

ment crammed floor to ceiling with neatly organized files, drawers, scrapbooks and boxes of festival field recordings and images. I have interviews, speeches, and performances by Dorothy Allison, Judy Chicago, Laura Nyro, and Alice Walker. These tapes and notes reveal the arc of a cultural activist movement led by lesbians of every race and class, age and viewpoint; women who used their own vacation time to attend tough “unlearning racism” workshops or to build access stage ramps for women in wheelchairs.

Forty years after all of this began, both the performers and the audiences of women’s music festivals are national treasures. Collectively, these women are the cultural producers that helped make same-sex marriage possible, that first introduced ASL interpretation as a standard feature at any public event, that nursed the ill and dying AIDS generations, and that marched on Washington for contraceptive rights they’d never need as lesbians. Two generations of women who found their voices via festival culture helped the LGBT movement win its key victories.

But instead of being thanked or celebrated (or written into history), America’s festival artists are being attacked, threatened, and boycotted; they’re being depicted as the enemy within by LGBT institutional leaders. If this trend continues, the pipeline for transmitting accurate historical information from living lesbian elders to younger students and activists will be broken—not by homophobes, but by *LGBT* social media.

**I**T HAS NEVER BEEN an easy task for cultural historians to preserve women’s history in a woman-hating world. Ideally, we should be able to collect narratives and document lives without being called names like TERF. Even the most informed and mainstream LGBT blogs and columnists now employ this dismissive slang term, which has rapidly acquired the weight of an Oxford English Dictionary definition. Popularizing the slur “trans excluding radical feminist” serves multiple purposes, but getting lesbian history right sure isn’t one of them. Too many progressives are simply reintroducing old right-wing attacks on lesbians as ugly, outmoded man haters. In generational terms, this looks like the annihilation of the cultural mother by her liberated children: “We don’t need you any more.”

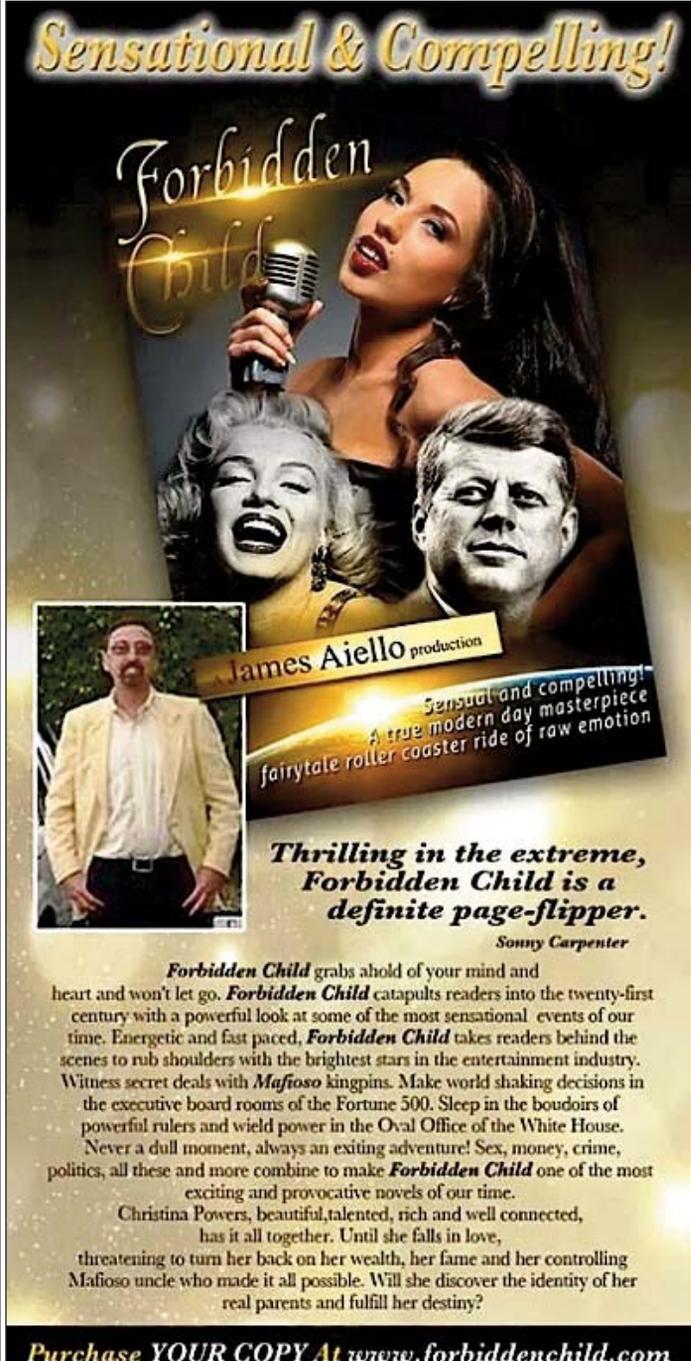
I don’t recall employing these methods when I came out. Sure, I found plenty to disagree with in some classic lesbian texts; I had my share of difficult encounters at festivals. But I still wanted to sit at the feet of my role models and *learn*. Boycotting events that I felt left out of was the last thing on my agenda. In fact, what I learned at my first Michfest was that I wasn’t going to be included in every workshop and space—not in the women of color drum circle, not in the Deafways gathering. That didn’t mean I was not their ally, or that my own life experiences were inauthentic, but rather that some support groups were designated by affinity.

So, this is the view from a frustrated working scholar. We are witnessing an almost cheerfully flippant erasure of recent, late 20th-century lesbian achievement and art, the legacy of a specific performance culture through which bold ideas about same-sex love were transmitted via song, speech, and the written word. Women’s music festivals created a culture every bit as unique as drag, and no more violent or hatemongering in their separatism than the gay male subcultures and institutions that

we now historicize as significant to men’s self-identity, such as bathhouses, Fire Island parties, and Radical Faerie events.

My charge to every responsible editor, journalist, feminist scholar, and LGBT historian is to please *stop recycling the acronym TERF; it is defamatory*. Blaming an imaginary cabal of old women for stalling progress—and calling for old lesbians to be wiped out—is no better than blaming the Jews or “Pinkos” among us, or evangelicals shouting about secular humanists undermining civilization. Ultimately, critics of festival culture must understand that they are not the appointed custodians of this heritage. That role belongs to the participants and performers, whose paper trail is at risk of being expunged from the record. 

*Postscript: On April 21, 2015, festival producer Lisa Vogel formally announced that this year’s 40th anniversary celebration will be the final Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.*



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