



## Music Festivals

by Teresa Theophano

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A cultural institution among lesbians for the last quarter century, women's music festivals are eagerly anticipated community-based events that celebrate women's space as much as their music.

Dozens currently take place every year in the United States alone, and unlike the highly publicized Lilith Fair--a traveling tour with corporate sponsorship and an emphasis on mainstream female performers--grassroots festivals can provide satisfyingly intimate environments even with thousands of women in attendance.

Moreover, because "safe space" and "women's space" are often stressed at these festivals, the experience differs greatly from attending concerts in the everyday "real world." While some festivals such as the National Women's Music Festival welcome male attendees, others like the Michigan Womyn's [sic] Music Festival were founded on the separatist tenets that led to the initial development of women's music, and remain strictly women-only to this day.

### Early Festivals and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

The first women's music festivals--the National Women's Music Festival, which is still held annually, the Amazon Music Festival in Santa Cruz, California, and Womansphere in Maryland--took place in 1974.

But the best-known festival now, and one of the oldest, is the legendary Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which was launched in 1976. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival takes place in the second week of August each year and is among the largest of all women's festivals. Held on 650 acres of privately owned women's land in remote Hart, Michigan, the event is currently produced by Lisa Vogel, a former member of the founding collective.

Like most women's festivals, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival features much more than just musical performances. Myriad workshops, athletic events, nature activities, and meetings are held alongside an array of exhibits and services provided by female vendors.

The week-long festival, whose ticket price includes camping accommodations, vegetarian meals, bathing facilities, and all other activities, attracts around 10,000 attendees each year, all of whom participate in rotating work shifts.

Performers' musical styles vary greatly, and past headliners include prominent women's music figures such as Alix Dobkin, Ferron, and Teresa Trull, as well as newer queer female performers such as Melissa Ferrick, Kinnie Starr, spoken-word troupe Sister Spit, and the Butchies.

The festival prides itself on the notion that its grounds are "safe space" for women, but over the years many of its policies have proven controversial, for example, its "womyn-born womyn only" rule, which specifies



Cris Williamson performing at the West Coast Women's Festival in 1985. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

that no transgendered or transsexual women are welcome on the land.

In response to this policy, activist group Transsexual Menace began organizing protests in 1994 and set up Camp Trans to establish visibility and distribute information just outside of the festival entrance.

Other debates have developed over issues such as the presence of women involved in S&M and the performance of dyke-punk group Tribe 8, whose unconventional stage act led numerous women wrongly to accuse them of promoting violence against women.

The admission of male children has been another point of contention. Currently the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival permits males under five years of age onto the land, while older boys are housed at the nearby camp Brother Sun.

### **The National Women's Music Festival**

First held in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, the National Women's Music Festival does not seem to stand out in festival history the way the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival does, despite being the first women's music festival in the United States.

The National Women's Music Festival has been held at several locations, including Ball State University, Ohio State University, and Kent State University. In 2006, it is scheduled for Illinois State University.

The festival is a four-day celebration that attracts a mostly female crowd, though men are permitted to attend as well. Concerts are staged by such legendary women's music performers as Cris Williamson, Holly Near, Heather Bishop, and Lucie Blue Tremblay.

Other entertainment includes coffeehouses, workshops, a crafts marketplace, films and videos, and even a shopping mall. The indoor environment creates a very different feel from the campsites of Michigan, and attendees are responsible for securing their accommodations in the university's dormitories.

### **Wimifest**

Established in 1985 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Wimifest remains an annual three-day celebration of lesbian culture and women's music and art, with an emphasis on diversity among both performers and attendees. The festival is run by the nonprofit organization Women in Movement in New Mexico (WIMIN) and held indoors at Albuquerque's historic KiMo Theatre.

Performers from years past include Catie Curtis, Ubaka Hill, and Linda Tillery; and activities available include women-only dances (all other parts of the festival are open to everyone), arts and crafts, storytelling, open microphones, and athletic events.

### **Ladyfest**

A six-day women-produced festival, the first Olympia, Washington-based Ladyfest was held in 2000. Some events at the fest were for women only; and while some bands performing had male members, no all-male bands were invited.

No future Ladyfests are planned for Olympia, but spin-off events were held in other locations in 2001: Ladyfest Midwest in Chicago; Ladyfest Scotland in Glasgow; and Ladyfest East in Boston.

The first Ladyfest was a nonprofit event featuring bands popular in the independent music scene--such as Bratmobile, The Need, The Gossip, Cat Power, and the Butchies--as well as spoken word performances, visual art, workshops, panels, and dance parties. On the whole, it is fair to say that Ladyfest attracts a

younger crowd than many other festivals, as its performers and organizers are more deeply rooted in independent music and third-wave feminism.

### **Local and International Women's Music Festivals**

Varying considerably in size as well as in the types of performers featured, many local women's music events are held around the United States. Locales include Iowa, Alaska, Hawaii (Hawaiiifest), Missouri (St. Louis Women's Music Festival), Texas (which has two festivals, FriendsFest and the Houston Women's Music Festival), New Hampshire, North Carolina (Spring Fling and Starfest), Virginia (CampOut Virginia Women's Music Festival), and West Virginia (Sistah Summerfest).

In addition, some other countries also hold women's music festivals. Among these are Australia's Venus Rising festival in Melbourne and the Sistajive Women's Music Festival in Illawarra; Canada's Southern Ontario Womyn's Drum Camp and the Rock City Women's Fest, both in Ontario, as well as the Woman's Voices Festival in Quebec; and England's Coventry Woman's Festival and Chard Festival of Women in Music.

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### **About the Author**

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