



## Music: Women's

by Teresa Theophano

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Since its emergence in the 1970s as an outgrowth of what was then called the "women's liberation" movement, women's music has remained a phenomenally popular genre among feminists--especially lesbian feminists.

Women's music, loosely and logically defined as music made specifically by and for women, has always been stylistically diverse, incorporating elements of folk, acoustic pop, blues, jazz, and rock. The genre has broadened musically over time, and modern-day feminist and openly queer female performers have expanded upon the artistic freedoms established by pioneering acts.

The women's music boom of the 1970s set the precedent for later forms of DIY (do-it-yourself) and even less conventional types of music such as Riot Grrl [sic] and queer punk.

By encouraging women to get involved in all stages of the production of music as well as in venues such as festivals, cabarets, and coffeehouses, the initial phase of the movement helped launch a tradition of women creating their own underground media networks.

While contemporary lesbian feminism and its musical manifestations may not embody the separatism embraced by 1970s women's music culture, early separatist collectives were fundamental in providing women with a starting point to create a cottage industry within the music world.

### **1972 and the Birth of Women's Music**

Among the first performers of what would be considered women's music was Holly Near, a folk musician and civil rights activist. Because most labels would not produce music with lesbian-themed subject material such as Near's, she founded her own label, Redwood Records, in 1972. Redwood released albums from such feminist acts as Ferron, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Teresa Trull, Ronnie Gilbert, and Faith Nolan.

Around the same time, another folksinger named Alix Dobkin formed her all-lesbian group Lavender Jane. Their album *Lavender Jane Loves Women* was released and distributed under a label run by Dobkin and flautist Kay Gardner, Women Wax Works, and made history as the first album to be created, start to finish, by lesbians.

In 1972, Maxine Feldman recorded her song "Angry Atthis," a coming-out ode that expressed Atthis's frustration at not being able to hold the hand of her girlfriend Sappho in public. The single, which was written in 1969, circulated widely in the gay community.

In 1973, the feminist label Olivia Records was founded. Originating from members of a Washington, D. C. separatist collective (musician Cris Williamson was a co-founder), Olivia debuted with a split single featuring Meg Christian's "Lady" and Williamson's "If It Wasn't for the Music." Later that year, Christian's "I Know You Know" was Olivia's first full-length offering.

Williamson's landmark album *The Changer and the Changed* appeared in 1975; to date, the record has sold approximately 500,000 copies, making it one of the best-selling independent albums ever.

By 1975 Olivia and Redwood were both producing numerous albums annually. Then 1976 heralded the start of Lady Slipper, a mail-order women's music distribution company operated out of North Carolina.

Around the same time that these groundbreaking records and labels began to gain popularity, women's festivals commenced as a venue for bringing the music and musicians to a large audience of lesbians. The National Women's Music Festival and the Amazon Music Project were two of the first weekend festivals to emerge in 1974, followed by Womansphere in Maryland.

The largest and most popular festival of them all, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, was inaugurated in 1976. Now dozens of other music festivals are held around the country every year.

Other 1970s performers to become standards among women are Deadly Nightshade, Margie Adams, Robin Flower, Mary Watkins, and Linda Tillery. Urana, Pleiades, Lima Bean, Leonarda, and Goldenrod--also a women's music distributor--were among the independent women's labels of the time.

### **Women's Music: The 1980s and 1990s**

By the end of the 1970s, approximately twenty recording companies, forty-five production companies, and twenty-five independent distributors were promoting the work of about forty performers of women's music.

As the 1980s began, profit became more of a goal even for the grassroots music industry, and men became more involved in the songwriting and production segments of the movement. After the steps forward taken by grassroots performers, mainstream acts began to join the music festival circuit.

Meanwhile, newer female musicians such as the Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge, and Tracy Chapman broke out into the pop world of radio play. Singer-songwriter Phranc, who self-identifies as an "all-American Jewish lesbian folksinger," was signed to a major label, Island, a first for an out female performer. This kind of crossover would probably not have been possible without earlier independent female artists paving the way.

Along with the developments among traditional women's music figures, many of whom were still recording, the early 1990s brought the Riot Grrl movement into existence. Riot Grrl, a youth-based feminist culture that first developed in west coast towns such as Olympia, Washington--a hotbed of independent music--laid claim to girl-produced 'zines and bands with an adamantly anti-corporate ethic.

Bands such as Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, and Bratmobile screamed lyrics that, along with the women who penned them, were unapologetically feminist and often queer; they captured the spirit of true "girl power" long before the Spice Girls co-opted it.

Also in the 1990s, queercore became established as a movement linked to, yet distinct from, traditional punk rock; bands such as Tribe 8, Team Dresch, and The Need sang about overt dyke desire and attracted fans of punk who never felt entirely happy about the male-dominated mosh pits.

Mr. Lady records, run by video artist Tammy Rae Carland and musician Kaia Wilson (formerly of Team Dresch and currently vocalist/guitarist for the dyke trio The Butchies), was launched in 1996 to promote queer recording artists. Albums from Sarah Dougher, The Haggard, and Le Tigre, featuring Kathleen Hanna from the seminal Riot Grrl band Bikini Kill, have since been released. The company recently ended its operations.

On the folk-inspired front, the prolific and openly bisexual Ani DiFranco, with her folksinger-meets-punk-girl style, began playing at college campuses nationwide. In 1990, she started her own label called Righteous Babe Records, and began producing almost an album a year throughout the decade.

Out lesbian Melissa Ferrick incorporated a similar confessional style of songwriting, accompanying herself on acoustic guitar, and developed a following as well. Both continue to promote current albums today.

### **The New Millennium and Beyond**

Olivia Records became Olivia Cruises, a lesbian cruise company, some time ago; and Redwood ceased to exist in the early 1990s. But Lady Slipper is still in operation as both a distributor and a small record label, issuing albums from artists such as Kay Gardner, Ubaka Hill, and Rhiannon.

Holly Near recently released an album on her new label, Calico Tracks Records. And other record labels such as Kill Rock Stars, Chainsaw Records, and similar independents have picked up where Olivia and Redwood left off, though with a flair all their own.

Many old-school women's music artists such as Cris Williamson, Ferron, and Tret Fure are alive and well, making regular appearances at music festivals and producing new recordings. And new queercore groups like Tracy and the Plastics and the dyke-fronted The Gossip are emerging all the time, earning steady followings at live shows as well as praise in alternative publications.

In today's women's music there is often more room for the expression of third-wave feminist principles such as gender fluidity and raw sexuality, but the message is still a political one.

Crucial to women's music of both the old-school and the new is the visibility of feminism and lesbianism both within and outside the music industry.

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### **About the Author**

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