

RUBYMUSIC

A Popular History of Women's
Music and Culture



CONNIE KUHN

Caitlin Press 2023

INTRODUCTION

I'M A RADIO

RUBYMUSIC

with CONNIE KUHNS



Friday night

7:30 - 9:30
CFRO 102.7 FM
VANCOUVER
CO-OPERATIVE
RADIO

(Rubymusic is rebroadcast in part on Friday mornings beginning at 10:30)

It's not all here.

In my room are boxes of cassette tapes and large Ampex reels. I have perhaps a thousand pages of transcribed interviews, done on a typewriter, and notebooks full of actual notes that have lost all context. There are four file drawers of newspaper clippings and at least another six or seven boxes full of promo kits, posters, scrapbooks and other mementoes given to me by women who wanted me to tell their story. What you're holding is a selection of what has been published.

I got hooked early. I knew all the weekly top ten hits (and the flip sides) from looking through the record display at the dime store. On Saturdays I would ride my bike out to the radio station and buy demo records for ten cents apiece. I had *American Bandstand* in the afternoons, and at night, in shared bunk beds with my brother, I listened to far-off beats on my turquoise transistor, a Christmas gift from my parents when I was ten. In my teens, I discovered KOMA in Oklahoma City. Rock and roll, rhythm and blues, Brill Building pop, Philly and Motown—the great music of the era—found its way into my bedroom. The best reception was on our car radios, at night, after all the local stations had gone off the air. We drove around as late as we were allowed, listening as the music blasted its way over the Great Plains to the Canadian prairies.

Some of the bands I heard about on the radio played at our teen centre. But my world was amplified in the summer when I stood against the cool, tiled walls of the National Guard Armory, listening to the magnificent R&B bands swinging in step with their horn sections, looking smooth and sleek in matching baby-blue suits. Our little town was on the circuit. When I could, I deejayed my junior high school dances or formed separate lines of boys and girls to dance the Continental Walk. For a shy kid, this was surprising, even to me.

An older boy in the neighbourhood became the nighttime deejay at our local station. He gave me my first Rolling Stones album. One night, when my parents thought I was somewhere else, I went down and watched him work. The studio had its own magic. Turntables. Dials. Lights. I already knew I wanted to be a writer, but this was something else.

I went to college and quietly got my third-class radio licence from the Federal Communications Commission—a requirement to work at the college radio station—before flunking out first year. In 1968, no one paid attention to the lone eighteen-year-old female at the back of the class. In those days, becoming a journalist or having a career in radio was wholly imaginary for a woman. There were limits. One morning I got up and left.

In my first months on the road I used panhandling money to buy MC5's album *Kick Out the Jams* and Spirit's "I Got a Line on You," which I still have. (It didn't matter that I had no place to play them.) When I

got to California, the money I earned working at an amusement park got me tickets to Led Zeppelin and Three Dog Night. Legitimate employment paid for rent and more concerts: Sly and the Family Stone; Crosby, Stills & Nash; Iron Butterfly; the Rolling Stones. But underneath it all was Janis Joplin with her tortured call to be true to oneself. Eventually, over the endless drum solos, I started to hear the voices of Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, Bonnie Raitt and Carole King. Music finds a way.

I wrote my first concert review in 1976. I was crashing at a youth hostel in Vancouver, waiting out the rain. Each day on the bus I would pass by the Status of Women office on Fourth Avenue. One day I went in and asked if they needed any help. When they found out I was from California, they sent me out to review a Meg Christian concert for their in-house feminist monthly, *Kinesis*. Meg Christian was the first artist to record on the newly formed feminist label (out of California) Olivia Records. The women's movement had taken hold, and there was growing opportunity in its parallel universe. I was no longer invisible. A few years later I ended up writing a monthly women's music column in *Kinesis*, the companion to my new adventure: *Rbymusic*, a radio program featuring music by women, exclusively.

Rbymusic went on the air on May 15, 1981. When I climbed the stairs to the studio for the first time in late 1979, I knew this was where I needed to be. Vancouver Co-operative Radio was a revolutionary start-up, not just in ideology but in practice. At any time, a handful of different languages could be heard in the editing room, each representing a country or community in turmoil or construction. The music programming was the best in the city. There were women everywhere: writing, producing, operating the board, even running the place. They were open and ready for me, but as I wrote in my essay "A Woman's Place Is on the Radio," the station only gave me a thirty-minute time slot because they were unsure if there was enough music by women to fill the hour I had requested. In the guide copy for opening night, I wrote: "On this special occasion, take your radio in your arms and dance." When I retired the program fifteen years later, I had been on air for two hours every Friday night, rebroadcast on Friday mornings, and had produced hundreds of hours of special programming. *Rbymusic* was among the first of its kind in Canada, but it had become so much more.

The opening essay in this collection, "Women's Music and the Mothers of Invention," was made possible by an Explorations Grant in 1986 from the Canada Council for the Arts. With that money, I was able to interview at least a hundred women musicians, songwriters, composers, singers, technicians, concert producers and coffee house collectives, as well as the maker of the Picasso guitar. I crossed Canada meeting women in



1985: You're listening to Vancouver Cooperative Radio, CFRO, 102.7 FM, and on a variety of cable frequencies throughout British Columbia and northwestern Washington. Good evening. I'm Connie Kuhns, and this is *Rubymusic*. Photo: Sharon Knapp

airports, hotel rooms, kitchens and city parks, backstage at concert halls and folk festivals, and at the Toronto Women's Club. Four years later I received a Canada Council travel grant to speak on the history of women's music in Canada at the annual convention of the Association of Women's Music and Culture in San Francisco. The talk was part of a larger presentation on the hidden history of women's contributions that I had given in Vancouver at Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia, Langara College and the World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters. *Rubymusic* was my platform and became part of the zeitgeist. When Joan Turner offered me a place in her anthology *Living the Changes* to make my research permanent, it was a major opportunity. Also, during this time, on the recommendation of Ruth Dworin, the woman behind Womynly Way Productions in Toronto, and with the assistance of editor Mark Miller, I was asked to write the very first entry on "feminist music" for the second edition of *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*. It was published in 1992.

For a couple of decades, I carried around a Marantz tape recorder, an EV 635 microphone, a few feet of cord and a small mic stand. I kept it all in a Samsonite carryall with my name on the strap. I was almost eight months pregnant when I hauled my equipment around Vancouver's

Stanley Park at a concert protesting the evictions carried out by the city for the upcoming Expo 86. The concert featured, among others, Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, Four the Moment and D.O.A. It was my first story for the *Georgia Straight*, and one of the hottest summers on record. An old friend, Brent Gibson, had recommended me to Charles Campbell, the *Straight's* editor (who, if I remember correctly, really wanted more women on staff). He put my first story on the cover and later allowed my Amy Grant interview to appear in Q&A form, which was usually the purview of the publisher. (Full disclosure: I had just left town and he couldn't reach me to do a rewrite.)

My relationship with the Canadian literary journal *Geist* was my cosmic reward. Mary Schendlinger, co-founder and, at that time, senior editor of *Geist*, had been a long-time listener of *Rubymusic*. When we finally met in 2011, she asked to read whatever I was writing. I handed her some papers across the table. When that essay (not included in this collection) was published in *Geist*, it was reviewed in the *Globe and Mail*, nominated for a magazine award and named a "notable essay" in the *Best American Essays* series. I had found my place. Assistant Publisher AnnMarie MacKinnon asked me to write about punk music in Vancouver. We changed the focus. The result was "Strange Women," a history of the women involved in Vancouver's punk scene. AnnMarie had remarkable instincts. "Strange Women" and my extended essay on Yoko Ono—after AnnMarie had become publisher and editor-in-chief—would not have happened without her skill and trust.

I wish I could tell you everything—all those moments behind the scenes that are the foundation of this collection. Sawagi Taiko surprised us big time from the *Rubymusic* stage at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival by playing "Wipe Out" on Japanese taiko drums. Linda Tillery and the Cultural Heritage Choir made their first Canadian appearance on the *Rubymusic* stage and returned the next year. (Thank you, Dugg Simpson.) I spent a weekend in the recording studio with jazz musician and composer Mary Watkins and pianist Marcia Meyer during the recording of Marcia's atmospheric instrumental album *Oregon Summer*, and I got to be a fan girl backstage with Gloria Steinem when I showed her a photograph of me from the 1970s, with my hair parted down the middle, wearing a copy of her signature aviator glasses. There was also the night my friend Bill Grant called me from a pay phone and told me to get down to the Savoy immediately; a young wild woman in a bridal gown from Alberta had taken over the club. I interviewed k.d. lang the next day, and a few months later I introduced her from the stage of the Commodore Ballroom when she came back to Vancouver to headline a benefit for Co-op Radio.

Etta James was the full package. After our interview, I emceed her

concert at the Town Pump, took photographs of her during her performance and danced in front of the stage while she smiled down at us. The late singer and musician Elizabeth Fischer and I found ourselves awake and online one morning before dawn while I was writing “Strange Women.” She was the only person besides my editor to read that essay before it was published. We didn’t know Elizabeth would not be with us much longer. In 2021, we lost the extraordinary slide guitarist and singer Ellen McIlwaine. I wish I had more of her to offer you and more of her for myself.

In addition to my mother, who passed away just as I was finishing “Strange Women,” this book is dedicated to Karlene Faith. We met in the summer of 1982 at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival. I had just been rightly brushed off by Holly Near, whom I interrupted while she was listening to music, but her friend, who was sitting next to her, got up and followed me. Karlene had just moved to Vancouver from California to head the Simon Fraser University School of Criminology’s distance education program. She had heard about my show and wanted to help. Karlene became my mentor.

Karlene Faith was a revolutionary feminist. She had worked in Eritrea with the Peace Corps and in Jamaica with the Rastafarians and had led writing workshops with prisoners at Soledad in California. But as co-founder in the early 1970s of the Santa Cruz Women’s Prison Project, she brought feminist consciousness and self-esteem to the women incarcerated at the California Institution for Women (CIW). With volunteers that included artists, teachers, students, poets, professors and other community activists, women’s studies became the curriculum, college credits included. (At the warden’s invitation, Karlene was asked to introduce the three women we knew as the “Manson girls” to feminism in hopes that these women could be “deprogrammed” and reclaim their humanity. Karlene became their teacher.)

Through Karlene’s program Music Inside/Out, Meg Christian, Holly Near, June Millington, Linda Tillery and other musicians from the emerging women’s music scene performed behind those walls. Hundreds of musical instruments were donated. A concert tour called Women on Wheels travelled around California bringing attention to the issue. Karlene also taught the very first class on the history of women in American music at the University of California, Santa Cruz. (She had been denied the previous year because the subject matter was considered “too narrow.”) As this was an undiscovered field, with little to no research available, when word got out, many women in the business came as special guests. The class produced a 172-page book on a typewriter titled *Women’s Music*, itself a historical document.

I had been at the 1975 California National Organization for Women convention, where a handful of women from CIW were allowed to spend the day. They were returned to prison that evening while Cris Williamson and Margie Adam were performing. They stopped the concert. I was also in the audience at Women on Wheels. I knew Karlene without knowing her.

Always humble, Karlene referred to herself as simply “a witness.” She believed in me and what I was doing. Karlene was a guest on *Rubymusic* multiple times, and she introduced me to *everybody*. Eventually Holly Near did come on *Rubymusic* (she was campaigning for Jesse Jackson at the time), and I got to know her accompanist when we were trapped for a couple of hours in a crowded elevator in New York City, missing the after-party—Holly and Ferron had just performed at Carnegie Hall. Things have a way of coming full circle.

Karlene died May 15, 2017.

In 1988, June Millington, co-founder of the rock and roll band Fanny, and later of the Institute for the Musical Arts (which trains young women and girls in musicianship and business), said to me: “One of the things that concerns me is that we find a lot of women coming into women’s music as part of our audience who have no idea of the history of even those of us who are still alive, not to mention women who have done music and have passed on.”

I cannot stress strongly enough how the contributions of female musicians and the women who support their networks have been overlooked and dismissed, even into our modern times. In a story that may be familiar to some, my mother was the nighttime cleaning lady at her hometown radio station. In the dark and damp basement, she found hundreds of demo 45s that had been thrown away. She saved them for me. Most of those records were by women. This is where we find our history: in those dark and damp places, in used record stores, old magazines and photographs and in the memories of others.

There is a spirit that connects the women in this book. There is accomplishment, as in the work of Rosetta Reitz, who single-handedly gave us back our blues; there is sadness as Etta James recalls her encounter with Janis Joplin; and there is courage in the words of Holocaust survivor Esther Bejarano, who was selected to play in the “women’s orchestra” at Auschwitz-Birkenau as the trains arrived. I have been so fortunate to know these women, if only for a moment.

In their honour, I submit to you this history, before our words are lost again.



Founded in 1973, the Vancouver Women's Bookstore at 804 Richards Street became part of an international feminist network. In addition to books, posters and pamphlets, it was the only place where one could buy "women's music." Arson was suspected when it burned down in 1980.