

RHYTHM FEST: WOMEN'S MUSIC, ART & POLITICS (1990-95)

Rose Norman and Merril Mushroom

Susan LosCalzo of Lofty Notions, a craftswoman who worked the women's music festival circuit for two decades, was unhappy with the hierarchical structure of most of the festivals she attended. She found that some women got better food than others, some had preferential accommodations, some got better treatment. But Rhythm Fest was different. "That was the best festival I ever did," said Los Calzo, "because of the ethics. The festival . . . was very equal, and no one was going to eat better or worse than anyone else. . . . It was not classist in any way. It was egalitarian."¹



Photo courtesy of Barbara Savage

Rhythm Fest producers (l to r) Kathleen Mahoney, Barbara Savage, Michelle Crone.

Rhythm Fest, the first of the music festivals in the South that actually included producers who lived in the South, was also the

first to operate as a "workers' festival." Four of the producers—Barbara Savage, Kathleen Mahoney, Billie Herman, and Michelle Crone—met at Robin Tyler's West Coast Music & Comedy Festival. Most of them had worked at Tyler's Southern Music & Comedy Festival (the first festival in the South) and at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and they all had ideas about how they wanted to do a festival that was different, more inclusive, more political.

Michelle had met Mandy Carter at the Seneca Women's Peace Encampment, and they had kept in touch over the years. Mandy had been a member of Real Women Productions, the group that produced women's music concerts in the Triangle area of North Carolina (1986-90). Michelle asked Mandy to join with them in putting on the festival, and after some hesitation, Mandy agreed.



Photo courtesy of Barbara Savage

Rhythm Fest producers Mandy Carter (left) and Barbara Savage.

The producers lived all over the country: Barbara in Tennessee, Mandy in North Carolina, Michelle Crone in New York, Kathleen and Billie in California, although Kathleen moved to Atlanta for six years while producing Rhythm Fest. One of Kathleen's best

¹ Quoted from Robin Toler's phone interview with Susan LosCalzo on June 27, 2015. See also "Lofty Notions," this issue.

Rhythm Fest memories is “when we would have our meetings throughout the year to get ready for the next one. I really loved those times with those women. It was very inspiring. It was just an amazing process to try to create an environment that was outside the box. It was incredible that we were able to do it with basically no money, no investors.”

They each took on tasks they were good at. Mandy handled logistics—registration, volunteer work shifts, housing. Michelle and Kathleen did artist bookings. Michelle also facilitated all the meetings, and what was called “rumor control,” while Kathleen was primarily in charge of the stage (she had managed Night Stage at Michigan). Barbara took care of all the food needs (kitchen and concessions). Billie did the books and finances. Of course, they all did many other things as well.

The name for the festival came from the back of an antique plate that Barbara had in her kitchen. It read “Rhythmware.” Michelle and Kathleen were at Barbara’s house in Tennessee, planning the festival. Barbara describes the scene: “Kathleen turned over the plate and said, ‘Rhythm Fest.’ We all said, ‘that’s it!’ I remember that day.”²

Rhythm Fest began on Labor Day weekend 1990 and continued for six Labor Day weekends before difficulties in finding a festival site forced it to end. The festival incorporated music, art, and politics. Social interactions around music and art, and working together to create an environment for festivals, ultimately leads to political action and is, itself, a form of activism. For example, one of the workshops at Rhythm Fest in 1990 was around organizing politically to try to defeat Senator Jesse Helms, the racist and homophobic North Carolina US senator who was running for re-election that year against Black democrat Harvey Gantt. Gantt was the first ever Black mayor of Charlotte, NC, and the first Black student to integrate Clemson University in South Carolina. Mandy was campaign manager for Senate Vote ‘90 that was supporting Harvey Gantt.

2 Quoted from Rose Norman’s interview with Barbara Savage at Savage’s Tennessee home on April 29, 2015.

Producer Billie Herman had been in law enforcement and later owned her own tax and accounting company. She initially headed Security at West Coast and Southern festivals, and she did not want to do Security any more. Keeping order and enforcing policies designed for safety did not make for popularity, especially as a woman of color in a position of authority in the South. She said, “. . . many, many, many of the white women attending Southern [festival] had no idea how to handle that. There were comments made. So it wasn’t always fun for me.”³ She joined the Rhythm Fest organizers as a co-producer, keeping the books and handling the money. When Mandy Carter left in 1993, Billie took over some of Mandy’s official duties.

A lot of the skills for living on land and accommodating over 2000⁴ women had been learned through experiences at other festivals, especially Michfest, and the Seneca Peace Encampment.⁵ Women came and worked, and they learned by doing.

Michelle: At Rhythm we had the bottom-line policy that we won’t say no. We will say how can we make it work, and sometimes we couldn’t. We tried, and sometimes we discovered it just wasn’t going to work. But our mantra was “don’t say no,” and that was pretty major.⁶

The first workers at Rhythm Fest were people who had been kicked out of Michigan, Southern, and other festivals, usually because of festival politics and power dynamics.

3 Quoted from Rose Norman’s phone interview with Billie Herman, November 9, 2015. All quotations are from this interview.

4 Attendance data are not readily available, but *Hot Wire* says the first Rhythm Fest drew 1200 women (January 1991, p. 59), and Kathleen Mahoney recalls that one year they drew over 3000.

5 Begun in the summer of 1983 in Romulus, Seneca County, New York, this women’s peace encampment continued from July 4 through Labor Day. Women continued to have peace actions on that land until 1994, when it became Women’s Peace Land.

6 Quoted from Rose Norman’s phone interviews with Michelle Crone on May 18, 2015, June 3, 2015, and May 8, 2016. All quotations are from these interviews.

Michelle: For example, S/M women were frowned upon at Michigan. There was a real divide between the women who ran Michigan as a business and many of the workers, who were very grassroots and radical. I believe it was 1978 when Michigan changed from a collective to a cooperative and formed the LUNTS (Land Union Negotiating Team) and the CUNTS (Coordinator Union Negotiating Team). When Michigan started losing money, the CUNTS [which Michelle was part of] came forth and asked the workers not to be paid in order to save the festival. We also started collecting money toward buying festival land. We thought if we raised 15–20% of the cost of the land, then 15–20% of the land should be women's land, not going to the business. We raised thousands and thousands of dollars, and then it became really clear that the festival would bite the dust if some money didn't get raised. We were asked to turn over that money [raised for land purchase]. We held meetings, and finally reached consensus to turn over that amount, and when we did that, we were all asked to leave, fired. At subsequent festivals, when people were asked where we were, they would be told they couldn't talk about it because we weren't there to defend ourselves. That felt like character assassination to us. That's a big part of why we decided to start our own festival.

There were so many workers that Rhythm Fest was sometimes called "The Workers Festival," and the festival organizers deliberately intended for the workers to be empowered.

Michelle: Festie-goers were only there for three or four days, so they were not so much into the process. They were there to have a vacation or a good time, the community building, the joint feelings. It was the workers who were there for weeks at a time, building a vision. They were much more emotionally involved in how things operated, how women were being treated, their ideas being fed and

nourished. They were there to help *create* something, not only to participate in workshops and listen to wonderful music. They were much more involved in nation building, tribal building.

At Rhythm Fest, we would break down the kind of hierarchical structure that some festivals had. We weren't afraid to talk about controversy if there was an issue on the land. We'd set up times and places to have dialogue about that. Rhythm Fest was committed to diversity, to freedom of voicing, to making it a safe place. . . . We didn't want to create any barriers, such as the areas at Michfest where you had to have a certain wristband, places like workers' or performers' eating areas. There would be Security at those areas of Michfest. We wanted everyone to have access to all areas. At some festivals, workers and festies would get certain food. Craftswomen would sometimes be denied food. At Rhythm Fest, everybody ate the same food. You would always be able to go up and talk to performers or workers. There would be no final decisions without discussions, and we always tried to reach agreements by consensus.

Mandy: We knew that other women's festival producers had, you know, wristbands, VIP areas, and so on. We weren't going to do any of that. We wanted to have a different culture, not like other festivals. We didn't want to act like we had more power than anyone else. . . . We booked acts that normally would not get into festivals.⁷

Kathleen: At that time, we were much more on the fringe [than other festivals]. Tribe 8 performed, Super Punk, some Goth bands, the more cutting edge, super political, outrageous bands. They didn't perform at any of the other festivals then, because they weren't asked to, though later

⁷ Quoted from Rose Norman's phone interview with Mandy Carter on March 24, 2015. All quotations are from this interview.

they did. We definitely booked more radical entertainers, like Lea DeLaria, who hadn't done many other festivals.⁸

Rhythm Fest also had festival favorites like Holly Near, as well as big-name performers like Melissa Etheridge, Emily Salyers, and Ani DiFranco, who were not regulars on the festival circuit. Melissa Etheridge actually worked on getting ready for that first Rhythm Fest.

Rhythm Fest was very popular with performers.

Kathleen Mahoney: After the first festival, the reputation really rippled out to the artist community about what a great environment it was. It was really easy for me to book entertainment. People just felt inspired by our desire to create a different type of environment, a more cooperative work environment. Everybody was treated the same. Nobody got a fancy anything. They came. They camped if they were able to. It was just a different process. People were intrigued and inspired by it. Performers were camping if they could. We had only a couple of cabins. Mostly everybody camped. There was no separation between workers, festies, producers, performers. During fest, everybody played together.

Although there was not a great deal of money, Billie felt that what there was was handled well. The producers were committed to making sure all the workers got paid and that women were reimbursed for their expenses. Rhythm Fest also made a commitment to profit sharing.⁹ Michelle Crone says, "We never really made much of a profit. We never lost money, but there wasn't much profit to share, and usually what was left was spent on storage units, equipment, and other things needed. When there was profit to be shared, it was shared." For all the time the

producers put into planning and running the festival, they might take home \$1000 each.

But Rhythm Fest was never about the money. The most important thing was how it felt to be there.

Kathleen: There's a magic that happens when you get onto the land, and you're immersed in nature, and you're immersed in this group of women that you only get to see once a year, and work side by side with them, building this amazing environment for women to come and settle into for an out-of-the-ordinary experience. I think that was the most fulfilling thing about it, when we were all (the workers) setting everything up, creating that environment, and then watching and being able to see all the people come and pay their money to be there, and settle into it, and be just so fulfilled. It was such a beautiful, *inspiring*, powerful, energy there. A lot of very spiritual women were there. Energetically, it absolutely vibrated through the whole festival.



Backstage at Rhythm Fest.

⁸ Quoted from Rose Norman's phone interview with Kathleen Mahoney on May 13, 2016. All quotations are from this interview.

⁹ *Southern Voice*, September 27, 1990, p. 4.