

# Songs for Ourselves, Revisited

## A Dialogue Between Maggie Benston and the Rest of the Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet

*L'article fait l'historique du Euphoniously Feminist and Non Performing Quintet—dont Maggie était membre—et traite du rôle de la chanson et de la musique dans le mouvement des femmes.*

Fourteen years ago, Maggie wrote an unpublished article about the politics of our singing group. In this article, the singing group responds to some of the issues that Maggie raised in her article and which we have all debated over the years. Thus we present the academic Maggie (from the 1979 article, in italics) and the more everyday voice which she shared for over twenty years with the Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet.

*Most Friday evenings for the last couple of months, a group of women has appeared near the corner of Davie and Denman in Vancouver, unpacked guitars and tambourines, and started singing. The scene is the sorwuc [Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada] picket line at the Muckamuck, a Vancouver restaurant, and the strike is into its ninth month. We pass out song sheets to the other people on the picket line and spend two or three hours picketing and singing together about our goals and our struggles. They are feminist songs; at the same time they are songs for all working people. The strikers and their supporters on the picket line are both female and male and we all bellow out Working Girl Blues, the Secretaries' Song or Solidarity Forever.*

The year was 1979. The Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet (EF & NPO) had been in existence, singing for ourselves, for eight years and for (and with) others for four or five. Now we look back on a singing history of more than twenty years which includes two tapes (*Still Not Performing* and *Size of Our Dream*), several major concerts at various venues (Women in View; the Fringe Festival; the Peacemakers' concert at Vancouver East; Mayworks; and more). The world of women's music has changed dramatically over the years, since the time when Maggie wrote: "...such songs as we had available to us...were appalling. We sang, for want of anything better, *Banks of the Ohio* where the heroine gets done in by her own true love..." Now we have songwriters like Nancy White and Judy Small and Leon Rosselson, Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerard, Linda Allen and David Campbell, who write the songs we really want to sing. Now we have the Folk Festivals and cultural events that bring people to us, introducing us to even more songs, more ways of saying what we want to say. The musical exploration of feminist issues, women's issues, children's issues by songwriters and the burgeoning of material around native and ecological concerns, Latin-American issues and peace is a reflection in song of important questions in our lives and the world around us. We no longer sing songs where the women are killed in the second verse.

### **But Why Sing At All?**

*The pleasure we got from the whole process (of singing) was immense...When we moved out with our songs beyond our own small group, we found that our first sing-songs were real highs. Shared music is an important part of the women's movement first of all because it is enjoyable. Not only had we all, group members and participants, thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, but we also felt closer to each other. Discussion and evaluation after the event clarified our understanding of a second very important*

*function of music in social movements: it creates solidarity or a "we" feeling in a group.*

After twenty years of singing, we still take our songsheets with us wherever we go. For each event, we create a program (and a sheet of lyrics) which speaks to that event and to those people who are working in that area, be it women's health, liberation in Central America, or high school women in transition. The songsheets say to people: yes, we want you to sing and be part of the action; yes, the words are important and you can read along even if you don't wish to sing along. Even savvy teens will sing, if the words are relevant and the situation is seen as safe: non-judgemental, relaxed and humorous. "There is no such thing as a bad note; there are only interesting, modern harmonies!"

For many listeners/singers, it is a new experience to be invited, even encouraged, to sing along. Most of us are well accustomed to attending musical events as a relatively passive audience, responding in our various ways to the music, but quietly, indi-



Maggie with Pat Davitt (Prospect Point, 1984)

vidually. When EF & NPQ goes out to sing, we ask that the audience not be quiet or passive; the interaction between the singing group and the active audience often charges the event with much greater meaning for all of us. We indeed feel that we are parts of a community or a social movement.

*Songs...that outline problems, describe an oppressive or unjust situation, protest against injustice or point to a remedy, particularly a collective one, give us a sense of ourselves as an active part of an active women's movement. This is not a new discovery, but rather a re-discovery of a truth which had occurred to movements as diverse as the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies) in America and the Wesleyans in England.*

Music can not only create a sense of community, it can also

provide the information, the history, that a community needs in order to develop a sense of itself. Over the past two decades, a whole industry around women's music has evolved and grown, partly as a vehicle for promoting a women's culture, and partly in response to the need for musical expression from a women's culture that was already developing. Music thus has an educational function: it can tell the stories that define our realities, expand our horizons and give us options for future actions. Moreover, one can be so much more direct in song than in speech, whether we are talking of love, or duty, or images:

So let's shake hands and agree we disagree  
I won't tell you how to live, and sister, don't tell me  
We should fight together, as mothers, daughters, wives  
And we're entitled to our private lives.

*(We're Entitled, Nancy White)*

*Our group (EF & NPQ) feels that understanding women's work is central to understanding women's situation. We also feel that organizing women around their specific concerns is crucially important and that feminist democratic unions are an important way of doing that organizing.*

The recent history of women organizing in Vancouver has been characterized by the struggle of independent unions such as Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC) and the Association of University and College Employees (AUCE) to survive, and ultimately to prosper. The various drives to sign up women workers in banks, insurance offices, and in retail sales were the context in which we established the largest part of our repertoire. We learned songs, we wrote songs, we re-wrote songs that talked about male workers exclusively to describe the work of women and to call out to people to ameliorate the conditions in which women laboured.

I saw the seamstress working, sewing 'til the dawn.  
She labours years for others, 'til youth and health are gone.  
But the banks are made of marble...

All the years on picket lines taught us the value of catchy, simple songs that people could sing readily, and if necessary, over and over again. We sang the old standards like Woody Guthrie's *Union Maid* and the Almanack Singers' *You Gotta Have Union*, as well as songs we made up ourselves:

If we walk this picket line, we're gonna win this strike (x3)  
Ain't no way they can ever keep us down.  
(to the tune of *This Little Light of Mine*, sort of)

*This song, like all of the organizing songs we sing...is intended for group singing. The melody is familiar or catchy and can be sung either unaccompanied or with simple guitar or piano accompaniment. The political message in such songs is straightforward and clear; it is the dominant element with the performance skills of the participants subordinate. The song generally poses collective action as the solution to a perceived problem or injustice. The best of these songs can be very moving. We sing them on the picket line, and everyone marches a bit taller. We*



Maggie with Pat Davitt and Anne Roberts (Stanley Park, 1986)

*sing them at women's centres and there people both learn and share a sense of commitment.*

Over the years, we have added to our repertoire, as our musical skills developed and as our interests in a variety of political movements broadened. Latin American and Southern African issues took on a larger role in the political life of Vancouver. La Quena Coffee House opened on Commercial Drive, a venue in which EF & NPO sang for a number of groups such as the Committee for the Defense of Women in Chile (CODEM) and the Association of Women of El Salvador (AMES) and South African Women's Day. Now we were singing not only about the lives of women in North America, but in the underdeveloped nations of the world, and we were trying to assist those women to make a material improvement in their lives.

Who's that walkin' miles for water?  
 Who's that sweat-shoppin' all the day long?  
 In the hot South, in the cold North,  
 Who are these, so proud and strong?  
 (*Rosa's Daughters*, Robb Johnson)

*We sing other kinds of songs that address themselves to the problems of women who are trying to cope with what it means to be female in this society.*

Often these tales of trials and tribulations are told with humour, enabling us to say to each other and to society at large that we are strong enough to laugh at our pain, and to affirm our strength in the face of it.

Oh the I.P.D., the I.P.D.,  
 It may not feel to good to you, but it's not hurting me;  
 So every time the pain begins to fill your eyes with tears,  
 Remember I put up with it for years!  
 (I.P.D.\* *The Ovarian Sisters*)  
 \*like the I.U.D. but different

And if all this wasn't enough, we want to say also that we sing love songs, like Malvina Reynolds's *Rose and Apple Tree*: If you love me, plant a rose for me. And ecology songs: My dame hath a lame, tame crane. And anti-consumerism songs: *We Sell Everything*. And anything else that tickles our fancy and seems to say: this will entertain people and make them (us) think!

When we sing our songs, and when we sing with other people, we feel the links that bind us to our community, to our history and to our futures. In singing about them, we define our terrors and our triumphs and we can overcome them. We sing out of strength and pride and friendship and loss, but there is nothing so awful that a good song can't make at least a little better. Maggie was part of that, and still is part of that, and that is the strength of singing for ourselves. Let's let Maggie finish:

*Songs which describe the importance of friendship and of people you can count on are wonderful in that they provide positive models for what interpersonal relations could be. They do not pose any collective solutions and, sung by themselves they could give the message that these kinds of relationships are a sufficient solution to women's problems. In the context of the other, collective songs, however, these songs illuminate a crucial*

*dimension in the women's movement. In our attempts to fuse the personal with the political, friendship is very much at the heart of our politics. Other social movements which have used...songs would probably not have included:*

*When you're down and troubled, and you need some loving  
care  
And nothing, nothing is going right  
Close your eyes and think of me and soon I will be there  
To brighten up even your darkest night*

*as an important political statement. It is one of the strengths of the women's movement that we do.*

### Postscript

The EF & NPQ now includes Pat Davitt, Barbara Hicks, Valerie Macdonald, Marisa Orth-Pallavicini and Ulryke Weissgerber. If you want words to songs, write us at 1492 William Street, Vancouver, V5L 2P9 and we'll send you song books or song sheets (a donation for printing and mailing costs would be appreciated). We now have two tapes completed: the first is out of print but the second is still available for \$8.00 from the above address. Alternatively, you can phone (604) 253-1885 and we'll be glad to sing you any song you like (as long as we know the tune!).



Maggie with Wendy Hurst

Photo: Pat Davitt

## HELEN POTREBENKO

### Daydreams Are Better than Nightmares (Revisited)

With my next pay cheque I will buy  
a pink summer dress with big orange flowers  
to wear without any pantyhose  
baring to the world my unshaved legs; exposing bare  
unshaved legs.

With my next pay cheque I will buy  
records of Ronstadt and Parton and Near;  
books by Lessing and Laurence and Anon  
and bring them all home in a taxi; and bring them all  
home in a taxi.

With my next pay cheque I will donate  
lots of money to the strikers so the babies will grow  
heaped with love and luxury  
so they can do what we've left undone; so they can do  
what we couldn't.

With my next pay cheque I will buy  
a house with a kitchen with stained glass windows  
and room for a study for each of us;  
a garage for the car on the side of the house and a gar-  
den for me at the back.

Then, of course, we'll need to buy  
a truck with the pay cheque after that  
to move with and to bring home the stuff  
I will buy with my next pay cheque; buy with my next  
pay cheque.

We'll need a motor home to travel  
to Palm Springs and Long Beach and Sooke  
and if there's time and money left over  
I will work in my garden; I will work in my garden

That is, when I'm not at the union.

*This is from a poem called "Daydreams are Better than Nightmares",  
which was set to music and adapted as a song by Margaret Benston  
in 1987.*