Abstract: As we celebrate forty years of the women’s music movement, its founding mothers and elders are beginning to pass on. Feminist scholars and activists are just beginning to write historically about the events (concerts and women’s music festivals) and material culture (recordings and photographs) from two generations of women’s music. This essay raises questions about how we will remember and historicize the unique politics and contributions of women’s music artists, and offers a glimpse of drum artist Ubaka Hill’s 1997 recording session with the late Kay Gardner.
The women’s music movement, a radical, grassroots, and authentically North American folk genre, has thus far attracted few scholars and archivists, for it seems too recent a scene to be regarded as historical. Its roots in the lesbian-feminist politics of the 1970s, too, which stress a uniquely woman-identified communalism, have alienated a present cohort of progressive activists who object to the absence of male and/or transgender artists onstage. But this is a year of celebration in women’s music. Both the National Women’s Music Festival (founded in 1974) and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (founded in 1976) are hosting their fortieth anniversary gatherings in summer 2015. Recording artist Cris Williamson, whose 1975 album *The Changer and the Changed* remains Olivia Records’ best-selling release, is touring in celebration of the album’s fortieth anniversary. While the passage of time and shifting political allegiances have reduced attendance at women’s music festivals, these anniversary celebrations help other interested performers, reviewers and audiences to discover women’s music for the first time. A network of feminist concerts, fans, and studio recording collaborations thus remains vibrant.

But while newer generations debate this legacy of woman-only events, the movement’s elders are starting to die. We have already witnessed the passing of women’s music foremothers Ginni Clemens, Therese Edell, Maxine Feldman, and Kay Gardner. Who will remember them? How is their vision best articulated to future generations? Which archives are best entrusted with the ephemera others might discard: outmoded vinyl, clumsy cassettes, yet the soundtrack of an era? A material culture of feminist performance culture now waits to be warehoused; a movement so recently constructed prepares to be critically deconstructed.

It’s an appropriate time for tributes to the women who instigated and sustained the women’s music movement: artists whose woman-affirming lyrics and female-led sound crews endured, for over thirty years, in an often misogynist and homophobic society. There are dozens and dozens of such dedicated and radical stage performers.

From its explosive emergence in the 1970s, the women’s music movement grew as a defiant counterpoint to the limited roles and opportunities for female artists in the mainstream recording industry. Independent musicians, woman-owned record companies (primarily Olivia and Redwood), woman-only festivals, and concert tours blossomed across North America; producers, writers and fans invested their dollars, careers and very lives in the transmission of a feminist message by women, to women. This call for change also identified the issue of racism as a stumbling block to female unity, so that intentionally diverse stage lineups and self-scrutiny became hallmarks of women’s music concerts and collectives. The will to identify and prevent learned, hierarchical practices led to unique production ethics, such as sign language interpretation of concerts and up-front, accessible seating for Deaf and disabled fans. The lesbian fan base, during the pre-Ellen era of 1973-1998, proved to be a hitherto untapped consumer niche for material production. Soon woman-made art, clothing, mugs and books were sold alongside the music at festivals, and the preponderance of lesbian consumers created a new sense of accountability for artist whose own sexuality connected them to their audiences. What women’s music provided to the first generation of post-Stonewall lesbian couples was a soundtrack of political love and commitment; album after album and concert after concert boldly proclaiming the existence of women who loved women.

The network of women’s music also offered an important alternative to bar culture, long the only gathering space of the gay community and a surefire role in fostering alcoholism in the pre-Stonewall generation. Thus the oft-mocked moniker that women’s music was “healing” had a hard truth for those combating dependence on alcohol and drugs; some women’s music festivals, such as the Gulf Coast Festival in Mississippi, were deliberately substance-free. In this climate of politics, inclusion, and recovery, a focus on musicianship might seem to take last priority, and yet the festival stages have ultimately produced some of the nation’s greatest crossover household names: Melissa Etheridge, the Indigo Girls, Ani DiFranco.

It’s significant that these aforementioned artists— all excellent songwriters and instrumentalists—are white women, perpetuating an archetypal “girl with guitar” image belying feminist commitment to diversity. In fact, Tracy Chapman, too, began
performing at women’s music festivals, appearing onstage at the Michigan Women’s Music Festival in 1987. Vicki Randle rocketed from performing on one of Olivia Records’ first albums to a long-term gig as percussionist on NBC’s Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Less commercially well known on America’s airwaves, but most beloved from an actual audience standpoint, are women of color whose talent and charisma made them festival favorites year after year: Linda Tillery, Judith Casselberry, Nedra Johnson, Toshi Reagon.

In this essay, I pay homage to the artist Ubaka Hill and her role in opening a space for women to participate in drum traditions long denied them. Performing at multiple women’s festivals since the 1980s and still leading a “drumsong orchestra” on the acoustic stage of the Michigan festival each August, drum artist Ubaka Hill—once nicknamed Peanut for her deceptively diminutive stature—revitalized drumming as a community act. Her work helped bridge a painful divide in a subculture where drum circles had taken on racial rather than rhythmic meaning.

By the mid-1980s, due in large part to the work of breakthrough performer Edwina Lee Tyler, drum circles had become a reliable part of women’s music festivals, popularizing a skill traditionally reserved for men only. Particular types of drums and inherited songs, however, were sacred to African, Asian, and Native American diaspora communities, aspects of ceremonies or beliefs long threatened by encroaching Westernization. Where white feminists were excitedly discovering the heritage of traditional music as an oral storyline for women, who for millennia had been denied other intellectual outlets or access to higher education, their learning curve was slower in accepting contemporary drum circles as ritual spaces valued by women of color.

In the early 1990s, the problem of unskilled and occasionally inebriated white women dropping in on every festival drum gathering to bongo party-style led to drum workshops being advertised for women of color only. And such separatism, even in a community of lesbian separatists, created howls of protest. But this issue, perhaps more than any other antiracism workshop, forced many white festiegoers to see that women of color remained a distinct minority at lesbian festivals, easily visible in a sea of white women. While going shirt-free and learning about soundboards might feel radical to white campers, for many black women festivals merely reproduced the same hegemonic dynamics of white majority rule. Drum circles had become places of mutual support and alliance, akin to the self-selecting “black table” in a white-majority school lunchroom, and just as glibly misunderstood.

What emerged in the mid-1990s was a careful campaign to educate white festiegoers about drum technique as heritage, combined with enhanced opportunities for mixed play, along with the preservation of some spiritual gatherings that were not open to all—in recognition that a tourist mentality sometimes prevailed when nondrummers toted cameras to African drum circles. This potentially still-explosive area was soon soothed by Ubaka Hill’s striking role as a mediator, and her work as an authoritative conductor: at festivals across the country.

From her first festival appearances, offering stunning drum compositions and poetry, Ubaka Hill initiated a format of inviting interested drummers to rehearse with her and then join the stage for a community finale. She was also the first artist in any festival context to offer music workshops for Deaf women, teaching intensive drum rhythms and then placing Deaf drummers in key performance roles. This “open-drum policy,” coupled with a loving but strict rehearsal process, attempted scores of women, most of whom had never owned a drum.

Summer 1995 was Ubaka Hill’s turning point. On Memorial Day weekend, at southeastern Pennsylvania’s Campfest retreat, nearly every woman on the land filled the old lodge up to its rafters and drummed hypnotically for hours, drumming and dancing and then drumming again, standing, seated, embracing, using any available percussive tool when all drums and shekere were taken—tinplates, spoons, open palms beating on thighs. This spectacular gathering was followed, just one week later, by Ubaka Hill’s first mainstage appearance at the National Women’s Music Festival, held in the acoustically stunning music hall on the campus of Indiana University. In that packed audience, one rapt festiegoer could be heard declaring “I think Ubaka could be some kind of messianic leader,”—prophetic words for the subculture of lesbian festivals. Over this same summer, Ubaka Hill released her first CD, Shape Shifters, on Ladyslipper Records’ label, and the season
culminated with her first Drumsong Orchestra on the acoustic stage at the Michigan festival’s twentieth anniversary that August. The newly enlarged acoustic stage filled with 156 women drumming as one, and many eyes filled with tears as Ubaka invited up her own role model to join in onstage: longtime festival performer and drum soloist Edwina Lee Tyler.

With the public linking of these two artists—whose works insist upon both the sacred and the playful as paired elements—the torch was passed. Festival audiences saw drumming’s spiritual significance transcend to a next generation of serious drum students. That moment was also one step forward in the group process of using the women’s music movement—and festival season—to explore the fight against racism.

In September of 1997 I was invited to join Ubaka Hill for a studio recording in Woodstock, New York: a front row to percussive album-making. My role was to describe what Alice Walker has called the womanist feel of a collaborative drum recording produced by primarily lesbian artists. The story I produced helped publicize the new album, but was never published. I include it now as a valuable snapshot of women’s music history: a collaboration between Ubaka Hill and the late women’s music flutist and producer Kay Gardner. What was the mood in 1997?

From My Journal: In The Studio With Ubaka

September, 1997. The women’s music festivals from summer are memories, now: golden-glazed soundbytes and images, stored in heart and mind. Fall’s the season for getting back to business, for facing the demands of the “real” world, which seldom cares that thousands of women just spent their summers in vibrant celebration of the women’s music movement. You won’t find coverage of these long-enduring women’s festivals in any mainstream music publication. Spin, Vibe, Rolling Stone, they’re not interested in the prehistory of alternative feminist stages; they’re preoccupied with Lilith Fair, believing it to be the first production of its kind. Lilith Fair will make commercially feasible the concept of an all-female lineup, but it’s no innovation; women have been out front in rock, blues, folk and jazz firing up soundstages for twenty-five years in the independent lesbian scene, with its industry of production/distribution networks and attendant, loyal fan base.

The many thousands of women who attended Campfest in May, National in June and Michigan in August now have their eyes and ears fixed on one rising artist, a figure for the times, whose music they yearn to bring back home and enjoy year-round. This fall, it’s a big deal to our community that Ubaka Hill is about to go into the studio and record a new album. I’ve come to Applehead Studios in Woodstock, New York, where forty-two women from eight states and two countries have gathered to make history—or, as Ubaka calls it, “sisty.” Ubaka has brought these women together to play as the drum orchestra on her second CD; this has never been done before, in North America, the recording of an all-female drum ensemble. The women waiting patiently with drums and weathered hands are black, white, dreadlocked, redhead, Latina, Jewish, Arab, the eldest in her fifties, the youngest a home schooled nose-ring-wearing nine-year-old named Leila. Some have been drumming for over twenty years; others began just recently, through one of Ubaka’s festival “drumsong” workshops. These so-called drum orchestras, conducted by Ubaka at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival each year, offer any interested woman the chance to play in a large-scale ensemble, performing on the acoustic stage the last morning of the festival; recently, one hundred and fifty-six drummers joined that concluding show. Now the trick will be translating that earth-shattering tribal sound, perfected in the woods, into studio confines, on schedule, under budget. Ubaka’s mantra for the occasion is “Be tribal, but maintain the integrity of the pattern,” and her recording engineer is certainly the right woman for this job: Karen Kane once wrote an article titled “Maintaining Acoustic Integrity.”

Today’s goal is to record two different pieces, “Singing in Silence” and then “Spiral Dance.” Kay Gardner, the album’s producer, and Karen Kane, as co-producer and recording engineer, drove down to Woodstock from Maine and Toronto, respectively. These women’s music veterans know that time in money in studio work, and would prefer to record three or four tracks a day if such a schedule didn’t exhaust and water down what Karen Kane calls “the vibe.” So we’ll do two recordings today, and make them count; the drum orchestra ensemble plays on the
first track, and that will take us from nine a.m. to nearly four p.m. to do.

We begin the day joined in circle, singing “Woman I am, spirit I am, I am the infinite within my soul.” Ubaka leads a social mixer, splitting the women into small groups by astrological sign, then by decade of birth (mostly the 1950s and 1960s, here), and then by favorite women’s basketball team from the WNBA (nearly all present root for the New York Liberty, so we’re back in one clump again.) Ubaka concludes the warm-up by asking each woman to explain how long she’s played her instrument. I’m the only non-drummer permitted here, so when my turn comes I hold up my fountain pen: I’ve been writing for thirty-one years.

Setting up the microphone stands, placing the drums, placing the women, and testing the sound levels takes us up to nearly 11 a.m. Karen’s at the sound board saying “Bring the level down.” I’m allowed to sit in the sound booth and watch through its glass windows when the drummers start up, led by Ubaka, conducting with arms raised and curved. The beat rises; the women with their djembes, percussion, voices shake the room. From my vantage point I can see two potted plants actually trembling from the drum thunder, and the upturned faces in this orchestra of women: faces, shoulder blades, hair all mobile with ecstasy. Someone whispers to me “This is a dream come true, for these women, to record with Ubaka.” That dedication is revealed in the license plates on the cars lining the dirt road outside: Michigan, West Virginia, Massachusetts, Maryland. Some of the musicians are in Ubaka’s core performing group, the Shape Shifters: Hillary Kay and Gabrielle Shavran, Suhir Blackeagle, and guest artist Edwina Lee Tyler, the first name in festival drum performance.

Kay Gardner reminds the beatified throng that the project can’t afford more than one rehearsal per take. There’s no talk of good versus bad drummers, here, but Ubaka tactfully replaces a “wavy” drummer with one more “confident.” Then off we go: “Roll tape. They think it’s a rehearsal, but let’s see what we get,” Karen whispers; then, “God, how I love these old faders. They’re so good for tracking.”

What I know about drums, faders, and tracking would fill a thimble; but I know about production values, and the sound waves I’m sitting in set my legs trembling from feet on up when the drums begin again.

The nervous players look down at their own forearms, corded veins bulging. The veterans play freely, rolling their heads and arms independently of their skilled hands, exposing hot collarbones, necks and throats to my camera lens. Ubaka’s dreads fly, barely held down by earphones.

This is music that women know really are waiting for, waiting eagerly to buy, after seeing and hearing and feeling Ubaka’s shows only at a festival. There simply has not been a drum orchestra recording available until now; that’s why I’m here, to help publicize the breakthrough of a genre. Bass, tone tone. Bass, bass tone. Slap slap tone. This is hot music, and no mistake; when the first take is played back, the women look up in amazement as they hear what they have done.

I move into the studio, journal in my lap; and when the women begin again the beat literally lifts my ass off my seat. This is the most powerful writing music available to me in my lifetime; the drum orchestra is discipline made creative, creativity disciplined, controlled looseness. One woman is brick red in the face, and appears about to explode into fragments; others are smiling so broadly that their eyes have disappeared, and my old friends Sharon Marcus has the look of approaching a finish line at the Olympics. The standing drummers dance as they play, necklaces bouncing in sweat-beaded cleavage. Feet clad in boots, moccasins, sandals beat delicately around the heavy sound cables on the floor. This is the sound of the advancing army of the matriarchy; the sound of Woodstock, New York, in 1997, is female.

“The vibe is tribal,” says Ubaka, laying down her hands.

In Closing

When I look at these images from 1997, it’s with both sadness and fresh determination. Sadness: because so much has changed. All but three or four women’s festivals have shut down; and while the two largest and oldest are each set to celebrate a forty-year anniversary in summer 2015, National has never received the respectful publicity it deserves; and the Michigan festival is under threat of attack and economic boycott by critics who oppose its born-female intention. Kay Gardner is no longer with us. The arc and playbook of the women’s music
movement remains neglected by both music and social historians.

Ubaka Hill’s drumsong orchestra, however, continues to thrive at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, where Ubaka (with several more albums to her credit by now) conducts that living tribe. More recently, Ubaka convened a “Million Women Drumming” event near her home in Catskill, New York. My determination is to continue as an historian who took note of what individual women, and the grand collective of artists, gave to the women’s music audience: the sound of female empowerment. This is but one snapshot of a movement that needs more homage: for its artists, audience, producers and consumers are all graying even as we still participate in making lesbian sound. There was—there is-- a home-grown movement here, and one that must be archived while its music is still played.

References