

The Creation of a “Safe Space” within the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

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“Not only can the women of the festival look around and know that everything in sight has been created by women, from the tower holding the sound equipment and lights, to the awesome main stage, to the city of tents full of life, excitement and joy, to the community services available to all, but we can look around and realize that through living by different values for a week in Michigan, we created another world” (Jennie, 2001). The true essence of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival centers on the creation of a safe space where women can escape their daily lives and live in a world void of social expectations and barriers that are ever present within mainstream society. As Ruby Jennie powerfully states, this festival successfully fosters an atmosphere where women are able to improve their skills, while living in a place that celebrates and promotes women’s power, bodies, and overall successes.

### **Historical Background of Women’s Music**

Women’s music encompasses the ideals that women can empower themselves through taking control of the music network. In controlling the production of their own music, women can increase their self-esteem and can improve their skills in all aspects of the music industry. The women’s rights movement in the United States was the key political influence in the creation of such network where the ideals of the separatist movement paved the way for women to create their own music industry (Browne, 2009). Women’s recording and production companies, radio shows, and sound and lighting businesses spread throughout the country. In addition, as many of these women were lesbians, they supported the fundamental ideal that women should be separated from men in order to escape their oppressor (Browne, 2009).

The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival began in 1975 as an experiment in creating a woman only community living space (Flanigan, 1995). In 1976, the festival was officially

established and aimed at promoting a sense of unity for all “womyn-born-womyn”. This festival allows women to express their struggles and their pride through music. They also obtain a great sense of power and confidence in their own abilities as only women are in charge of putting together this full-scale production. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival is the “heart” of the women’s music network as it was the first festival to accommodate an audience exclusively of women (Morris, 2005). The festival provides an experience for women’s music and culture along with a safe space for women to explore their own, unique identities. It has fostered much enthusiasm and has brought together many lesbian communities throughout the country. It began growing every year and eventually turned into a six-day event with multiple stages (Browne, 2009). It includes not only musical performances, but also art, comedy, theater, and dance. The festival has formed into a process of self-evaluation and self-expression in an environment where women feel safe and accepted.

### **The Creation of a “Safe Space”**

Within the context of a patriarchal and capitalistic culture, the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival fosters a safe environment for women where they can promote feminist values, freely express themselves, and create opportunities scarce in mainstream society. In order to recognize how women benefitted from this safe space, one must understand what encompasses a safe space. Many attendees have documented their experiences at the festival through blogs, diaries, and articles where they explore the ways in which the festival works in promoting a positive, supportive atmosphere.

Ruby Jennie, a festival attendee, discusses the values and attitudes that contribute to the creation of a safe atmosphere and unforgettable experience. She highlights tolerance and cooperativeness as important social values within this space. Many qualities that women possess

such as being a lesbian, being overweight, being old, and being of a minority status are not accepted traits in mainstream society (Jennie, 2011). Within our patriarchal society, the media and other institutions emphasize the need to appear youthful, skinny, and essentially perfect, while they criticize women who do not fit within this ideal standard of beauty. However, when women enter onto the festival grounds, every individual is not only tolerated, but is celebrated for being exactly who they are. Also, cooperation is an essential part of the festival (Jennie, 2011). As over 6,000 women attend each year, they are expected to work together in order to make sure the festival can operate smoothly. By physically putting together the stages, equipment, and other venues, women support each other in working towards the same goal: making the festival experience as extraordinary and as inspiring as possible.

Support of self-expression plays an important role in the creation of this safe space as well (Jennie, 2011). Artists are able to sing about topics that are typically kept silent or viewed as taboo within our dominant culture such as domestic abuse and women’s rights (Snodgrass, 2005). Not only can women express themselves through their music, but various workshops also cover different aspects of one’s lifestyle. For instance, one can take training classes in drumming, dance, writing, and even stilt walking (Snodgrass, 2005). In addition, women can express their unique qualities by wearing neon colored wigs, extravagant gowns, or even no clothing at all (Jennie, 2011). In celebrating women’s unique traits, there are various parades that take place such as the redhead parade (Jennie, 2011). Jennie recounts women in this parade chanting, ““What do we want?” Sunscreen. When do we want it? Now!”” (Jennie, 2011). In addition, Flanigan discusses in her magazine article another parade where several women walked on stilts; an older woman that participated in the parade appeared topless after having a complete mastectomy (1995). The audience, composed of predominantly young women, responded with

passionate applause, celebrating her bravery and survival (Flanigan, 1995). Where certain traits that women possess are seen as inferior or to be criticized within mainstream culture, festival attendees commemorate the beauty of all women’s bodies. Women are not only able to feel safe on the land, but are also able to feel safe in their own bodies, which can be seen as a site of struggle and insecurity for many women outside of this atmosphere.

Also, the “womyn-born-womyn” only space helps women feel more open to participating in certain activities where the presence of men would greatly limit their actions. In Eileen Hayes’s *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women’s Music*, she interviews one woman about feeling free to walk around topless on the festival grounds. She asks, “If Michigan were not a women-only festival, would you feel as free to do that?” and the interviewee responds, “Oh, hell no! It’s bad enough to try to talk to guys and have them look you in the face....but in this society? When women have implants and become 55DDD’s...Boys just couldn’t handle it” (Hayes, 2010). In this interview, Hayes successfully highlights the pressure that women face within our patriarchal society. As various women combat the need to alter their bodies in order to gain acceptance in our culture, Hayes emphasizes the importance of this space in deconstructing societal barriers and expectations. By acknowledging that women built this land themselves, using their bodies and their skills without the presence of men, they can feel more pride and freedom in showcasing their natural bodies. In addition, several blogs from various attendees expand on this idea. One woman admits that she did feel uncomfortable in her own nudity, but said that the festival experience “moved her in the direction of comfort” (Disability and Nudity, 2002). This environment seeks to help women find their bodies as a source of pleasure and confidence. Many women are uncomfortable in exposing their bodies due to the unwanted attention they receive from men, but this space serves as a positive,

nonjudgmental atmosphere where women can find the beauty and strength, in a world that does not objectify or attempt to find fault in their physical appearance.

Another factor that contributes to the safe space is caretaking (Jennie, 2010). If someone is injured or is emotionally troubled, strangers take the time to make sure she is cared for (Jennie, 2010). In mainstream society, when someone is in need of help, people typically keep to themselves, assuming that the “proper authorities” will eventually help (Jennie, 2010). However, mutual caretaking is emphasized on the land. A sense of safety is created by not only escaping threats from the outside world, but also in knowing that a perfect stranger is willing to make sure that all the attendees are physically and mentally taken care of. Furthermore, childcare including Sprouts Family Camp Ground, Gaia Girls Camp, and Brother Son Boys Camp provides a place where women can bring their children for daily activities and adult supervision (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, 2011). The Boys Camp is placed in a secluded area, as to preserve the womyn-only space, where boys can play sports, go on daily outings, and have campfires (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, 2011). Childcare is a great contributor in increasing access for festival goers. Women are not restricted in gaining the full festival experience simply because they must watch their children as they can be reassured that their children are cared for through the services provided on the land.

Also, access for disabled individuals plays an important role in establishing a supportive and accepting space. The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival’s website highlights The Disabled Access Resource Team (DART) as a helpful resource for these individuals. There is a DART shuttle bus that transports luggage and drops women off at their designated spot (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, 2011). The documentary, *Radical Harmonies*, interviews several women who are able to experience and partake in festival activities with the services provided to

them. One particularly inspiring woman diagnosed with multiple sclerosis is interviewed. She explains that she has been attending the festival for numerous years and as her condition has gotten progressively worse, she is still able to see the action up close. The festival provided her with a wheel chair accessible space where she can comfortably watch the performances without having to worry about any physical barriers. In addition, for those individuals who have hearing problems, the festival provides American Sign Language interpreters on stage. In *Radical Harmonies*, various ASL interpreters appear on stage during the performances. One can see how passionate and expressive these interpreters are throughout the performances. These women truly feel the music throughout their entire bodies and express this emotion through signing. Overall, these services greatly enhance the experience for disabled individuals as they allow women to become fully integrated, acknowledged, and celebrated within this space.

Furthermore, the absence of capitalism greatly influences the emergence of the safe space. As our capitalistic society promotes individualistic gains, people are driven to obtain as much power and wealth as possible, potentially at the expense of others. In addition, some individuals are placed in unfulfilling and uninspiring jobs, but must remain in them in order to survive. However, all women enter into this festival knowing that their needs will always be cared for despite the amount of money in their pockets (Jennie, 2010). Food, clean water, health care, and mental services are all guaranteed. Without monetary gains determining the amount of work individuals will partake in, women are able to uncover the real pleasure and love that goes into their work. Many attendees compare their full-time jobs outside of the festival to the work they do within the festival grounds. Several note that sitting inside, surrounded by concrete walls, staring at a computer screen all day can never compare to the sense of comradery and accomplishment they feel when hauling heavy lumber across the grounds with dozens of other

sweaty women (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). Even though there is no monetary value associated with this work, women obtain a much greater sense of power, self-efficacy, and social support in accomplishing tasks that are typically not deemed “women’s work”.

Through tolerance, cooperation, self-expression, caretaking, access for the disabled, and the absence of capitalism, a safe “womyn-born-womyn” only space is born. Safety does not only encompass the notion that women are freed from the pressure and domination of men, but also that women are able to live in an atmosphere filled with support and inspiration. Flanigan remarks, “living in such close proximity with thousands of women, our tents nestled close together, our body odor mingling in the Port-a-Janes, our voices raised in collective song, provides a powerful sense of community” (1995). The physical aspect of safety plays a necessary role in the creation of the land, but these remarkable experiences are mainly a result of the values and philosophy expressed throughout these six extraordinary days.

### **Improving Skills within the Festival**

Within the emergence of a safe space, women are able to also improve their skills in male dominated fields with the help and support of other women. As women build the land themselves from the ground up, they are able to take advantage of learning new skills that are not easily accessible in mainstream society. Women are placed in work crews, long crews that last a month, two weeks before the festival and one week after, and short crews that last ten to fourteen days (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). For example, Lace Hardware is a crew that builds the tents for the stages and carries lumber and furniture onto the grounds (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). In addition, the Land crew is responsible for creating pathways and preparing the land for the festival. The Carpentry crew builds stages and other structures, while the Worker’s kitchen prepares the food (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). There are also garbage and recycling crews,



sanitation crews, plumbing crews, health care crews, stage crews, and several other crews that work together in operating a successful festival (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). In one photograph taken at the festival, several women are captured hauling lumber (Women Workers of MWMF, 2005). This photo is extremely inspiring in that one rarely sees women carrying anything requiring tremendous physical strength. The image fosters an awareness of the power present in women’s bodies. These women deconstruct societal expectations, as they are sweaty, are covered in dirt, and are wearing clothes made for physical labor such as boots, cargo pants, and gloves (Women Workers of MWMF, 2005).

Several women in Cvetkovich and Wahng’s roundtable discussion with workers from the festival note the impact of seeing a woman “dig out the fire pits in the Main Kitchen” (2001). Without men asserting their dominance onto women by limiting their access to tasks that involve physical labor, women can feel free to take on these challenges. Instead of expecting these women to fail, everyone is supportive; those with expertise in a certain field are even eager to guide others in improving their skills. In addition, workshops such as “Women with Tools” teach women how to safely use tools, teaching them how to install door locks and how to repair broken windows. These workshops foster a great sense of empowerment as women can learn to become self-reliant when various appliances and other objects need to be fixed.

Also, different workshops help women expand their instrumental skills. For example, women can learn how to play instruments that are labeled as “masculine” within mainstream society. In the workshop, “Drumsong Orchestra”, women learn the art of drumming within various cultures and rituals. In addition, the workshop “The Alchemy of DJ-ing” teaches women about handling equipment and about the techniques of DJ-ing (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, 2011). In various blogs, women also discuss their experiences in learning how to play

the guitar from other festival attendees (Lo, 2004). One woman reflects on how there was no instance where she felt judged by being unable to play a particular cord; she was completely supported throughout this learning process (Lo, 2004). While many women are denied the experience of learning how to play particular instruments that are labeled “for men only” in school and in other institutions, this festival gives women the opportunity to gain these skills without fear of criticism or subordination.

As explored in Karla Mantilla’s experience at the festival, performers can also be seen playing “masculine” instruments and taking control of the audience in a strong, powerful manner. For example, The Butchies gave a solo performance where they all body surfed among the crowd as “wild moshing” occurred in front of the stage (Mantilla, 2001). In addition, Edwina Tyler gave numerous performances, displaying her amazing drumming skills (Mantilla, 2001). Bitch and Animal were also present, giving a provocative, energized performance with the electric violin. As highlighted in *Radical Harmonies*, other talented musicians such as Bernice Johnson Reagon and Meg Christian can be seen on stage displaying their tremendous guitar and drumming skills as well.

Furthermore, Dr. Boden Sandstrom discusses her experience as a woman in the male dominated field of sound and recording engineering. She highlights the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival as a “training ground for women” (2000). She explains that male engineers are able to improve their skills through apprenticeships (Sandstrom, 2000). In the 1970’s, they begin by unloading trucks and setting up equipment or they purchased their own sound equipment after forming a band. However, at the time, most women did not have these opportunities available to them as women were unable to form bands nor did they have enough money to buy the necessary equipment (Sandstrom, 2000). Instead, women enrolled in classes “on the science of sound as

well as ‘how-to’ classes”, which ended up giving them a great advantage; they gained more scholarly knowledge on the science and technology of sound engineering (Sandstrom, 2000).

The festival then provided an outlet for these women engineers to showcase their skills while also being able to learn and grow from each performance. Sandstrom explores her experience as an engineer at the festival stating, “I will never forget the first phone call that I received from a women’s music festival producer, asking me to organize the sound for five stages and to mix on the main stage. It was the first time that I did not have to fight for every ounce of recognition” (2000). By training in this festival, women have become “beyond equal to men” as they learn to pay attention to the musicians, the audience, and the producers in the creation of these sounds (Sandstorm, 2000). This space paved the way for the first generation of women engineers as it allowed these women to grow and learn with other members of the women’s music network. This experience now assists women engineers in understanding the real impact of the message that can be expressed through the creation of sound (Sandstrom, 2000). Overall, this festival encompasses a space where women can come together, sharing their unique abilities with one another in the hopes that they will take their newfound skills back home and use them within mainstream society.

### **Issues that have Emerged within this “Safe Space”**

Despite numerous successes, the creation of this safe space as “womyn-born-womyn” only has emerged as a sight of struggle for some individuals. For instance, lesbians are able to have enough confidence and strength to shut off half of the population because they have no real use for men. However, it is riskier for straight women to seclude themselves from men because they are still apart of their culture as men fulfill certain needs (Browne, 2009). Also, people who do not support the lesbian community have responded with threats and even violent attacks on

the land. For instance, in *Radical Harmonies*, two women reflect on how an individual placed a dead dog on their mailbox, threatening the safety of the land and of every individual living on it.

In addition, the transgendered community has attacked the festival for not granting them access to the event, creating a source of conflict and misunderstanding between the two groups. In response to these restrictions, the “Son of Camp Trans” was created as an annual demonstration and event placed outside the entrance of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Mantilla, 2000). As Lisa Vogel, founder of the festival, emphasizes that no one at the festival will question anyone’s gender, several individuals from “Son of Camp Trans” obtained access onto the grounds one year. These individuals then removed their clothing near the outside showers, revealing that two of them were biologically male (In response, 1999). The group then began discussing explicit sex change procedures and starting selling “Transsexual Menace” t-shirts on the grounds (In response, 1999).

In response to the situation, festival organizers distributed a statement that read, “This festival is a womyn’s space, something that is rare and precious to most of us. We also define that further as womyn-born-womyn 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 ask that they, and other members of the Transsexual community, respect those wishes” (Morris, 2005). As the transgendered community and various other groups that do not support the festival’s philosophy and goals attempt to impede on the festival’s success, attendees are made aware that creation of a safe space does not necessarily guarantee total freedom from scrutiny and criticism. However, most women still view these grounds as a healing place, where they can defy traditional concepts of womanhood and can experience real freedom within a supportive, unified community.

### **Moving these Experiences into Mainstream Culture**

Women’s presence in the music industry is still extremely limited. However, there are women producers that have broken into this field. For instance, Cordell Jackson founded Moon Records in Memphis, Tennessee and became one of the few women viewed in the studio as an equal (NPR, 2003). Fortunately, several women producers have followed her including Ellie Greenwich, Sylvia Moy, Linda Creed and Sylvia Robinson (NPR, 2003). Robinson became in charge of the Sugar Hill record label, where “Rapper’s Delight” became popular within mainstream culture in 1979 (NPR, 2003). In addition, Vicki Wickhman has managed soul star, Dusty Springfield, alternative rock performer, Morrissey, and has managed other artists within the past decades (NPR, 2003). Also, Leslie Ann Jone, the director of music recording and scoring at George Lucas’ Skywalker Sound, produces jazz and classical music records (NPR, 2003). However, she originally wanted to produce rock ‘n’ roll records, but felt her access to the genre was too limited (NPR, 2003). Unfortunately, many women are restricted from entering into this career. For example, June Millington from the band Fanny attempted to produce other artists, but was denied access to the studio as the albums were being created (NPR, 2003).

Despite numerous failed attempts at breaking the glass ceiling, women still express their desire to continue working towards obtaining equal opportunities within the music industry. For example, Cvetkovich emphasizes how working at the festival has raised her expectation level for the outside world. After having worked on the festival grounds, she has gained a new perspective on the workplace; she now recognizes the true value of her own labor and is inspired to make a change in present working conditions (Cvetkovich & Wahng, 2001). Even though women are denied total access to the industry, they are able to leave the festival with a new appreciation and an enhanced set of skills that they can carry with them for the rest of their lives.