

That time TERFs beat RadFems for protecting a trans woman from their assault

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Abstract

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Article



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[Beth] Elliott also served on the organizing committee of the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference, planned for April of 1973 in Los Angeles, and she had been asked to perform as a singer in the conference's entertainment program.

The Gutter Dykes leafleted the conference to protest the presence there of a “man” (Elliott), and keynote speaker Robin Morgan, recently arrived from the East Coast, hastily expanded her address to incorporate elements of the brewing controversy. All of her incorporations seem to have come from separatist material, and none from Elliott and her supporters. Morgan’s speech, titled “Lesbianism and Feminism: Synonyms or Contradictions?” was subsequently published in her memoir *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist*, and it was also widely anthologized. More than twelve hundred Women at the conference--which turned out to be the largest lesbian gathering to date--listened to the speech firsthand. For many attendees, the controversy over Beth Elliott’s participation in the West Coast Lesbian Feminist Conference was their first encounter with the “transgender question,” and what transpired there would inform opinions nationwide. - *Trans History* by Susan Stryker, pages 103 - 104

Robin Tyler and Patty Harrison were partners in a Radical Feminist comedy duo known as Harrison & Tyler. They were scheduled to perform at the Conference, but TERFs became violent and attempted to physically assault Beth Elliott, an out trans woman, who was also scheduled to perform.

Cristan Williams: You were at the 1973 West Cost Lesbian Feminist Conference where TERFs had threatened to disrupt the conference?

Robin Tyler: Yes, Harrison & Tyler were performers and we defended Beth Eliot. Robin Morgan came up with this horrible speech and when Beth went on stage to play her guitar and sing, [TERFs] started threatening her. Patty [Harrison] and I jumped on stage and we got hit, because they came onto the stage to physically beat her.

Williams: Oh my god!

Tyler: We stepped up and defended Beth. When Robin Morgan came out against Beth, I said to her, look, you’re bisexual and you’re up here determining who should belong to this movement and who shouldn’t? Both Patty and I thought it was just terrible. It wasn’t like we totally understood transgender people at the time, because we didn’t, but how are you beat someone? It was just disgusting.

Around the time that TERFs were sending death threats to the radical-feminist lesbian-separatist music collective, Olivia Records for being trans-inclusive, Olivia produced Tyler’s groundbreaking comedy album, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*.

Tyler: I produced my first album *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* and Olivia distributed it. So, I know Judy [Dlugacz]. I knew the people from Olivia Records and I couldn’t believe it when there was a problem with Sandy Stone! Can you believe it? All of that over Sandy! You know what’s interesting? Rather than fighting who’s oppressing us, TERFs go after the most oppressed people instead of building a coalition. It was all just shocking to me! I think maybe what helped me was that I knew trans guys who were on testosterone back when I was in New York. Maybe when you get to know people personally, it’s hard to hate them, or fear them.

So, [Camp Trans] at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival was good. It was a great chance to get to know trans people personally. Having a space to meet trans women, to talk to them and to do workshops and educate people. That was good!

In her commentary, Susan Stryker notes that the group of TERFs who were primarily targeting Beth

Elliot called themselves the “Gutter Dykes.” TERF pioneer, lecturer, writer and opinion leader, Bev Von Dohre (AKA, “BevJo”) was an active member of the Gutter Dykes at the 1973 Conference and was directly involved with the effort to target Elliot. Von Dohre is somewhat infamous for stating:

[Trans people’s] arrogance and oppressiveness is amazing. It is funny though that they are so used to Feminists immediately bowing before them that they don’t know how to deal with that we don’t care what happens to them. They expect we’ll be shocked to see statistics about them being killed, and don’t realize, some of us wish they would ALL be dead. - Bev Von Dohre, 2010

Von Dohre contributed to a Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival booklet that proclaims itself to be a “Radical Feminist Greetings & Messages for MichFest 2014.” In the booklet she writes:

Radical Feminists NEVER agree to the female-hating trans cult con that men could be women or Lesbians. (We also do not accept “trans-paraplegic” able-bodied men who demand to be accepted as paraplegic Lesbians.) This includes not supporting these men appropriating our identity by calling them “transfolk” or “transwomen” or any other terms that give credence to the idea that they are somehow more special than other misogynist female impersonators. Radical Feminists never call men “women” of any kind or “she” or “her,” or call women “men.”

Radical Feminists do not lie, threaten, bully, manipulate, play games, name-call, ridicule, taunt, insult, abuse, or use oppression against other women (such as using classist or racist terms aimed to humiliate women oppressed by classism or racism.) -Bev Von Dohre, Radical Feminist Greetings, pages 12 - 13

In the next portion of my interview with Robin Tyler, she discusses her first-hand experience with the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival and talks about the TERF violence that lead her to start her own, trans-inclusive Women’s Music Festival.

Next in this series: A TERF’s fist gave rise to trans-inclusive women’s music festivals

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