

"Music carries, it caresses, it moulds, it educates it trains, it pacifies, it mobilizes, it calms, it motivates...it is indeed the most fascinating thing I have ever known in my lifetime. Consequently, it can be useful and dangerous. Anything that carries as much power and influence as does music must be handled with care." - Holly Near

INTRODUCTION

Women's Liberation Music Projects Group (WLMP)

This songbook has been put together by three women who have been involved with the WLMP group.

WLMP has been meeting in London since December 1976, following a meeting on "Women and Music" at Essex Road women's centre, which brought together women from the Women's Liberation Movement who were interested in various aspects of music, and wanted to challenge and create music from a feminist point of view.

Since then the group has organized a number of projects. We have run music workshops where women learn, teach, or share their musical experience, organized a women's music weekend in Bristol, set up a music register through which women can contact one another*, and we have put together this songbook. We have also had ongoing discussions amongst ourselves about such topics as: the popular music scene, women in the commercial music industry, the politics of performing in the Women's Liberation Movement, the politics of women's record companies, and our relationship with left/alternative music groups. Although there are various shades of opinion within the group, we are united in our politics in that we are all feminists, and are working towards radical changes in all areas of our lives. We are all involved in music and related activities, very much at a grass roots level - in and around the women's movement and in situations where we can reach as many women as possible without compromising. We are firmly against feminist music being taken up by the music industry and commercialised in any way. We are involved in taking control over our own music, which means not only playing and singing, but also gaining knowledge about instruments, equipment, sound engineering and recording - usually a male domain, and having control over distribution of our music, etc.

The Politics of Music

In the last few years the Women's Liberation Movement has shown a growing interest in music, and in creating music which we can relate to. It became clear that we had no music of our own when we found ourselves bopping away to the Stones at women's discos, looking for music to listen to at home, looking for songs we could sing ourselves,

* The music register is kept at the Women's Arts Alliance, 10 Cambridge Terrace Mews, off Chester Gate, off Albany Street, London, NW1.

- and we realized that the music we were most familiar with and used to like, was anti-women and oppressive. Since those days there have been a number of feminist bands and singers, and more recently, a variety of workshops encouraging women to experiment with their voices, and with different instruments such as, African drums, saxaphones, etc.

We feel that, whether we play or not, music is a large part of most women's lives. With the growth of the mass media and popular music, many women are subjected to a barrage of songs, on the radio, and on television, which belittle them by describing them as babies, chicks, dolls, which reinforce all the stereotypes about us - that we are men's property. We are either sweet and passive, or mean and deceptive; we are always waiting, hanging back, taking what comes our way, mourning lost loves. In fact, pop music pours out endless, unrealistic clichés about love and relationships, which are also, of course, almost exclusively heterosexual. These ideas about relationships limit us all.

The music industry is one of the most wealthy and corrupt capitalist enterprises - EMI not only produces records, but invests in and makes weapons. There is no question that women are greatly under-represented in all aspects of music, and no less so in the music industry either as musicians or in production (except, of course, on the factory floor). Promoters are mostly male and it is they who think up the images that singers, etc, must conform to - images that will sell. For women this means being pretty, feminine, staying in the background as back-up vocals, being sexy, or, more recently conforming to a more butch look - the raunchy liberated ladies who've got "balls" - an image which can now be sold too. The definitions remain male defined, that is, the women are only defined in relation to male values, (having "balls" for example), not accurately in terms of themselves. Women are distorted by these images, and also by being used sexually to sell records. Album covers often use sexual bravado or innuendo to sell the products, and it is always women's bodies which are used for this end. Women are also exploited by being a large part of the audiences which pay to see mostly male stars, and who lose their identities in them, join the fan clubs etc. If we think fan clubs are a bit old-fashioned, we only have to look at the curious events after Elvis Presley's death, and the mass hysteria of many women to see the effect that all that still has.

The need for women to define their own music is clear, as is the need we feel, to avoid the pitfalls, the profit mongering, and the packaging of women that goes on in the music business. We also feel that the supposed 'alternative music set-ups' aren't women defined either. We want to develop radical alternatives to what exists, and not just be glad that women are having more opportunity to play, as they are in punk music for example. Music influences and moulds us all, and can be a great source of pleasure. To create music which accurately describes us and the situations we find ourselves in is a political act.



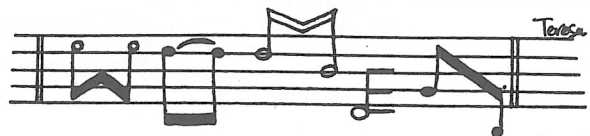
While there is still an ongoing debate as to what 'women's music' really is, we feel we must challenge all aspects of music making. This means challenging not only the words of songs, but how we present them, avoiding male-defined styles such as 'cock rock', looking critically at what different styles of music represent and helping each other with criticism. We don't want to encourage stars and we feel that performing is not more important than other activities. We want to encourage women to have expectations of themselves musically, either as listeners, players, or whatever. Not only are we not encouraged to play, but we are encouraged to listen in a passive way.

The Songbook

Some of us who had been playing guitars and singing began to feel a desperate lack of songs we could relate to. We found we resorted to playing popular songs which got near to what we were feeling if we changed some of the words, or singing songs of general struggle which seemed to leave out women - songs about the working man etc. None of this material quite 'tells it like it is' for us as feminists! So, a group of us within WLMP decided to put together a songbook of women's songs. We wanted songs to express our changing consciousness and ideas about ourselves and other women. We had started to write songs ourselves, and had been hearing some new songs coming out of the women's movement which we felt might get lost, so we decided to collect and record them in a book. We wanted to make them available to women who were probably as in need of women's music as we were. We hope it will stimulate interest and confidence in producing and collecting more songs, and in playing women-identified music.

We also feel it's important to record traditional and historical songs about women, and that there are songs from the past which need only to be dug out or reclaimed. We have concentrated on new songs though, partly because that was our area of interest and partly because Cathy Henderson, Frankie Armstrong and Sandra Kerr are compiling a book of women's traditional songs.

This book is a non-profit making project. Any money made from it will go towards another music project, another songbook for example, or even a recording project. All the contributors have agreed to give their songs on that basis. We advertised for songs to go in the book in Spare Rib, Wires, and the London Women's Newsletter. There was, however, virtually no response, perhaps because our publicity didn't explain enough, perhaps because it's difficult for women to have the confidence to just send in songs. So, we contacted women we knew, or had heard of and we've put together a variety of songs about as many aspects of women's lives as possible - about love between women and the difficulties of relationships, about work situations, street hassles and so



on. We wanted to represent the diversity in the Women's Liberation Movement and also the wide range of our growing interests. Pop music usually offers a limited choice of subjects for women, mostly around the theme of love and romance.

Because of space, money and time, we deliberately didn't include women's songs which have been published in books such as 'The Hackney and Islington Songbook', because we felt these were already becoming known and we wanted to print other new ones.

We are really excited about this book and have learned a lot from putting it together. The three of us have had virtually no musical training, although we've all been involved in playing and singing, and two of us did have some knowledge of musical theory. A lot of things were quite new to us - like transcribing music onto paper from tapes, and working out the rhythm and timing. This was a painful process which involved much counting, clapping and thumping, and playing bits of songs over and over again! The graphic work was also new, laying out the songbook, etc. This is an all women project - the material has been written, compiled and printed by women.

*Tiera Thompson
Andrea Webb
Janie Faychild*

We'd like to thank all the women who gave us their songs; Teresa Savage for the original drawings; Shiela Smith and Caroline Griffin who have helped us with ideas and practical suggestions; and the Hackney and Islington music workshop.

