

MEDIA RELEASE: August 24, 1999
CONTACT: Lisa Vogel

FESTIVAL REAFFIRMS COMMITMENT TO WOMYN-BORN SPACE

The 24th annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, held August 10 - 15th, brought more than 5,000 womyn and children together for an inspiring, rejuvenating week of performances, workshops, and community. This year's Festival was also the site of an action organized by the group Transsexual Menace.

When WWTMC, the organizers of the Festival, learned that Transsexual Menace planned to hold a "Son of Camp Trans" event across the road from the Festival grounds, producer Lisa Vogel issued the following statement:

"We do not and will not question any individual's gender. The Festival is an event organized by, for and about womyn. Our intention is for the Festival to be for womyn-born womyn, meaning people who were born and have lived their entire life experience as female. We ask that the transsexual community support and respect the intention of our event."

On Friday, August 13th, six individuals and a group of supporters from "Son of Camp Trans" approached the Box Office and requested tickets to enter the Festival. They proceeded with the full knowledge of the intent of the Festival to be a woman born woman space. In keeping with Festival values that no woman's gender ever be questioned on the Land, the Box Office workers did not question anyone's gender, and sold tickets to the six individuals when requested. Those individuals then entered the Festival.

"As commonality organizers, we operate from a position of trust, expecting that people will try to do the right thing, rather than policing people to catch them doing the wrong thing," says Vogel. "We do not and will not question any individual's gender. We hoped that the Transsexual Menace organizers would honor that trust and respect the intention of this event."

The Son of Camp Trans activists proceeded from the Front Gate Box Office to the outdoor, communal showers in the RV camping area. They took off their clothes and it was apparent to the womyn in and near the showers that two of the Son of Camp Trans activists were anatomically male. The word began to spread that there were men on the land who had shown their penises in the showers. A member of the Son of Camp Trans group stopped by the teenage girls' discussion group at the Community Center and engaged in explicit discussion about the clinical aspect of sex change operations. The group later began selling Transsexual Menace t-shirts outside the Main Kitchen area, attracting attention and complaints (sales of products and services outside of the Crafts Bazaar is not permitted out of respect to the crafts-womyn who go through a selection process).

As the Son of Camp Trans activists made their way through the site, increasing numbers of Festival participants became aware of and expressed concern about their actions. Festival organizers focused on rumor control and safety of everyone involved. The Community Center, Oasis peer counseling area, Staff Services and Security/Communications crews all worked hard to ensure the flow of accurate information and provide constructive opportunities for the expression of the full range of thoughts and feelings generated by these events.

A number of spontaneous gatherings developed where participants discussed and debated the presence of the Son of Camp Trans activists and their actions. Volunteer facilitators helped to structure discussions so that various viewpoints, including those of the Son of Camp Trans, could be heard. The Son of Camp Trans activists scheduled a workshop session for Saturday at noon in the workshop area, and various Festival participants announced their intention to hold community meetings at different locations on Saturday.

In response to confusion and concerns among Festival participants, organizers distributed 2,000 copies of the following statement on Friday evening, August 13:

Festival Update on "Son of Camp Trans"

There has been an event called "Son of Camp Trans" organized across the gate from the Land to protest the Festival as an event organized by, for and about womyn born womyn only.

The Festival is womyn's space, something that is rare and precious to most of us. We also define that further as woman born woman space, meaning a place for people who were born and have lived their entire life experience as female. This is our public statement to the Camp Trans Organizers, and we asked that they, and other members of the Transsexual community, respect those wishes.

We are aware that some individuals associated with Camp Trans have not respected the Land as womyn's space. We know that many of you are angry about this, and have questions about whether this is a change of festival policy. There is

no change in Festival policy, politics or intention regarding womyn's space. We too are angry that this has been disrespected, and we are dealing with it now the best we can. We want you to know that we always have been and always will be committed to the Festival as womyn's space.

We want to caution all of us on two things. First, the Festival does not and will not question any individual's gender. This is basic to the environment of trust and freedom that the fabric of the Festival depends upon. Many of us move about a world that questions our femaleness every day. This is not an experience that we want any single woman to have on this Land. Please do not perpetuate this by approaching any woman to question her gender.

Secondly, there are over 5000 womyn here. Let's not allow a few individuals to define and absorb all of the incredible woman energy of our event. This is an event about womyn, not about people who do not respect womyn's space. Let's continue to build the powerful community we create year after year. This is why we are here.

On Saturday morning, several Festival staff members met with Transsexual Menace organizers at Son of Camp Trans. Festival organizers reiterated the intention of the Festival as a womyn-born womyn space, and again asked Son of Camp Trans participants to respect the Festival community's intentions, and the two anatomically male individuals agreed not to reenter the Festival grounds. Transsexual Menace and Son of Camp Trans organizer Riki Anne Wilchins declined to respect those wishes and entered the Festival, participating in discussions and the workshop, and attending performances.

In response to the presence of men on the land, several Festival participants chose to leave the Festival earlier than planned. Others expressed appreciation dismay that Festival organizers had not done more to prevent men from entering the Festival. Others voiced support for changing the womyn-born womyn intention. Many expressed appreciation for the statement issued by organizers and the way the events had been handled.

"This was a challenging experience for many of us," says Vogel. "For the last 24 years, the Festival has been like a petri dish, a laboratory of ideas and expression that have influenced and been influenced by the many communities and cultures that flow into and out of the Festival.

"We recognize that the Festival and Son of Camp Trans symbolize and express divergent views on the larger gender discussion that is going on in lesbian and gay communities. We support this larger discussion and value and respect the transsexual community as integral members of the broader queer community. We ask that they in turn respect woman born woman space.

"We believe that individuals and organizations who are committed to disrupting or destroying womyn-born-womyn space are acting with ignorance and complete disregard for the legacy of misogyny and sexism that still pervades our daily lives. Just as many Womyn of Color express the need for 'room to breathe' they gain in Womyn-of-Color space away from the racism that inevitably appears in interactions with a white majority, womyn born womyn still need and value that same 'room to breathe'.

"We are saddened and angered that political energy is being directed at tearing down womyn's space, instead of at the external institutions that still concentrate power and control in patriarchal hands. We believe that the Transsexual Menace's political action at the Festival was meant to disrupt and undermine the very fabric of the Michigan community, and the womyn of Michigan are understandably upset at the level of disrespect expressed through the action.

"We remain united in our commitment to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as womyn's space. This is basic to the power and philosophy of what brings womyn from around the world back to Michigan every August. This is the experience we are committed to celebrating at next year's 25th Michigan Womyn's Music Festival."