

In June 2006, I got sober, and soon started the Americana/alt-country band Roxie Watson.¹ “These Friends of Mine” was one of the first songs Roxie recorded. Today, the trio Just Roxie still performs this song, and it has become one of our most requested. This song is a tribute to all the people, friends, loved ones, the “village,” if you will, needed to help us get through life, the good times and the bad.

Thank you, Cherry “O,” for haunting my dreams as you still do today. I feel you near me so often. I miss you every day, Buddy.

THE SOUTHERN LESBIAN FEMINIST ACTIVIST HERSTORY COLLECTION IN *SINISTER WISDOM*

This edition of *Sinister Wisdom* marks the sixth and final special issue in the series devoted to Southern lesbian-feminist herstory. In 2009, a group of lesbian writers gathered under the pines at *Womonwrites*: the Southeast Lesbian Writers Conference to discuss the preservation of our rich herstory. Many of us recognized that the lesbian-feminist voices of Southern lesbians had been omitted or marginalized in mainstream literature of the LGBTQ movement as well as from feminist history. We committed to preserving the activism of lesser-known Southern lesbians during the second wave of feminism from 1968 to 1994, and soon our timeline stretched to the end of the century. For the first three years, we did not know where the project was going, and it was not until 2012 that we stopped soliciting memoirs (which we were not getting) and started recording interviews, which made the project really take off. About that time, Beth York and Rose Norman made a research trip to the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University to see where those archives might lead us. They found a treasure trove of material about the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA) and Atlanta’s Charis Books, as well as wonderful materials about *Womonwrites* in the archives of two of the cofounders, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Segrest. That research trip led to *Womonwrites* turning over a huge collection of material previously stored in a garage (<https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/womonwrites>). By then, we were calling ourselves “The Herstory Project,” with a nod to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. The Sallie Bingham Center, being in the South and already archiving Southern lesbian-feminists, soon became the obvious place for archiving our interviews. Those interviews are now a subset of the *Womonwrites* archive (<https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/slfaherstoryproject>).

¹ The Roxie Watson Band is now Just Roxie, but you can still listen to “These Friends of Mine” on YouTube with band members Lenny Lasater, bass; Beth Wheeler, mandolin; Linda Bolley, acoustic and electric guitar; Sonia Tetlow, banjo; Becky Shaw, button accordion, harmonica, lap steel, acoustic guitar. All sing vocals. Their debut album, with “These Friends of Mine,” was *True Stories* (2010). Their music is available on iTunes, Amazon Music, etc. See also ourstage.com/epk/roxiewatson.

A turning point came when Barbara Ester asked, “Why don’t we contact *Sinister Wisdom*?” Barb had been published in an issue on music and the arts and thought that the editors of *Sinister Wisdom* would be interested in our project. Barbara was right. And so began our relationship with *Sinister Wisdom* editor Julie Enszer, a relationship that has guided and shaped our project ever since. Our project grew from a handwritten timeline of remembered events and organizations to a time when Womonwriters began to commit to writing about those topics. With the leadership and expertise of Rose Norman and Merrill Mushroom, *Sinister Wisdom* published the first special issue, *Southern Lesbian Feminist Herstory, 1968–1994* (SW 93, Summer 2014). In the process of creating that first issue, we realized that the project was flowering from what we had thought would be one issue to three, then four, now six. Julie Enszer enthusiastically encouraged us to continue. Issues followed on *Landykes of the South* (SW 98, Fall 2015); lesbian-feminist arts (*Lesbianima Rising*, SW 104, Spring 2017); lesbian spaces (*HotSpots: Creating Lesbian Space in the South*, SW 109, Summer 2018); *Making Connections* (SW 116, Spring 2020), honoring bookstores, publishers, newsletters, and the byways through which lesbian literature was distributed throughout the South; and this final issue on our spiritual and political paths, which we view as one.

The project has been intensely collaborative and geographically dispersed. The nine editors of these six issues live in five Southern states and have communicated primarily through email, plus three times a year in person at Womonwrites conferences and Womonwrites planning weekends (through 2019). Rose Norman and Merrill Mushroom, who have worked on all six issues, live about two hours apart, in Alabama and Tennessee, respectively. Kate Ellison and Barbara Esrig, who have each worked on two issues, live fairly near each other in Florida. Beth York, who has also worked on two issues, lives in South Carolina. B. Leaf Cronewrite, Gail Reeder, and Lorraine Fontana all

live in the Atlanta area. Robin Toler, whose art graces all six covers of these issues, lives in Louisiana. All of these, and many more, have worked tirelessly to find more and more stories as themes emerged that took us well beyond our original idea of collecting stories from people we knew and their friends.

Rose Norman began to travel, first interviewing lesbians in Gainesville, FL, and Atlanta, then reaching out to Durham, NC, which brought in many stories of Triangle Area lesbianfeminists. Merrill Mushroom’s suggestion that we contact Beth Marschak in Richmond, VA, brought in a whole new set of lesbian-feminist activists, as we found more and more “hot spots” beyond Atlanta and Gainesville, which were already familiar to us. Rather than simply recording interviews and archiving them, we began mining the interviews for more polished stories. In that vein, Phyllis Free turned Rose Norman’s six separate interviews with Southerners on New Ground founders into one interview, as if they had been interviewed together. Even though we were cutting down long interviews into shorter stories, we often struggled to fit a wealth of stories into the limits of a single issue. Mercifully, Julie Enszer often let us exceed our word limit.

We are deeply grateful to Julie Enszer and the volunteer editors and contributors that have made this collection possible. We count at least eighty lesbians who have submitted stories, poetry, and song. Even more lesbians have been interviewed, and those transcripts have been preserved in the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. We will continue to collect and archive stories of lesbian-feminist activism in the South, and possibly turn some of them into stories for future open issues of *Sinister Wisdom* or for other publications. If you would like to archive your story of lesbian-feminist activism in the South, write us at SLFAherstoryproject@gmail.com. Some of the interviews are already available online at <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/slfaherstoryproject>. Rose Norman did so many interviews

with the women of Pagoda that she is now writing a book about that lesbian-feminist intentional community and cultural center in St. Augustine, FL. Phyllis Free's "Goddess Chant" and Barb Ester's "Lover's Touch" are included on a new recording of original songs performed at Womonwrites entitled *Finding Home* (Beth York, 2019).

We are proud of our contributions to lesbian culture and strengthened by our collective voices. We enthusiastically give young Southern lesbians who read these pages many strong shoulders to stand on.



Art by Robin Toler. Collage by Cat Purdom

Covers from the five previous SLFAHP special issues before this one.



Photo by Rose Norman

Project Planning at Womonwrites 2011. (l to r) Merrill Mushroom, Barbara Ester, Kate Ellison, Lorraine Fontana, Harvest (Diane Boward), Gail Reeder, Reba Hood, Beth York, Phyllis Free.



Photo courtesy of Rose Norman

The workshop at Spring 2016 Womonwrites drew a big crowd of SLFAHP collaborators. (l to r) Rand Hall, Gail Reeder, Womonwriter, Kate Ellison, Phyllis Free, Beth York, Sage Morse, Corky Culver, B. Leaf Cronewrite (and behind her) Brae Hodgkin, Drea Firewalker, Barbara Ester, Barbara Esrig, (and behind Barbara) Merrill Mushroom, Woody Blue, Rose Norman, Lorraine Fontana. Almost everyone in this picture has a story in this issue.



Photo courtesy of Rose Norman

Herstorians gather for planning at Outrageous Voices fall 2019. (l to r) Sarah Salamander Thorsen, Helen Renée Brawner, Barbara Esrig, Rose Norman, Judy McVey, Lorraine Fontana.

SNAPSHOT LESBIAN LOVE CELEBRATION

I remember Martha Shelley from the 70s lesbian feminist uprising. She is still a political activist and writes blogs and publishes with *Ebisu Publications*. She and her partner, Sylvian Allen, are honored in this segment, hoping their love stories add to your day like they did to mine. (Roberta Arnold)

About Martha, by Sylvia

I first met Martha Shelley on a strangely hot day in San Francisco in February 1997, when I was leading weekly city hikes for women. It was my Land’s End hike and I had about 20 hikers. Martha was with us for the first time and behaved badly. She demanded ice cream (which she didn’t get), insisted that I divert the hike to a different, much more difficult trail (which we didn’t do), and finally took off her shoes and waded in the decorative fountain outside the Legion of Honor Museum. That last was actually okay with me but she also threatened to remove more garments, and I had to tell her, “No, you may NOT take your pants off.” She pointed out that she had underpants on. It definitely felt like taking my two-year-old for a walk.

However, in between the bad behavior, she told me about the series of novels she was writing, set in the 9th century BCE, and we talked about Judaism and historical fiction. I enjoyed her conversation tremendously, and was amused and intrigued by the combination of childlike behavior and sparkling intellect, and the passion for justice that showed through both.

She never came back to City Hikes, but I remembered her, and months later one of my regular hikers commented, “You sure like talking about Martha Shelley.”

Some months later, in October, I attended a friend’s birthday party—a sit-down dinner in a restaurant—and the person who happened to sit across from me was Martha. We were both



Photo courtesy of Rose Norman

Herstorians gather to plan the SW116 release parties and work on SW 124 at Dykewriters, December 2019. They are holding various SW special issues that we did and the new *Sinister Wisdom* 2020 calendar that SW editor Julie Enszer had sent to everybody. (l to r) Seated: Womanwriter, Rose Norman, Kate Ellison, Woody Blue. Standing: Robin Romaine, Barbara Ester, Edie Daly, Barbara Stoll, Contributor, Phyllis Free, Beth York, Torii Black, B. Leaf Cronewrite, Gail Reeder, Trey Anderson, Debra Gish, and Sage Morse.

celebrating: She had just had her *Haggadah* published, and my article on communicating with people with AIDS dementia had just been accepted in a respected journal. We didn't talk to anyone else all evening. Someone down the table was talking about a movie from the film festival, "When Night Is Falling," and Martha said to me, "That was a great movie. You should rent it and watch it on your VCR."

"I don't have a VCR," I told her.

"Then you and your girlfriend should come watch it on my VCR."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

The rest is history. We're still together, 24 years later. I still love Martha for the same reasons I found her so memorable on that hot day at Land's End.

About Sylvia, by Martha

Sylvia used to lead hikes for women in San Francisco. I joined one in February 1997, and really enjoyed conversing with her. She was interested in my research on the ancient Middle East, for my novels about Jezebel. But when she left a message inviting me to another city hike, I didn't respond, preferring to tramp around the woods instead.

I met her again at the end of October, when a mutual friend invited us to a birthday party at a restaurant. We found ourselves sitting opposite each other and once again couldn't stop talking, mostly about our writing projects. Occasionally I'd tear my attention away and say a word to someone else, but it was an effort. Then, when another woman praised a lesbian flick from that year's film festival, and Sylvia said she'd missed it, I suggested she rent it. She said she didn't have a VCR—or a girlfriend to watch it with. I blurted, "Then you can see it at my place."

Next weekend we watched the movie. The following weekend we hiked the length of Ocean Beach and back, then watched the stars come out. Sylvia is taller than me, with long legs, and I

struggled to keep up but was too proud to let her know that until years later. The weekend after that, we climbed the Glen Canyon Park trail. That night she seemed a lot prettier than she had before—until I realized that her looks hadn't changed. I was falling in love. I'd planned the fourth date to be an East Bay hills hike. We got all the way from my front door to the bedroom.

On Thanksgiving we drove to Point Reyes, hiked out to the beach, and ate a festive meal at the base of the waterfalls. Then we spent the night at her place. In the morning I said, "I think I'd better get my camels together"—meaning the bride price.

She understood. "I think you'd better."

Proposed and accepted. We were married (though not yet legally) in 1998.

Missing Martha and Sylvia's photograph

Credit: Lois Allen

Martha and Sylvia Sitting on Steps