In an interview, Alix Dobkin reiterated this function of humor within the women's music environments of the early 1970s:

> The brilliant thing about lesbian feminist politics it that it was new to almost every one, especially at the time we were inventing it. It was an extraordinarily rich environment for creativity. It was dynamic in many ways, and humor was one of the most powerful tools that I could use for reaching a certain level of consciousness and making people pay attention. It made them able to approach something scary, to give people comfort and familiarity. If you can laugh at something, it can open you up so maybe a new idea can get through.

> I try to be as subversive as possible with my humor, Humor is a wedge, it's an opening, a new perspective. It allows for political analysis, for truth; that's where the power lies, in the truth that has not been spoken before in that way or possibly ever. That's what was so brilliant about lesbian-feminism in the seventies, it was a rich source of material because everything was going to be original . . . The best humor is about the truth, it is the most powerful humor and it makes people pay attention to the truth. (Interview with the author, November 2010)

Dobkin's comments identify the heady environment in which lesbians at a women's music concert felt they were speaking new truths about their lives for the first time, and making the first statements about lesbian-feminist identity in musical form. It was an environment in which their sexuality and identity were being addressed publicly, and where performance made it more valid. She suggests that some contexts for humor in music took place in environments of fear, as well as exaltation of new political and sexual identities. At the same time she and her peers were "inventing" lesbian feminism, they were aware of the dangers involved in making their life-stories available to the world outside of their group. At another point in the interview she notes, "Of course I understood my audience. I was my audience." Here she belies the density of her insider community, her sense that performer and audience were practically the same. Additionally, humor functioned to get everyone in the audience to create a communal understanding of the political and psycho-social nuances of shared experiences, an in-group of experience for which there was yet little public description.

Early separatist environments could be giddy places. Often they were the first opportunities for women who had not publicly acknowledged their lesbianism to be "out" around other women.[14] They were also emotionally charged environments, as Olivia founder Ginny Berson describes one early Meg Christian show in Washington, D.C.:

> We started to notice in the women's bathrooms, women running into the bathrooms and crying, and sobbing. What was going on was that Meg's music and the fact that Meg was paying attention to women in the audience was so moving to them that it was releasing something in them and they were crying.

> When she was introduced and she walked out on the stage there was so much energy in the room that I saw her literally knocked backwards by it. Women were seeing themselves in many cases, for the first time women were seeing the entirety of their community, they got to see that, oh my god, we can fill this room. (in *Radical Harmonies*, Olivia Records founder Ginny Berson).

Berson recognizes the "energy" given off by Christian as something that provided both community connection for women in the audience, as well as an opportunity for cathartic release at the realization and joy that they were among their peers, perhaps for the first time ever. Along with clapping to the beat or singing along to the song, laughter functioned to unify the audiences, and the humor that elicited that laughing was an important element in the solidarity of women's music audiences throughout the hey-day of the style.

In recordings and the rare film footage of early women's music performances venues (available as part of the 2001 documentary of the movement, *Radical Harmonies*), there is commonly an overwhelming amount of audience participation, ranging from squeals of delight, to clapping, singing, and laughing. On the tenth anniversary of Olivia Records in 1983, the company brought Cris Williamson and Meg Christian to New York City's Carnegie Hall. The concert was sold out two months in advance, attended by more than 5,600 people, and resulted in a live double-LP (*Live at Carnegie Hall)*. On the album, the sound of the primarily female audience is mixed low, but even at this mainstream venue and a decade on in the women's movement, a listener can hear the group participation (laughing at jokes, clapping to familiar songs, singing along) throughout. This successful culminating event for the label (which in 1988 switched business models to run a lesbian cruise company) represented a decade of grassroots cultural organizing.

In 1977, Olivia released *Lesbian Concentrate: A Lesbianthology of Songs and Poems*, in part as a response to former pop singer and then orange-juice spokes model Anita Bryant's highly-publicized anti-gay advocacy in Dade County, Florida, which resulted in an equally publicized gay-rights activist and sympathetic celebrities' boycott of Florida orange juice. The cover of *Lesbian Concentrate* features a cartoon of a sweating orange juice can that proclaim its contents to be "100% undiluted," which provides a visual joke for those familiar with Bryant's homophobic politics. The album collects both new and older tracks from other Olivia releases and characterizes the activity and energy of the women's music scene up to that moment. It was the first album Olivia released that proclaimed lesbian identity, and it did so in a bold way. Not only in the title, as well as in the song lyric and poem content, the album contained a (homo)erotically-charged visual pun and coined a humorous, unwieldy neologism: lesbianthology.

The back of the album shows a photograph of women protesting, the most prominent of whom is carrying a sign that says, "Lesbians for O.J., OUR JUSTICE" and the following manifesto, written by the Olivia Collective:

> Along with many of you (we suspect), we were amused when a part-time orange-juice pusher began to rant against homosexuals. Later we were horrified at the intensity of the attack and the support it generated. We now have to match that force – flip-flop it back onto itself. We think the proper response is to recognize our bonds and support each other as strongly as we can. This is more than time to come out. We think it's time for energetic affirmation of lesbian identity and culture. Part of the proceeds from this record will go to the Lesbian Mothers' National Defense Fund. (1977: liner notes)

The women of Olivia employ a strategic essentialism by implying a singular "lesbian identity and culture" that must be affirmed in the face of the homophobic activism stirred up by Anita Bryant and the emerging forces of the Christian Right. The politics of this resistance are encompassed by the music and spoken-word performance on the album, much of which is humorous, and by the detailed networking information and earnest political writing in the liner notes.

The gatefold insert in *Lesbianthology* is of particular interest because although Olivia Records always contained liner notes with complete lyric sheets, photos of the artists and of the Olivia Collective (as well as illustrations and sometimes translations into Spanish,) but this one was different: it served as an explicitly activist tract. The album title proclaimed what had been long understood by its fans, (that the artists and audiences identified predominately as lesbians), and the notes, written by Olivia founders Ginny Berson and Robin Brooks "for the women of Olivia Records," state that they are "Out to change the world!"

The notes assess the position of lesbians in contemporary American society, in the shadow of Bryant's "Save our Children" campaign:

> For lesbians now, this is a time of great challenge and great potential. We must remember that the difference we have among ourselves are miniscule in comparison with the differences we have with our true enemies – the people who hold power over us and make our lives difficul. We have something now that lesbians have never had before – we have each other, out front, publicly proclaiming our strength, our love, our pride in ourselves, and our joy at being woman-loving women (1977: liner notes).

The notes also include information about the Lesbian Mother's National Defense Fund, as well as a listing, with addresses and telephone numbers, of feminist and lesbian community organizations from nearly every state. This

was significant information for organizing in an era still marked by invisibility and lack of access to basic information about gay and lesbian culture. The notes could be a means for the women's music fan to transform into a lesbian activist, and to connect with a community beyond the audience at a show, making concrete and practical the solidarity implied by the humor of many of the tracks on the album. The extensive contacts imply a national movement which was still somewhat fragmented and largely concerned with local issues at this time; although large cities and university towns had some resources for lesbians, many women were isolated from both political and social organizing efforts, often making long trips to women's music festivals to enjoy the camaraderie and entertainment (Morris 1999:17).

Lesbian Concentrate features a live version of Meg Christian's song, "Ode to A Gym Teacher." The song is significantly more animated than the original version, and showcases some of the most important interplay between artist and audience, emphasizing the shared humor of the song. Each consecutive chorus of the song elicits louder cheers and animated laughter, together with rhythmic clapping. The lines that get the most laughter throughout the song are those that provide in-group information: things lesbians might say to one another to convey special knowledge about the experiences of growing up gay (i.e. liking sports or writer and feminist Edna St. Vincent Milay). The lines that elicit the biggest laughs are reproduced below:

> She was a big tough woman,
> the first to come along
> That showed me being female
> meant you still could be strong
> And through graduation meant
> that we had to part
> She'll always be a player
> on the ball field of my heart.
> *(laughter, clapping)*
> I wrote her name on my note-pad
> and inked it on my dress
> And I etched it on my locker
> and I carved it on my desk
> And I painted big red hearts
> with her initials on my books
> And I never knew till later
> why I got those funny looks . . .
> *(chorus with laughter, clapping in time)*
> Well, in gym class while the others talked
> of boys that they loved
> I'd be thinking of new aches and pains
> the teacher had to rub

(*laughter*)
And when other girls went to the prom
I languished by the phone
Calling up and hanging up
if I found out she was home.
(*chorus with even more laughter,*
singing along)
So you just go to any gym class
and you'll be sure to see
One girl who sticks to teacher
like a leaf sticks to a tree
One girl who runs the errands
and who chases all the balls
One girl who may grow up
to be the gayest of all.
(*laughter, clapping*)
(1977: liner notes, with added audience transcriptions)

Along with the shared experience of the romance and frustration that comes from being a young lesbian with a crush on an older teacher, the hilarity of inhabiting the stereotype of lesbians as explicitly sexual, predatory creatures is explored in the track "Leaping Lesbians," written by Sue Fink and Joelyn Grippo. It first appeared on the album *Meg Christian: Face the Music* in 1977 (Olivia Records). The instrumentation is a honky-tonk piano with accompanying slide-whistle with an arrangement that sounds more like vaudeville slapstick than like the gentle folk-music or vague funk styles on the rest of the album. The song begins with a classic haunted-house creaking door and scary cackling just before the opening lines:

Here come the lesbians
Here come the leaping lesbians
(*slide whistle*)

The lyrics of the song mock the idea that lesbians are frightening and that they are preying on the listener:

Don't look in the closet
Who's creeping down the stairs
Who's slipping up behind you
Watch out, better beware

The song highlights the lesbian perception of what others think about them, and can also be read as a parody of the idea that homosexuality is villainous or alien. It also refers to the identity of the lesbian as a magical, powerful, and aggressive person. It characterizes lesbians as threatening because they are sexual predators:

> We're going to
> please you, tease you
> Hypnotize you try to squeeze you
> We're going to get you if we can...
> Don't go and try to fight it
> Run away or try to hide it
> We want your love and that's our plan
> Here come the lesbians

The mock derision of lesbians through a characterization of their sexual desire also has a double meaning in these lines, since they could also be lodged at a closeted lesbian, and as such may be somewhat reassuring (albeit with nervous laughter). Nonetheless, these lines are in keeping with political language of the period that suggests that "male society" (both men, and feminists who are afraid that lesbians will derail the women's movement) view lesbians as women who have sex with women, and that this is their only identity. Bing and Heller recognize the role of sex and sexuality in lesbian joking as central to the function of creating a group identity from within:

> Whereas the term "lesbian joke" usually activates a sex frame for the dominant culture, much humor created by and for lesbians is based on a switch from a sex frame to a non-sex frame. When lesbian jokes "are" about sex, they affirm the right not only to private sex, but also to public representation. (2003:164)

"Leaping Lesbians" parodies the homophobic perception that lesbians are necessarily sexual predators, and so is both about sex (that lesbians do it) and not about sex (it implies that it is impossible that lesbians would possess predatory sexual desire). It also makes lesbians into entities who "leap." Are they fairies? Monsters? The fairy-tale quality of the alliteration imagines beings who are not far removed from the elfin Meg Christian from the *I Know You Know* album cover, only more sinister.

Lesbian feminists who participated in women's music culture in the early seventies created environments in both recordings and live performance venues where their lived experiences were described, celebrated, and shared—often with humor. Music played a central function in this larger cultural process because it publicly presented emotionally inflected and often personal versions of the political doctrine that predominated in manifestos and other dogmatic writings of the period, particularly as it pertained to sex and sexuality. In the development of full political and social expression of lesbians in the United States, the absence of overt expressions of sex and sexuality is notable, especially considering the fully kinetic connections simultaneously occurring in disco culture, which became an increasingly

important venue for the expression and celebration of gay male sexuality (Lawrence 1977; Echols 2011). It would not be long until elements of the separatist lesbian cultures would begin to identify and celebrate sexuality as an affirming aspect of identity, albeit reluctantly, recognizing that the power imbalance that had once been the central point for the criticism of the patriarchy was actually a key element of sexual expression and pleasure.[15]

Humor and laughter within the development of the first woman-centered music environments helped to define group identity. It relieved the often-rancorous theoretical debates about the politics of sexuality by identifying the oppressor as external to the group, and by parodying stereotypes about lesbian sexuality for the pleasure of the audience. Finding refuge from both the mainstream society and homophobic feminist culture, the people who played and enjoyed this music found common ground in the pleasure of their laughter.

Notes

1. Mainstream success in this context refers to both the relative commercial and critical successes enjoyed by each of these artists: Joni Mitchell's *Rolling Stone* cover story from May 17, 1969, her inclusion on greatest guitarist, singer and artist lists (rollingstone.com accessed April 4, 2011), multiple Grammy nominations and induction into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame (Whitesell 2008); Carly Simon's multiple top-10 hits from between 1970 and 1977 and her Best New Artist Grammy in 1971 (rollingstone.com accessed April 4, 2011); Joan Baez's appearance at large concerts such as the Newport Folk Festival, Woodstock and the Concert for Bangladesh between 1959-1975 (Baez 1987). This is compared with the nearly complete absence of women's music artists from media sources like *Rolling Stone* or *Billboard*. A search on billboard.com and rollingstone.com on April 4, 2011 revealed album listings for Cris Williamson and Meg Christian (the two best-selling musicians of the movement,) but no news articles or reviews. This is despite the fact that Williamson has made nearly thirty albums, and her album *The Changer and the Changed* was one of the best-selling independently produced and distributed albums of the 1970s, selling 100,000 units its first year, and eventually selling an estimated 500,000 (Garafalo, 1992:245).

2. The Olivia Records collective describe their ambitions in an article penned for *Off Our Backs* v.4 #9 (August/September 1974), "the muses of olivia: our own economy, our own song."

3. Abbott and Love (1972) describe the following day of the conference when the lesbians offered popular workshops and detailed resolutions at the days' end, including "(1) Be it resolved that Women's Liberation is a Lesbian plot"—a clear example of how these lesbians used humor to both mock the mainstream feminists who marginalized them and find solidarity in their position. By openly stating the idea that was so clearly implicated by mainstream feminists' actions towards lesbians, they rendered it ridiculous.

4. Other labels included Redwood Records, Wise Woman/Urana, and Pleides.

5. This historical context is explored in Morris (1999) *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals.*

6. Besides Olivia, women's music labels include Kay Gardner's Urana Records (New York City), Women's Wax Works, Redwood Records (established by Holly Near in 1973) and Margi Adam's and Barbara Price's Pleiades Records (Berkeley).

7. This conflict continues at one of the last holdouts of separatist music culture in the United States, the Michigan Women's Music Festival, which only allows self-identified "women-born women" in the gates, disallowing male-to-female transgendered people.

8. See Alix Dobkin's *Adventures in Women's Music* and *Radical Harmonies.*

9. This conflict is explored in the film, *Radical Harmonies* by Dee Mosbacher, 2002.

10. *Ibid.*

11. cf. Morris, Eder, Laird, Taylor and Rupp, Kearney, Rodnitzky and Faderman.

12. See Mosbacher, Dee. *Radical Harmonies.*

13. Olivia's mission statement was reproduced on all their releases:

> Olivia Records is a national women's recording company. Our purposes are to make high quality women's music available to the public, to give women musicians access to the recording industry, to offer training in the technical, musical and other fields related to the recording industry, and to provide jobs with decent pay in non-oppressive conditions. All money raised from record sales and contributions will be used for the purchase of our own studio, the production of future records, and the training and salaries of the women involved in Olivia. The owners of this company are the women who work for it.

14. *Radical Harmonies*, 2001, HotWire Journal Publisher and Producer, Toni Armstrong Jr,.

15. See Gerhard 2001: 157–164.

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