ROBIN TYLER AND THE LIVE AND LET LIVE SOUTHERN FESTIVAL

Rose Norman

For nine years (1984–92), the Canadian-born comic and lifelong activist Robin Tyler produced the Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival (SWMCF), the third largest women's music festival in the country, after the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (1976–2015), and Tyler's own West Coast Women's Music & Comedy Festival (1981–95, with gaps). Tyler came from a show business background, and attended her first women's music festival at Michfest in 1977, where her experience was that comics (and her onstage butch persona) were not welcome. That's what prompted her to produce her own festival in California, where she lives. What led her to start the Southern festival a few years later, though, was strictly political: "When I started the Southern festival, I didn't do it just to bring music and comedy to the South. I did it because I thought it would help the South organize."[1] As these special issues of *Sinister Wisdom* have demonstrated, Southern lesbian feminists had been organizing since 1968. SWMCF was like throwing a match on a wildfire, and they came in droves. They came for the music, yes, but more for the opportunity to network in lesbian community. Tyler brought major activists and organizers to speak that first year: Flo Kennedy, Kate Millet, Rita Mae Brown, and Sonia Johnson (when she was running for President). Those and other activists came again in subsequent years: Urvashi Vaid, Patricia Ireland (then NOW president), Sue Hyde (NGLTF director), Hilary Rosen (Human Rights Campaign Fund Co-Chair), and more.

1 Rose Norman interviewed Robin Tyler by phone on June 17, 2016. All quotations are from this interview. A substantive recent study of Tyler's career and her "charged humor" is by Rebecca Krefting, "Robin Tyler: Still 'Working the Crowd,'" chapter 5 (pp. 136–68), *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2014).

Lesbians in urban areas like Atlanta and Gainesville, FL, may have had more networking opportunities than those in rural areas, like activists Brenda and Wanda Henson in Gulfport, Mississippi. The Hensons attended SWMCF shortly after they first met in 1985. It was their first women's festival, their first experience of that kind of women's space. "This festival, Robin's festival, saved my life," Wanda Henson said in 1990.[2] "It was an immense amount of culture shock, but it was *my* culture, it was *my* people, it was *my* home. My whole life is different now. . . . No amount of therapy or anything could compare to the festival experience."[3] They immediately started a feminist bookstore in Gulfport (Southern Wild Sisters Unlimited, 1987–93), and started the Gulf Coast Women's Music Festival in 1989, moving it to women's land in 1993.[4] Robin Tyler helped them raise funds to buy that land.

Held over Memorial Day weekend, Southern drew a crowd of 2000 that first year and was held at Camp Coleman, in northeast Georgia, until 1992, when a new camp director led to relocating to a camp in North Carolina.[5] "Having 2000 lesbians in the woods in the middle of Klan country was challenging," Tyler recalls. "Everyone in the camp felt safe, but we had people patrolling the borders with weapons."[6] After the initial culture shock wore off, she found Southern women charming:

2 Quoted by Jorjet Harper, "Southern: The Live and Let Live Festival," *Hot Wire*, 6.3 (September 1990): 40–41

3 *Ibid*.

4 For the story of that women's land, see Marideth Sisco, "'A Saga of Lesbian Perseverance and Steadfast Resolve': The Hensons and Camp Sister Spirit," *Sinister Wisdom* 98 (2015): 142–45.

5 "The struggle to maintain the camp was enormous. I brought in the ACLU, NOW, etc., but because they [the camp] were a religious organization, we had no more rights than when The Boy Scout camp threw us out of Willits, California. (We had to move the California festival three times.) I do not think that people understand how hard it was, especially in the South, but in California also, to rent and retain land for lesbian festivals." Robin Tyler email to Rose Norman 12-27-16

6 Over the eight years at Camp Coleman, they only experienced one incident of men trying to enter the land, a group of drunks armed with a baseball bat.

> Once they calmed down about us being there, everybody just fell in love (literally). . . . I found that Southerners were more like Canadians. They showed up on time. It was a fit. . . . The Southern festival was my *favorite* festival. They were more interested in the politics [than the women on the West Coast] and in the authors we brought. There was something to do every minute of every hour. Five things to do, or ten things. Also, there was a pool and a lake and cabins.

She also experienced the Southern women as not so "alternative" as what she had experienced at Michfest. By "alternative," Tyler does not allude to leather lifestyle or gender identity:

> If people were into S/M or whatever they were into, that wasn't up to me. We were strict about drugs, but I didn't care about people's personal lives. Our fire captain at West Coast was a trans woman. . . . Rather than have the push–pull of who's a woman, who's not a woman, we didn't have a transgender policy. It was not problematic. And therefore, we did not split the festival over it. We as people want civil rights, and as lesbians we have been so oppressed. I think we have to set the example of not being scared (we're survivors, and we're tough), but also by not oppressing other people that are being murdered and mutilated all over the world. It never became an issue because I didn't make it an issue. . . . I wanted the focus to be on lesbian feminism.

Since the days when Southern drew 2000 women, women's music festivals are fewer and smaller. Tyler thinks part of that change is that the women who were attending those festivals in the 1980s and 1990s are now in their fifties and sixties, and more likely to be taking an Olivia cruise than doing something that requires camping. She also compares what happened to the women's music circuit to what happened to the African American "Chitlin' Circuit" of the 1930s—they broke through into the dominant culture, or some of them did:

Melissa Etheridge, the Indigo Girls, Tracy Chapman, Ellen DeGeneres, Lea DeLaria—they've all been accepted in the dominant culture, where there's more money to be made. That's the end of our own culture, the segregated culture. In a way it's sad, because you never get the feeling of safety we had in the Amazon cities of women that were festivals. There's nothing like it any more. . . . But it lasted a long time, from the 70s probably through the 90s. Even the antiwar folk circuit in the 70s did not last as long as the women's music circuit. When you finally break through to the general public, your own group loses that intimacy with you.

It's really sad that it's over. It was like creating a dream and stepping into it. I still have the energy to do it, to fight over the land. I did try to go back to Camp Coleman. I thought maybe we could do one last festival, all together again. I called last year, and they never returned my call.

The lake at the Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival.