

Feminism and Rock Music. Can they be combined?

Whilst some women work to sort out this problem, others hop-on regardless. But the need is growing for non-sexist music and bands are slowly emerging. Primarily the call came from the Women's Movement for its conferences, benefits and socials. Now the demand is wider. Marion Fudger talks to an all-women feminist band

THE STEPNEY SISTERS

How did the band come together?

Marion: Caroline, Ruthie and I used to be in a mixed soul band in York. We came to London with the specific intention of getting some music together. We were all at York university except Susie, so when we got here we stayed in close contact.

Anyway, the band with the men didn't work and so we tried quite hard to get singing work but didn't have much luck. Then just before Christmas 74, Caroline, Nony and I were sitting in a house in Stepney and decided we would go all out to get our own band together.

Then I met you and you talked to me about the Women's Free Arts Alliance event and asked me to go to a meeting. They wanted some music for an exhibition on February 14, 1975, and it struck me that if we didn't do something, there would be no music there. So I said, rather foolhardily, "Oh, our band can play." Then Sharon who plays piano and was squatting in Stepney came round with some songs for us. I used to play bass a long time ago, so I thought I'd do that and Nony would play acoustic guitar. We had the rudiments of a band.

We rehearsed some songs that we'd all written in the past, but didn't have much time, didn't have a drummer and didn't have any equipment. We found Susie through asking friends if they knew any girl drummers. We all turned up at her house, she was in bed and we said, "Do you play drums?" she said, "Yes", we said, "We've got this gig next week, will you play with us?" so she said "o.k." Ruthie joined the band the week after we did the Free Alliance gigs.

What did you do about equipment?

Marion: We borrowed it all the time. Susie was good at hustling and used to borrow it from the band she had been playing with. We also used gear that we had part owned with that original band from York.

Was it important that the band should be all women?

Marion: Yes it definitely started out as an all woman venture. Up 'till then we had hoped men would somehow get things together on our behalf. We went to see agents and did a lot of silly photos and there were semi-promises which never materialised. So this time we felt it was important that we be self-sufficient.

Ruthie: Also we were reacting against the mixed band we had been in, where the men had tended to direct it. We

wanted to learn how to do it for ourselves.

Susie: No one had the experience to lead a band. We all had to pool our knowledge equipment-wise, and nobody knew how to get gigs, set up the gear and things like that.

After you did the Women's Free Arts Alliance gigs, did things just snowball from there?

Marion: Yes, it was ridiculous really because it wasn't like most bands who have to struggle and bend over backwards to get work. We didn't have the material or the experience, but before we knew what we were doing, we had a lot of gigs. We were frantically trying to write songs and rehearse. It didn't really start out as a feminist venture though.

Caroline: No, we wanted to have an all women band, but we didn't really tie it to feminism or the Movement at all, that just fitted in along the way, which was rather odd. We sympathised to varying degrees with the Movement, but no one was really active at that time.

Do you write original material and what issues do your songs deal with?

Caroline: Well the majority of songs we perform are our own.

We came across one or two songs which we liked from the Northern Women's rock band in Manchester. We do 'Keep On Trucking' which was written by a Chicago women's band, so that's come from Chicago to Manchester, then down to London.

Do you write your songs collectively?

Caroline: Well, the first half dozen songs we wrote independently before the band started. They were dealing with personal relationships. After that came one song called 'Its Only Make Believe' which we all wrote together. Its about the way radio and advertising encourages women to have a false view of themselves.

In actual fact we found that very difficult, though it was a valuable exercise for everyone to contribute on everything: the ideas, the tune, the harmonies, the arrangement, the words. But it was very time consuming and tended to be very cluttered - there were too many ideas poured into one structure.

What generally happens is that someone who has an idea for a song writes out their basic idea for the words and tune. Then they get together with another person if they're stuck with bits of it. Eventually the whole band hears it and offers suggestions and arranges it. By the end, everyone has contributed.

What musical influences or styles are there in your songs?

Caroline: We're all influenced by different kinds of music. I myself am fond of soul and reggae. Generally the band is quite fond of that kind of music. But it's turned out somehow, by some miracle of chemistry, that the last few songs we've put together do have quite a cohesive sound - a Stepney Sisters sound, kind of bouncy and a bit soulful.

We've got increasingly selective about the kind of things we do. Since we've been writing songs together we've cut out words like 'baby' and 'chick' and tried to stop doing songs which reflect women in weak or passive positions, because there are quite enough songs about women being trodden on and men being aggressive sexual athletes. So there are songs I would personally never perform on stage. Equally, there are certain types of music that I don't think any of us would want to play, anything that sniffs of cock-rock is out, unless its as a joke or something.

As many people don't listen to all lyrics, or due to bad sound on the p.a. [public address system], are unable to hear clearly, do you think your music stands up well on its own?

Caroline: Yes I think it does stand up well on its own, and now as a definite policy we are duplicating word sheets to hand out at every gig, so that if people can't hear the words, they can look at them later and think about them.

What kind of gigs do you play?

Susie: We don't go out and hustle the gigs ourselves - they're offered to us. If we're offered a money-making gig and a benefit on the same day, we generally do the benefit. Not being a professional band, we don't have to go all out for money. Also at benefits the audience hasn't paid simply to see us and therefore aren't so critical and don't consider they have to get their money's worth.

Do you ever tend to rely on the fact that you're women, in terms of the way audiences see you. For instance, they may not expect so much of you, or alternatively they may see the novelty or gimmick value of an all woman band, or even as far as humping the equipment is concerned?

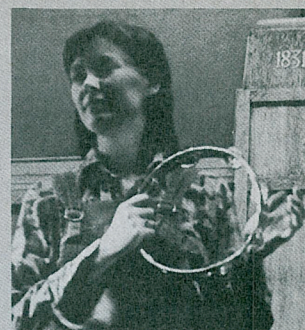
Susie: I don't think we rely on it, we are aware of it but if we relied on it I think we would dress up a lot more than we do. We don't tend to be flashy or hope to get away with not being very good because we are women. In



Marion: bass



Susie: drums



Caroline: vocals

PHOTOS BY JP, ANGELA STEWART-PARK

fact we are quite shy and we don't want to be patronised. If the audience think we are a novelty or we're not very good and go away with that impression, then there's nothing we can do. I don't really know how the audience sees us, I don't think about it. One person asked me at a gig if we knew what our image was and I said we didn't have one and they said "Oh yes you have, it's like something straight from the fifties, you're like a lot of fresh-faced college kids." I think that's because people have come to expect package deals and are possibly a bit thrown because we are natural.

The enthusiastic response that you get from specialist audiences for example, women's conferences, can be a problem because you could get a false impression of how well you would go down in a more general context. What do you think about this?

Susie: We have done both sorts of gigs and it is a lot easier to play to enthusiastic audiences. But there again we are a comparatively new and inexperienced band and need every ounce of that support that we can get. It's also easy to only accept 'safe' gigs, which is why we try to do both.

Marion: When we did a pug gig though, we did find that we really pulled together, because we felt a lot more exposed. The professional gigs we lose on, because the deal is a percentage on the door and nobody knows us in that world, so we make less money on those than we do on benefits.

Ruthie: It's taken us an awful lot of time to get enough confidence to stand up and present ourselves. There's always a fight between "Oh dear, I don't think I'm very good" and at the same time being proud of what we're doing, especially when we're doing new numbers that we're not sure of. I mean, we don't want to apologise for ourselves but at the same time we are aware that we're not as good as we want to be. We have been criticised in the past for looking at each other too much, and in a sense excluding the audience, perhaps because we're nervous. I think we're just learning to come out of a very introverted way of performing.

Susie: I don't think we could stand the pressure all the time of playing commercial gigs. Also if we only did those gigs, the worry might make us go too much the other way, like completely slick.

Marion: It was really funny when we were singing in the soul band, we used to spend *hours* trying to work out what to wear, we worried ourselves to death about it. We were all different shapes and sizes, and one thing would look alright on one person but absolutely insane on the others. There would be midnight sewing sessions and then we'd hate it, throw it away and start making something else. It's the last thing we think about now, everyone wears what they want and what they feel easy in.

Did you ever feel that you would prefer to play to all women audiences?

Susie: I don't think so – its never been a practical suggestion, there are so few women's gigs. Anyway, men are involved in helping us get to gigs.

Does the band share a common political line?

Ruthie: Well, when the band started, although we were interested in feminism, we never considered we were spokeswomen for the Women's Movement. At last year's women's conference the subject of politics as a very major area was suddenly introduced. We were immediately confronted by all sorts of issues purely because we are all women and there aren't many women's bands. Since then there has been constant political debate about where we play and what we're trying to say in our music. I think our attitude towards it is to accept that we are all different, that we can't hammer out a band line. We try to incorporate everyone's ideas as we go along. We're all going through personal growth, maybe in new areas of feminism or socialist politics.

At the conference the situation of playing to other women meant that we were suddenly confronted by ourselves. We saw ourselves by the expectations that they had of us and realised how unaware we were of what we were doing. We started relating our personal experiences and our songs to a much wider audience. Some of us felt that we wanted to write songs about direct

political issues, for instance the George Davis song, which hasn't very much to do with feminism, is about the law in Britain and how it discriminates against poor people.

Your song about the sixth demand, the right to define one's own sexuality, does it stem from a personal expression within the band or was the song written because it is an important issue within the women's movement?

Ruthie: I think we are talking in a very broad sense, the kind of oppression everybody experiences through having their sex role defined from a very early age.

Marion: Its one of those songs that started off with personal experience and got put into a more general context.

Caroline: I think we all think it is a crucial issue, feminist and a general political issue, to have your sexual freedom is very important.

How do you cope with the difficulties of combining politics and music, for example, sounding superior or humourless or boring and heavy?

Ruthie: Yes, well there's this thing about music being a pleasurable activity, where people go along and dance, which somehow has to be combined with the fact that our songs are very serious in their content. We are trying to synthesise the two because we feel it should be possible but we have had difficulties. Sometimes we've felt we were getting a bit preachy and have had to be careful to say "We feel this" rather than "You ought to be thinking this". There's a very delicate balance which I don't think we've fully established yet.

There's another difficulty too: because we do think the content of our songs is important, how much do we concentrate on the music and arrangements and how much on the words? Sometimes we've thought we should go all out to express our thoughts on various issues but its very hard to do that whilst maintaining the quality of the music, especially since we aren't that experienced as instrumentalists.

Some of us have felt that the best way we can be proud of being women and make other women feel they can



Sharon: piano



Ruthie: vocals



Nony: guitar

also be musicians, is to concentrate on the standard of performance, so people can say "they're really good musicians". Sometimes we feel we ought to just go and do any gig to improve ourselves and show that we can stand up to difficult situations. But on the other hand, maybe we shouldn't have to play to that market. Why should we have to prove ourselves in a male orientated music world, why can't we do it our way, but we haven't worked out what our way is.

What about the problem of preaching to the converted in the sense of the kind of people that come to your gigs?

Ruthie: Yes, I think that's the biggest issue in the band. Should we try to reach people who don't know anything about feminism?

We were offered a gig in the French Alps where we'd be playing to the rich jet-set and that was the big issue which polarised different feelings in the band. On the one hand we should be able to play to any audience as professional musicians, but on the other hand, how far do you sell out? We would be playing to rich people who could look on us as just another commodity.

What efforts do you make to remain connected and accessible to the audience?

Nony: Well people haven't been particularly hesitant about coming up to us after gigs, although obviously there must be some people who do feel put off simply because there's always the barrier between the people on the stage and the people off the stage. One thing we have found is that if we don't play on a stage, people tend to lean against equipment and put glasses of beer on our amplifiers. We don't want to remove ourselves from the audience physically but it does seem difficult not to. So there is always the danger that people will see us as performers with a capital 'P'.

Have you thought of trying to take your music into more working class situations?

Ruthie: Well we've had discussions about playing in ordinary pubs where anybody will go, or trade unions where we'd be playing to a more working class audience. Perhaps our gigs are rather exclusive in the sense that we play in

middle class places. One idea was that if we made a record, we'd be able to reach a much wider audience, like women trapped in the home, listening to the radio. Obviously this is something a long way ahead but the decisions we make now about where we play can affect whether we are going to make records or not.

What about the political nature of going through the music business machine?

Ruthie: Ideally we'd like to be independent, form our own record company, but it's a problem of capital, technical knowledge and experience. But as far as using an establishment record company prior to our getting capital together to do something of our own, we'd certainly consider it, though I know Caroline has serious reservations about it and we would obviously respect what she felt when it came to the crunch.

How are decisions made in the band?

Sharon: We agreed that decisions would be reached by majority will, although we would all be allowed to personally veto say, a particular song at one performance. I think the power of veto is a sort of valve so what's at issue can later be discussed democratically.

How are chores allocated?

Sharon: We've divided the administrative side into six areas of responsibility: maintenance of equipment; arranging gigs; Cody, who is Susie's baby; money and insurance; transport, roadies etc; and publicity, and each of us takes care of one area. This hasn't been in operation very long, but hopefully we will periodically rotate the areas so that we all experience each one.

Are there problems in working as a collective?

Sharon: Yes, it's very slow. The democratic process takes ages doesn't it? and sometimes we can get frustrated at not being able to take short cuts. One person can't make a decision for the whole band, and so we have to wait until we're all together at a rehearsal or a gig. Then the chances are that one or two people have had longer to think about it and would maybe bias a

collective decision, which might have to be taken quickly anyway.

What part does the band play in everyone's lives?

Sharon: Well, it changes all the time. I don't think any of us see the band as a job, because we all have other commitments, but we do try to be professional in our attitude to gigs, presentation and those things. I do tend to be a bit defensive and apologetic sometimes, when I talk about it with other people outside the band. For instance I wouldn't call myself a 'musician' — put it on my passport or anything — though other people might say I was one. I think this is probably 'cos of growing up female. Though I've always loved and played music, it never occurred to me that I could be in a band. I mean most blokes who are in bands have been on the music scene from a tender age, playing in youth clubs, at the school hop and all that. But we have come to it in our mid-twenties, already feminist, partly I think through the self-confidence that feminism has given us, and the knowledge that we can support each other.

I know that you have standardised your benefit fee, could you go into the money aspect of gigs?

Nony: Our basic fee is £30, and normally for a local benefit we can make that cover our expenses as well as capital to put into the band kitty. We pay our roadie £10-12 for an evening and the rest of it is used for buying new gear, maintaining equipment and also for Susie's babysitter.

Ruthie: I'd just like to say something about the personal relationships and consciousness raising aspect of the band. We've talked to other women involved in music and it seems that the same problems often crop up, the political/music splits. It's quite hard work, there are a lot of problems to work out, and that's part of the excitement and fun of it, but it can also be very distressing, personally wounding as well as 'work' wounding. We want to offer support to other women trying to get music together, and share information about what it's like to be a women's band. □