

WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVALS IN THE SOUTH

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Ten years after the dawn of Women's Music Festivals, Robin Tyler, producer of the West Coast Women's Music & Comedy Festival, took on the Deep South. She was warned that it could be dangerous and that "it's never been done."¹ She went ahead anyway, renting Camp Coleman in the Georgia mountains, and starting the Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival (SWMCF) in May 1984. With name performers, great sound, cabins, lakes for recreation, crafts area, workshops, and other appealing amenities, the ground was secured. Robin felt "there was a lot of initial resistance to our coming down there." There was a lack of trust the first year. The Californians came across as arrogant and patronizing to some of the Southern festival workers. But after a bumpy start, Robin considered that "we have successfully integrated."² Well-known women's music circuit performers from the South like Meg Christian and Teresa Trull were right at home at Southern, along with other local performers. There were a few complaints about the terrain and accessibility. Writing in 1990 for *Hot Wire*, Jorjet Harper called Southern a "live and let live festival" and found it "less politically charged" than other festivals she had attended.³ Compared to other festivals, "Southern was more like a lesbian vacation,"⁴ with night stage held in a roofed theater with real chairs for the audience! As far as explicit lesbian visibility, Harper (who is from Chicago) found Southern to be "one of the more radical," in that "Lesbians of diverse subcultures seemed to

coexist quite well." Harper found that diversity did not extend to race: "Aside from the performers, there was a startlingly low proportion of women of color."⁵ But 2000 festi-goers created a successful beginning, and Robin held onto Camp Coleman for eight years. She struggled with the politics of the camp's security in legal confrontations and had to leave Camp Coleman before folding in 1992.⁶



Photo courtesy of Phyllis Free

Yer Girlfriend playing day stage at SWMCF 1989.

Robin Tyler's challenges were nothing compared to what the Hensons faced in Mississippi,⁷ but SWMCF inspired a new trend in the South. Brenda and Wanda Henson attended the Southern Festival, took what they experienced, and brought it on home to Mississippi! They were emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually inspired to create their own style of festival. Brenda writes that

1 Toni L. Armstrong, "The P.T. Barnum of Women's Music and Culture: Robin Tyler" (Interview), *Hot Wire*, 4.2 (March 1988): 5.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Jorjet Harper, "Southern: The Live and Let Live Festival," *Hot Wire*, 6.3 (September 1990): 40-41.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 40

5 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

6 Robin Tyler moved the festival from north Georgia to its last site, in North Carolina, only to be confronted again by religious organizations.

7 On the Hensons and Camp Sister Spirit, see Marideth Sisco, "A Saga of Lesbian Perseverance and Steadfast Resolve," *Sinister Wisdom* 98 (Fall 2015): 142-145.

Wanda “put the whole thing together in ninety days with thirty-three volunteers. Her spirit is catching.”⁸ There were 250 festi-goers at the first Gulf Coast Women’s Festival in March, 1989, and Suzanne Pharr “opened the festival with a speech on ‘The Southern Woman,’ putting everyone in touch with her wonderful, rich, Southern culture and how important it is to celebrate our heritage.”⁹ Gulf Coast became a force of change for “sisters who had never seen or heard their culture [lesbian culture], whose lives were changed *forever* by the music and the sights!”¹⁰ Keeping festival sites and what became Camp Sister Spirit safe was challenging for the Hensons. The festival’s tone was all about community and spiritual enhancement. They acquired their own land for festivals, but as challenges intensified and national media got involved, attendance suffered. The festival was alive and well for fifteen years. Camp Sister Spirit also hosted Spiritfest with a focus on woman-oriented spirituality.

Women in the South didn’t have to wait long before another festival sprouted a “new attitude” on Lookout Mountain with cabins, lake, and all the usual festie requirements. Rhythm Fest was billed as the “new women’s festival,” and appeared on the scene in the fall of 1990. Produced by a cooperative and billed as a festival of “women’s music, art and politics,” the festival set a goal of operating without hierarchy among “organizers, workers, entertainers and festi-goers, who mingled quite easily and comfortably.”¹¹ There was always a lineup of name performers and locals, like Yer Girlfriend and the Reel World String Band. Great music, good energy, and 1200 women gave Rhythm Fest a great start. Alive and well for six years and known as “a well organized

festival without an elitist attitude,”¹² Rhythm Fest ended in 1996 when negotiations for the camp broke down.¹³

Excitement and enthusiasm for festivals waxed and waned. The challenges to keep locations safe in the Bible Belt festered. Those three major music festivals in the South are now old memories. Other, smaller festivals dotted the Southern landscape and were advertised in *Lesbian Connection*, *Hot Wire* magazine, and national and local newsletters. Winter Womyn Music in Charlotte, NC, the Virginia Women’s Music Festival, SisterSpace in Maryland, the Lesbian Bizarres in Miami, and Womenfest in Key West are a few examples. Another Southern Women’s Festival ran in Florida and Georgia from 2000 to 2007, originally produced by Pat Cobb. Attendance of 200–2000 fluctuated, as did the location. Some festivals continued and new, smaller venues occasionally appeared.

Dedication and commitment to women’s music and lesbian culture were changing. A new generation of lesbians became devotees of performers who were given better access to the various forms of public media. Many more lesbian performers were out and could be heard on radio and television, in mainstream concert venues, and on all kinds of techno-savvy media. But older lesbian generations passed down a legacy of doing it in the South in spite of the challenges. Womyn’s lives were changed. *Lesbian Connection* still lists two pages full of “Regional Festivals and Gatherings,” mostly Pride events, and only a few festivals nationwide. In the South, the Virginia Women’s Music Festival continues in May. SisterSpace and Womenfest are held in September, and the Amazon Music Festival is in April in Fayetteville, AR.

12 Ginny Risk, “Rhythmfest [sic] 4,” *Hot Wire* 10.1 (January 1994): 28.

13 A letter from Rhythm Fest producers to “Womyn in support of Rhythm Fest,” dated May 28, 1996, details the series of negotiations that led to canceling Rhythm Fest 7. They had had to use four different campgrounds in the six years, and the search for a fifth campground ended when the second set of negotiations broke down in 1996. See Michelle Crone Papers (1927–2000), Albany, NY, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives. “Bulk date” 1982–1995.

8 Brenda Henson, “The First Gulf Coast Women’s Festival,” *Hot Wire*, 6.1 (January 1990): 38.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Marcy J. Hochberg, “A New Attitude, a New Festival: Rhythm Fest 1990,” *Hot Wire* 7.1 (January 1991): 38.