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Correspondence: 2005-06-13: Amy - Michigan Womyn's Fest Interviews: Interview #3

I talked to Lisa Vogel, one of the founders and operators of Michigan Womyn's Festival about the history of the festival and her thoughts on the transgender issue. We sat outside her tent in Worker Ville.

Amy R. How are you doing?

Lisa V. I'm good.

A. The weather turned...

L. The weather turned. I feel really...just happy about it all, or happy about most of it. Happy about enough of it, that I'm happy about it all.

A. Well I heard people talking about this story that you told about the original Michigan, the first one, do you want to share that?

L. Oh sure, for some reason old stories are dribbling out of my mouth this year

So, the first year's festival, 1976, we had absolutely no money. We literally did garage sales. We literally did a car wash to get money to buy stamps. I borrowed money from my dope dealer. You know? It's like we had NO money! Our first piece of publicity was a mimeograph, and we did thousands of them because we could go into the university at night and do mimeographs. But, we had no money to rent tents, and we didn't have any water on the sight that we had rented. We had rented a sight that somebody had parceled up to sell- there was 120 acres.

A. In Michigan?

L. In Michigan, over by Mt. Pleasant where I was going to school at the time. And so we rented this space. There was no electricity, no water. We had no idea how we were going to make this work. And we were going to run a generator, we didn't have a truck among us, and we didn't have money to rent any vehicles and literally the sound woman rolled up and she had a truck, and I went, "Oh my God a truck. Now I know who's going to turn around and go to Detroit and get the generators." And we ran the whole thing off a generator. I mean it was just a stitch, you know? And we didn't have any water, and so I was trying to figure out how to get a big amount of potable water, because I didn't think that we would ever have a well. And we eventually had a local person put a well down and pull it up and we just had the well for 5 days, literally. But, I was trying to figure out how to get a hold of some tents, and I made up this story, I called an army reserve place, and I got a name of a guy. And I called another army reserve place and I said, you know, "Sergeant 'Amy Ray,' who I was in the reserves with, told me that you could hook me up with these tents. And what do you think about the Alpena branch? Do they have anything that we could possibly..."? And it went on for years. I mean I think that maybe after five years they finally figured out that nobody really knew me.

And we only rented one stage tent, like a little awning over our tent. And we borrowed for years, large tents. But the first year we also had this huge potable water thing. So it was the day of the first festival, we had no idea what to expect, we thought there'd be, maybe a thousand women, and the people who I was organizing the festival with, they wanted to go to the airport, basically, because they wanted to pick up performers that they were interested to meet. And I'm like, you guys, you cannot leave me here alone, I have no idea what's going on. I had just turned 20. So all of the sudden here were all these women, I mean there were 2000 women that came to the first festival, and they were dykes. We were lesbians from Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, we didn't really have a global view of a lesbian nation at that point - women from New York, and women from California, who were much more political and much more separatist. And so all of the sudden I'm running around trying to figure out what to do about all these people because it was a Friday, Saturday, Sunday thing, when all of the sudden this huge army truck with this huge tank of water... Well all they saw was a huge army truck with a huge tank on the back of it, and of course they think we're getting invaded. And I'm standing in front of the women, trying to keep them from attacking them. "No, no, no, really, he's here for a reason." - this big old butch of a guy in the front seat. It was hysterical. I have no muscle memory of him picking that up. I have a very big muscle memory of, I actually jumped up on his, you know, the step up thing, and rode on his truck so I could just keep women back from coming up to him. It was hysterical. But the day before, we actually had a well put in. A local guy took pity on us. You know, a friend of a friend of a friend, and came up and sunk down a well, and pulled it up on Monday. And we ran it off a generator. Cause we were out there trying to put in our own well.

A. How many people was it, the original incarnation of starting the festival.

L. Well initially, there was me and Mary Kindig, and my sister got involved in the spring.

A. So y'all brainstormed it.

L. I had gone off to the Midwest Festival. It's like not a music festival and it still exists in a certain form. I was a freshman in college, and I had a college instructor who was trying to make time with me, so she invited me to go to this thing. And I knew nothing about nothing. I just came out in the spring, you know the spring of my high-school year and was y'know, being a frisky young lesbian. And so she invited me to go to this thing in Missouri and I went. I don't know it was a couple hundred women, maybe, living in a camp, and doing workshops, and sharing work shifts, and cooking for each other, and I was a hippie, you know, so this was like, oh my god, this is kind of like a rock festival, but yet without the dudes, this is fantastic. And then I went from there to a women's music festival in Boston that I heard about there. And it was an indoor, two-day festival, and that's how I met the Saints, 'cause they had the bar happening then.

A. Right, the Saints' Bar.

L. Yeah, and that's when I first met them. And so we went there and that was very cool. I mean, I was definitely into rock and roll, and not much rock and roll was happening, but I loved the women-identified music tremendously.

A. So your original idea with this, it included music...was that like the main ingredient for you?

L. You know what was really the main ingredient? - music and communal living. And the food piece I've often times felt like was maybe the most significant decision of that first year. 'Cause we didn't really have very much the first year. We had a stage, and we had a health care tent, and we had communal food. And that seemed to be, like if we wouldn't have started with communal food, I don't know that we would have gotten back to it. And that, I think defined the community maybe more than almost anything; rather than having stands and you buy your food or something like that. At the time, we were the first women's music festival that did an outdoor communal thing. That was pretty unusual.

A. And the reason why you thought that that was important, was it a cultural reason? Were you compelled by something political about oppression and women needing their own space, was there a developed mission statement, or was it just kinda like this is going to be fun, and we shouldn't have men here.

L. Honestly the original seed was that men would be there. When we really started thinking about it, we couldn't imagine a space without men.

A. Because you didn't want it or because in the world...

L. Never had it. Never had it. Never had it. You know? And even though there were no men at that Midwest Festival and there were women-only concerts, we were in an eco-sphere of kind of left-wing hippies, which were mostly lesbian, and gentle and supportive men, who we hung out with. And so we started planning it, on the way back from the Boston Festival, you know we were in the van, like, "Oh god, this is so much fun going to these things, but it's so far to drive. What if we had something like this in Michigan, it would be so much easier than traveling."

A. Oh, that's great.

L. Fabulously innocent, right? And really I thought that for quite awhile - the easier, softer way, is to do something in Michigan. Having never produced anything but a kegger, you know?

And, so honestly, initially the concept was just a women's event, and we didn't think through the piece of how would it be to actually wake up and have a dude in the tent next to you. And you know initially I went to the women in the food co-op and said, "Would you organize food?" And they were all straight hippie women. And they all actually showed up the first day, and went to the beach and never came back.

A. Oh my god.

L. So like they were so freaked out, so...

A. And what did you do?

L. Well, the food was super simple...

A. The food was there already?

L. Yeah. And it was super simple. So like I really had these experiences of running over to start the fire to cook the corn and the potatoes and running back to the stage, and...

A. You didn't have many people working?

L. No, we had almost nobody. We just had a handful, and you know, women would, some women came and just snapped to.

A. So when you sent out the message to invite people to this, at that point did you say we're gonna make it clear that it's just women, or did it just happen on its own?

L. Well no, it didn't happen on its own. When we started talking to performers, Meg Christian at the time was doing women-only concerts only. And her manager said are you going to have men? And we said, "Oh. We hadn't really thought about that piece." We were having a hard time just getting people to take our phone calls.

A. You were calling performers.

L. We were just trying to, you know... we had met Margie Adam at this Chicago concert, afterwards, and got a phone number. And

everybody just kept saying, call us after somebody else says yes. Call us after somebody else says yes.

A. Right. They wanted you to have an anchor.

L. Yeah. Exactly. And we had never produced anything. And that's all we had, was an idea. And Margie really was the first person who said yes. At that time she had done a record, Meg had done a record, and Cris Williamson had done her record. Those were the three women who were the primary, touring women that had the draws. And Holly was just at that point kinda crossing into the women's community from doing the anti-war and left stuff.

A. So were things like the women-of-color tent, and the DART, and all of those special sort of things that take into consideration people's needs, did they develop over a long period of time, or was there one moment where it really cemented in everybody's mind?

L. It developed over time. Like DART came out of picking up the phone, a woman saying hey I want to come to your festival and is there a way to get there from the bus. Sure we pick up women from the bus. Well, I'm in a wheelchair. And I remember the woman's name today. And this is on the old land, and I'm like fuck, what is this woman gonna do? I'm like well there's never been a woman in a wheelchair here. And then I went and talked with a woman who worked with women with disabilities and said what do we do?

A. What brought up the women of color area?

L. That really happened once we were on this land, even. So the women-of-color tent didn't come about...

A. This is the third piece of land y'all have been on?

L. Yeah. We were one year on the first land, seven years on a rented piece of land, and we moved here in 1982. I think as more women of color started to attend the festival. You know it was pretty white - pretty white and thirty-something. And diversity of age was like when we did the bookings, we'd think, oh, diversity of age was booking somebody who was 40. Like I remember a woman that we booked and it was really important that we book her because she's like "old," she's 40. (laughs)

A. And so you really developed as things became, came up?

L. Well you know the community evolved. The community, really, I mean my...I mean it's not like I haven't had a few good ideas in 29 years. I'm saying I've had a few, but mostly what I've done is facilitate community ideas. I mean that's really how I see my role.

A. When did you develop your policy, like your specific policy, for example, "women born women?" Did you feel a need to have it after the first year?

L. The first year we articulated it was 1978.

A. So after 2 years?

L. Yeah. There was not a trans movement but you know there was a dynamic that was happening, and there certainly was an issue, and there was a dynamic that was kind of two-fold. There was this whole process that was happening about questioning women of color, butch women of color. Women would come up to me, "there's a man on the land." And the first question out of my mouth became, "is she a woman of color?" Because white women who weren't used to being around African-American women, specifically, or Mexican-American women, would read butch African-American women as men. And that was a real dynamic thing that was happening in the seventies. I mean, just bluntly. And because there hadn't been a lot of, I can say from my experience anyways, there wasn't a whole lot of interracial community action happening. And I think the festivals were really part of making that be so, but it wasn't very "so" at first.

A. And so you handled that by helping people understand, just getting rid of that ignorance and sort of opening people up to...

L. Well I didn't even know the ignorance existed. I'm sure it existed in me, but then I would have someone come up and say "there's a man on the land." And after going up to several people accused of being male and walking up and going, oh that's not a man. And then starting to realize that white women track women of color very differently and not understanding what a butch woman of color presents as is different than a butch white woman. So that was just like, you know, you learn that as you experience it.

A. And do you feel that Michigan is like this springboard where people come and then they go out into the world after Michigan, and whatever happens here really affects the way they run their businesses or the way they do their activism, in a political way. Or do you feel that it's this cultural space and we come together to have fun in a safe space, and you know, not to feel the responsibility or burden of that. Because, I've been interviewing different people about all the different perspectives on Michigan and some people specifically identify it as a cultural space, and some people identify it as a political space. And one woman I did talk to from Camp Trans identified it as a political place. She was talking about the "women born women" policy saying she wants this policy to change because she feels that so many people come here that affect the world when they leave. And I wondered if you felt Michigan's impact in that way, or if that's even an issue.

L. Well I know it has that impact for some women. See I think here there's many, many women endeavoring to do the right thing. You know? And I feel as though the guideline for those of us working on the festival and, certainly for myself, is that probably most important, is to endeavor to do the right thing. It's a cultural event. You know we program it, we build it. And the real Petri dish is what kind of environment, what are our choices, what's our value system here, when we really can't hang it on anybody else. Like what is important to us? Like the services we provide for each other, the way we care for our children, the way we make things accessible, you know, listening to minority voice, leaving lots of room for the voice of dissent, you know, like absolute commitment to continuing dialogue, processing our cracks off. We've been process monsters from the start because it is first and foremost a community event where it is the community's process that will really bubble up to the top, and the right thing will happen.

We have these community meetings and we have these special interest group meetings, and of course we have this whole infrastructure of coordinators and crews. And it's that kind of vital input from so many women that end up solving so many of the problems, end up creating so many of the things, the women-of-color tent, the deaf way tent, the Jewish women's space, how we have the child care organized, the oasis, you know the political statement we're making by how the womb is organized. So that we are fundamentally creating, yes, a first-aid space, but a radical space for teaching different ways to approach healing. I mean that was probably one of the first, besides deciding that we were going to eat together, this process of eating together bonds us as a tribe.

And then the next thing we really developed was really a radical approach to we're not just going to have first aid, we're actually going to teach each other how to take care of ourselves. We're actually going to meld modalities. We really kind of downplay the medical model and the doctors who work in the womb, you know, there have been plenty of docs who can't really hang with the scene there because they're equal with herbalists. You know and it's deep. I mean docs walk away changed.

A. It's a microcosm.

L. Right. And so do I think that has an effect? It has an effect on me every year. I mean I walk away changed every year. I feel the responsibility to keep clear that my job is first and foremost to endeavor to do the right thing. And not to endeavor to make the most money...you know what I mean, like in these years when we're going through all these changes of size, it's really called upon a whole other skill set to make it work, but also to keep your eye on the prize, that it's really...Of course, the concerts are fabulous and the workshops are fabulous, but the grist of it is something bigger than that.

A. Hmmm. I love that.

L. It's really something bigger than that. You know, if we were just about doing a concert, I could figure out how to make a lot of money just doing a concert. I mean, I've been doing it a long time, but the value system really demands that the economics go into community services, and that's crucial. That is what tells us we're a community. That's what has the energy, you know, the cycling of energy, and the interchange. I mean as each new generation comes in, or each new woman attends. So we're taught a consumerist culture, and we're trying to say, the very statement from the beginning is this is your event. You know, we provide a framework, yes you pay a ticket, but we provide a framework, this isn't a thing that we're providing for you. This is the gig. And we've found ourselves saying to people, this may or may not be the event for you. Like, I don't know why I have to do a workshop; I just want to pay an extra fifty dollars. You know? And we're like, thanks but we're not going to let you off the hook that easy, 'cause this is really what your experience, this is actually, we're offering something different and we think it's pretty powerful.

A. Do you mind making a statement about the transgender issue and Michigan Womyn's Festival's "women born women only" policy?

L. Not at all, well let's see, just off the cuff, here's what I would have to say about it. As a queer community we're all struggling around how we explore and expand gender definitions, and the women here who are creating this festival are part of that. And I feel very strongly that having a space for women, who are born women, to come together for a week, is a healthy, whole, loving space to provide for women who have that experience. To label that as transphobic is, to me, as misplaced as saying the women-of-color tent is racist, or to say that a transsexual-only space, a gathering of folks of women who are born men is misogynist. I have always in my heart believed in the politics and the culture of separate time and space. I have no issue with that for women-of-color, for Jewish women, for older women, for younger women. I have seen the value of that and I learned the value of that from creating this space for so many years. So the troublesome thing is, in the queer community, if we can't, not just allow, but also actually actively support each other in taking the time and space that we need to have our own thing, then to come together, in all of our various forms, is going to take that much longer. And I understand how certain activists in the Camp Trans scene only see this as a negative statement, and I think that there's a lot of connection that's getting lost. Because, I really think that folks aren't understanding how crucial this space is, as it is, for the women who come here. And, maybe that's just it.

A. That's great.

L. OK, cool.

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