

The Indigo Girls, The Bigotry Of The MWMF WBW Policy, And Peaceful Action

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Abstract

As Cristan Williams pointed out in her recent Transadvocate piece Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, segregation against trans women has been occurring at that festival for a very, very long time. Over the years, many intra-LGBT community allies of trans women have spoken out against the policy -- including the Lesbians for Justice in 1992, the [...]

Article

As Cristan Williams pointed out in her recent Transadvocate piece Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, segregation against trans women has been occurring at that festival for a very, very long time. Over the years, many intra-LGBT community allies of trans women have spoken out against the policy -- including the Lesbians for Justice in 1992, the Lesbian Resource Center of Seattle in 1999, and the Lesbian Avengers of Boston in 2000 -- and yet words alone haven't moved the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF). Things haven't changed since the MWMF's 2000 press release:

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival remains clear and firm in our commitment to maintain the Festival as womyn-born womyn space. Just as white allies are asked to respect womyn of color only space, we ask the transsexual community to respect womyn-born womyn space. Supporting womyn-born womyn space is no more inherently transphobic than supporting womyn of color space is "racist." We refuse to be forced into false dichotomies that equate being pro-womyn-born womyn space with being anti-trans.

Michigan has always been home to womyn-born womyn who represent every point along the continuum of gender identity: from butch to femme and beyond butch and femme, including many who consider themselves transgendered. We remain committed to providing space for womyn-born womyn to gather in celebration of our diverse identities as womyn-born womyn.

All the words over all the years haven't moved the MWMF organizers to change their policy. It seems likely that more words won't do it now.

The Indigo Girls are scheduled to perform at this year's festival come August. However, they've put in a statement that this will be the last year they were performing at the festival until the womyn-born-womyn policy is withdrawn:

Our hope for all the past years has been that the Festival would move towards an intention of Trans-Inclusion. We have continued to search our selves and look at both sides of this issue and

truly respect the different points of view, but have always come back to our core belief that Trans Womyn should be included in the Festival, and their womynhood should be honored by the intentions of MWMF. The current intention for the Festival to be for “Womyn born Womyn” only grew out of an important necessity to honor the idea that womyn have a variety of self expression and appearance and they need a safe space where their womynhood is not in question as they stand in many different places on the spectrum from femininity to masculinity. This intention has a very important historic basis and has kept the space safe for many womyn over the years. But we strongly feel that the time is long overdue for a change of intention, to one that states very plainly the inclusion of Trans Womyn. To us, this change of intention is the only path to a truly “safe space” for womyn. We are in a time of struggle and rapid changes in our movement and we would be remiss to not recognize that many of the strides that have been made are a result of Trans Activism and the strength and perspective they have brought to the queer and feminist revolutions. We feel that if someone identifies as a womyn, they are a womyn and should be welcomed into our community with open arms. We will only be stronger for it.

They also stated:

We understand that there are many folks who feel passionately about these issues, but we encourage people on both sides to act peacefully when they express themselves. There is nothing to be gained from hateful rhetoric or aggressive actions.

Words just aren’t enough at this point, and what the Indigo Girls offer is just more words...and a bit of passive action that really doesn’t begin until August. Perhaps the Indigo Girls could learn a thing about peaceful protest from Martin Luther King Jr. In King’s Nobel Prize lecture The Quest for Peace and Justice where he stated:

The nonviolent resisters can summarize their message in the following simple terms: we will take direct action against injustice despite the failure of governmental and other official agencies to act first. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly, cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to truth as we see it.

Working peacefully, as Martin Luther King Jr. saw it, included nonviolent direct action. Talk is good; fair compromise is good, but there are times where achieving what suffragist Alice Paul referred to as “ordinary equality” means engaging in direct action that may include suffering.

So, with thought in mind, how much prejudice and discrimination towards members of one subcommunity of the LGBT community tolerate by members of another subcommunity of the LGBT community by responding with words when words haven’t, in the recent past, persuaded discriminators to change? How much prejudice and discrimination do trans people tolerate from minority communities that intersect with LGBT community by responding with words when words haven’t, in the recent past, persuaded discriminators to change?

Scheduled 2013 MWMF performer Andrea Gibson withdrew from the event this year when she found out

about the discriminatory policy. Yet, the Indigo Girls chose not to follow Gibson in her action.

The last iteration of the MWMF womyn-born-womyn policy by Lisa Vogel, a lesbian feminist who is the lead organizer for and a co-founder of the festival, is found in a 2006 press release on the policy in which she stated:

I deeply desire healing in our communities, and I can see and feel that you want that too. I would love for you and the other organizers of Camp Trans to find the place in your hearts and politics to support and honor space for womyn who have had the experience of being born and living their life as womyn. I ask that you respect that womon born womon is a valid and honorable gender identity. I also ask that you respect that womyn born womyn deeply need our space -- as do all communities who create space to gather, whether that be womyn of color, trans womyn or trans men... I wish you well, I want healing, and I believe this is possible between our communities, but not at the expense of deeply needed space for womyn born womyn.

Healing will come only when prejudice and discrimination against trans women by some lesbians and some feminists in the festival leadership ends.

There is something to be gained by aggressive, peaceful, direct actions. If the Indigo Girls choose to perform at the festival, they should bring transgender women to the festival who have fought for community civil rights. They should consider trans women such as Jos Truitt, a feminist activist who is an editor at Feministing, Allyson Robinson, the executive director of OutServe-SLDN, who fights for the full equality of LGBT servicemembers, and Janet Mock, a transgender activist who as a then editor of People Magazine who strongly participated in the It's Gets Better initiative.

As Julia Serano has written, it's time to "hold the discriminators [at the MWMF] accountable by calling them on their shit," and words alone at this point isn't really holding the organizers of the MWMF on their shit.

I'm exhorting the Indigo Girls to engage in peaceful, direct action.

And hey, it's not like I'm strongly suggesting they engage in a kind of behavior I haven't engaged in myself -- I have.

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