TRANSADVOCATE

Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

By Cristan Williams

Published April 9, 2013 | Updated March 31, 2026
https://www.transadvocate.com/michigan-womyns-music-festival_n_8943.htm

Abstract

Most of the Womyn that come to fest really don’t care whether you’re straight or not as long as your not trans. - D.M., Festival Supporter, July 4, 2012 It’s been 23 years since the MWMF became a symbol of all that’s wrong with cis-privilege and some might wonder why the fight to end cis/trans segregation at [...]

Article

Most of the Womyn that come to fest really don’t care whether you’re straight or not as long as your not trans. - D.M., Festival Supporter, July 4, 2012

More Context:

- MWMF TERFs organizers supported the targeting of a Radical Feminist, Lesbian-separatist music collective for being trans-inclusive and led to armed TERFs threatening the life of a trans woman.
- Lisa Vogel’s fist inspired trans-inclusive Women’s Music Festivals
- MWMF violence led to the creation of Camp Trans while Leather Dykes and the Lesbian Avengers offered bodyguard protection for the trans women.

It’s been 23 years since the MWMF became a symbol of all that’s wrong with cis-privilege and some might wonder why the fight to end cis/trans segregation at the MWMF continues to be relevant. Lost in the discussion is the actual story of what transpired that cool August night back in 1991. Here’s what happened that night, as recounted by Nancy Burkholder herself:

In August, 1991 I attended my second Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF) with Laura Ervin. Laura and I drove 1,050 miles nonstop in her vehicle... and arrived at the festival, car #33, at about 9:00 am Monday morning. We walked and talked with women waiting with us on the road, bought raffle tickets from a festival promoter, and joined women in joyous enthusiasm, camaraderie, and expectation while we awaited the start of the festival at 2:00 pm. When we got onto the land Laura volunteered the use of her vehicle to help with shuttle service. Laura and I split the work shift. I worked the first two hours while Laura moved our gear to the campsite and set up her tent. She worked the next two hours while I set up my tent.

After going through an orientation run with a shuttle coordinator I began the process of loading women’s gear and driving them to their desired destinations. I felt a sense of pride in my work; welcoming the women, helping them with their gear, and answering their questions. At the completion of my shuttle shift I set up my [campsite], took a much-welcomed shower and went for a long walk in the woods.

I met Laura at our campsite and she invited me to walk with her to the main gate to meet a friend who was arriving on a chartered bus from Grand Rapids at 10:00 pm.

We arrived at the main gate at about 9:30 pm and sat down around the fire pit with several other women. We chatted with the women and enjoyed the warmth of the fire. At about 10:00 pm we received word that the bus was delayed and would arrive around 11:00. Laura and I decided to remain at the main gate until the bus arrived. We continued to socialize with the women who come and went from the area of the fire pit. The bus arrived at about 11:00 pm and Laura went over to the bus. A woman requested that I stay away from the bus to avoid congestion. I stopped at the edge of the road about 20 feet from the fire pit.

While I waited for Laura to return I was approached by two women, Chris Coyote and Del Kelleher. Chris said that she needed to speak with me regarding a serious and difficult matter. Sensing her urgency I suggested we move away from the women near the fire pit in order to talk privately. Chris said that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was a woman-only event and she wanted to know if I was a man. I replied that I was a woman and I showed her my NH picture ID driver's license. Then she asked me if I was a transsexual. I asked her what was the point of her questioning and she replied that transsexuals were not permitted to attend the festival. She said that MWMF policy was that the festival was open to "natural, women-born-women" only. I replied that nowhere, in any festival literature or the program guide was that policy stated. I asked Chris to please verify that policy and she went to the office to contact the festival producers, Lisa Vogel and Boo Price. Sometime during this conversation I waved Laura to come over and she witnessed much of what transpired.

I continued speaking with Del. Del stated that the reason the policy was not in any literature was because the issue of transsexuals had never come up as a problem before. Del added that the policy was for the benefit of the transsexuals' safety and the safety of the women attending the festival. When I pointed out that there were other transsexuals on the land she acknowledged that this was true. Then she added, 'We haven't caught them yet, but we did catch you."

At around midnight Chris returned and told me that she had talked to the producers and that they had indeed verified that transsexuals were not allowed at the festival. I asked to speak with the producers directly. Chris stated that the producers would not speak with me and that she was the designated contact for the producers. Chris asked me if I had had a sex change operation. I replied that was none of her business. I said that I was willing to submit to genital examination in order to satisfy her concerns about my sex. She replied that she would not feel comfortable doing this. I said that was a rather odd reaction since public nudity was quite common at festival. How would viewing my cunt be different from any other woman's? I told her to please produce her proof to her insinuations that I was a transsexual. She looked at me for a few seconds, saying nothing. Then she said that the festival producers had empowered her to expel any woman at any time, at her discretion. She told that I had I had to leave the festival and that I would not even be allowed to return to my campsite to retrieve my equipment. I realized that Chris and Del were expelling me in spite of all the irrefutable legal and anatomical proof that I was a women. I knew there was nothing more I could say to these women. I resigned myself to the fact that these women were expelling me from the festival.

Laura and Chris departed to pick up a few of my personal belongings while Del stayed with me. Del facilitated some arrangements for a room at a motel in Walhalla, about 10 miles distant. For some

moments I stood outside the circle of women at the fire pit at the place where out conversation transpired. The night was clear and the air had a chill to it. Suddenly I realized I was cold. I was wearing only nylon shorts, a flannel shirt and sandals. I hadn't dressed for extended night-time exposure. Del invited me to return to the fire pit. I sat at the edge of the pit for a long time, I'm not sure how long. My mind was blank, my body absolutely still as I became aware of the emotional devastation that I felt inside. The events that were going down seemed totally unreal. Nevertheless, I found a place of calm inside myself. I found acceptance for my situation, and I could feel the emotional devastation without the devastation overwhelming me. I stared into the fire. The heat from the glowing embers warmed my legs and face. Del stayed close by. From the time Del and Chris first approached me until I left the land, I was guarded and forbidden form leaving the area around the fire pit.

After some time Del met with a woman from the office and she called me to come over to her. I got up and went over. I turned on my flashlight and she handed me a printed receipt stamped with an MWMF logo. I signed the receipt and she gave me a cash refund for my ticket. I held my flashlight up and pointed its beam at my right wrist as Del cut the wrist ticket free. Then I returned to the fire pit to await Laura's return. During this time not one of the half-dozen women who sat with me at the fire pit spoke or looked at me. I no longer tried to keep secret the nature of the events that were going down. I asked Del if someone was going to protect my personal belongings from theft or vandalism. She replied that Chris and my friend had probably gone back to the site to retrieve all of my belongings.

At about 12:50a.m. Laura returned with all of my equipment and her car. We departed the land. In less than two hours and under the cover of darkness, the festival personnel had expelled me from the land. Their actions were facilitated by our closeness to the main gate and the lateness of the hour. There were no witnesses to the events except for Laura, Chris and Del. I don t know the women present at the fire pit knew of the events that had transpired.

Laura and I arrived at the motel at about 1:20 am Tuesday morning. We were both emotionally and physically exhausted. Neither of us had slept more than a few hours in the past 42 hours. The motel room was a small, cinder block room. We were greeted by the smell of wet, moldy carpet. The stillness of the night was interrupted by the loud roar of trucks passing by our open window facing Route 10. I still could not believe this was really happening.

I slept very little that night. I was exhausted from our 20 hours of travel and in shock from the emotional trauma perpetrated by the festival women. I eventually slept for a few hours and when I awoke it was light outside. The mattress bed had duplicated the effect of sleeping outside on the hard ground. My hips and thighs ached.

I showered, repacked my gear and we departed for Grand Rapids. When we stopped for breakfast at Muskegon I called to make reservations for a plane flight home. The flight cost $382 and I was grateful for having a credit card. I did not have the cash. I departed Grand Rapids at 12:40 p.m. and arrived at Worchester, MA at about 6:25 p.m. Laura called ahead and made arrangements for transportation from the airport to me car which me an additional $50. I drove home, arriving at about 9:15 pm.

Why is Nancy's experience relevant to modern trans discourse? Why is the trans community and its allies still focused on ending the discrimination all trans individuals risk at the MWMF?

What happened to Nancy sparked the first community-wide response to the Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF*) oppression of trans people and was buoyed by the 1991 print publication of Sandy Stone's response to TERF hate, The Empire Strikes Back. During the previous decade, TERF ideology had begun to bear fruit. TERF leadership had said that the "problem with transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence" and they sought to do just that. They lobbied two US administrations (Carter and Reagan) to set up a national program of forced reparative therapy for all trans folk. They teamed up with a powerful racist and successfully stripped the trans community's access to medical care while at the same time hunting down trans folk in order to out them to their employers. They teamed up with their white upper-class transphobic gay leaders to defeat trans protections and to wipe the trans community from the collective memory of queer history. By 1991, trans people - as a community - had finally had enough and mobilized against TERF hate. The MWMF became both the embodiment of and loud apologist for the very ideology which sought to realize a world in which trans people didn't exist.

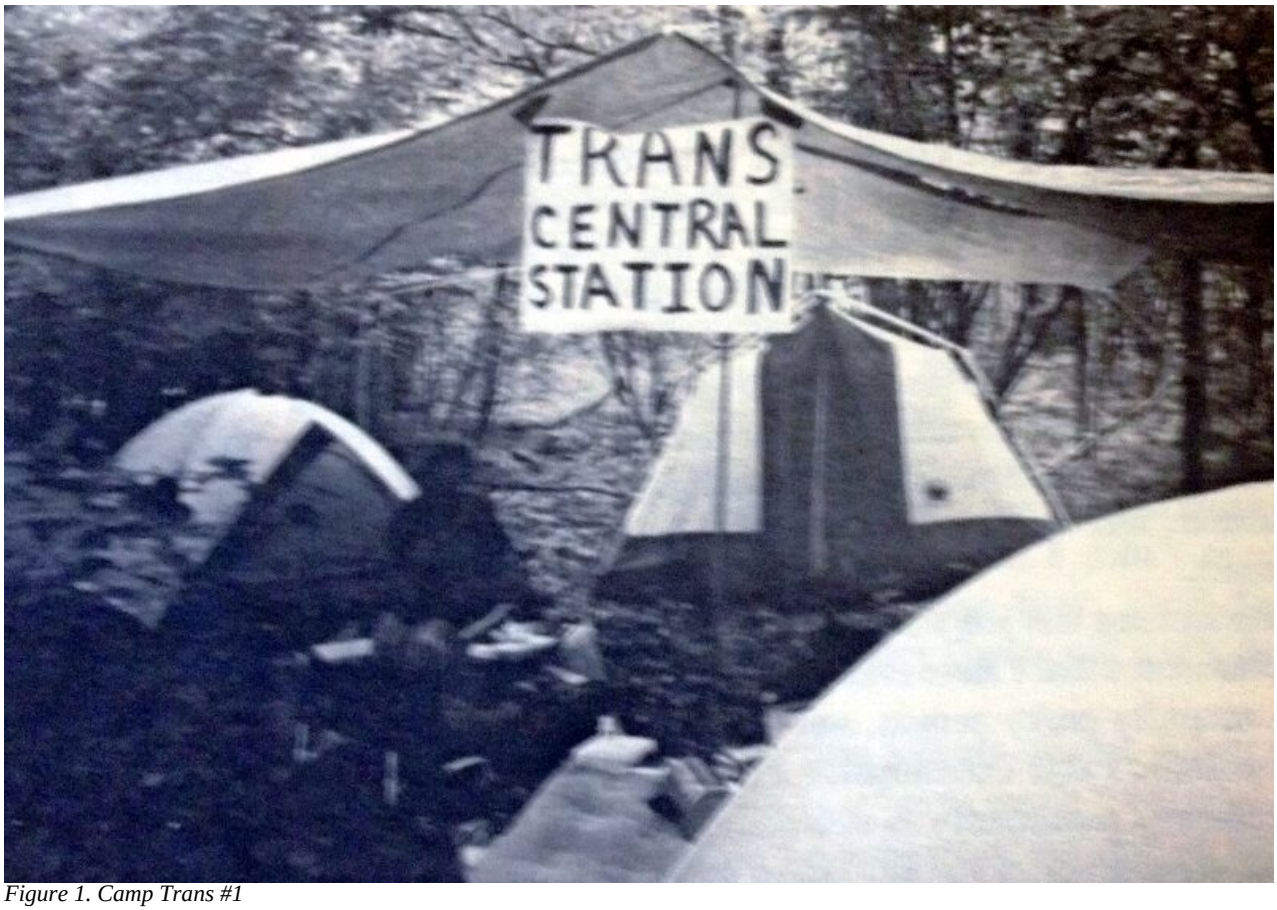

Figure 1. Camp Trans #1

Consider the way the abuse affected Nancy: "My mind was blank, my body absolutely still as I became aware of the emotional devastation that I felt inside. The events that were going down seemed totally unreal. Nevertheless I found a place of calm inside myself. I found acceptance for my situation, and I could feel the emotional devastation without the devastation overwhelming me." Is responding to systems that perpetuate this type of abuse still relevant?

The reason Nancy was given for her treatment was that the cis-only policy was , " ... for the benefit of the transsexuals' safety and the safety of the women attending the festival." For just a few moments, think about both the threat and the assumption underlying that policy. The TERF ideology informing this policy assumes that trans folk pose an inherent risk to cis folk. Moreover, there is the implied threat that should a trans person be discovered, trans folk may face a brutal response. Are narratives which teach cis people to view trans people as an inherent risk still affecting the trans community today?

Is the MWMF still an embodiment of and apologist for the very TERF ideology that recently sought to have the United Nations declare open season on trans people? When a TERF leader said in 1979 that the best way to deal with the trans experience would be to "mandate it out of existence," has not the MWMF carried out this very policy for the last 23 long years?

Since the MWMF has never repealed their cis-only policy, the protests continue.

"We have made it clear that this will be our last time at the Festival until MWMF shows visible and concrete signs of changing their intention," Amy Ray and Emily Saliers wrote on their site. "We have no animosity towards anyone in this case but see the deep and fearless legacy that MWMF has had during its existence and we honor that. We also honor the prayerfulness that has been a part of this struggle on both sides." - Indigo Girls, 4/4/2013

"With a heart full of love, sadness and hope I am writing to announce my decision to cancel my performance at the 2013 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Since the announcement of my intended participation several weeks ago I have received a great deal of heartfelt feedback that in light of the festival's policy of not welcoming trans women, my decision to attend is one that is causing pain within our community, and that is truly the opposite of what I had hoped to create by attending." - Andrea Gibson, 3/24/13

Is it still relevant to stand against trans discrimination and cis-privilege at every turn?

Tell me what you think in the comment section below!

*HT Gemma ?

Cross-posted from Ehipassiko

Suggested citation

Cristan Williams. "Michigan Womyn's Music Festival." TransAdvocate, April 9, 2013.
https://www.transadvocate.com/michigan-womyns-music-festival_n_8943.htm