

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING WITH ANIMA RISING

Beth York

Photo by Rand Hall



Mel played with Leslie Kyle in several rebirths of the lesbian band Buffalo Shoes during the 1980s in the Tampa and St. Pete, Florida area. The photo was taken of Mel with Silk Heat at The Cheshire Cat in Gulfport, FL.

Coming out as a lesbian feminist was intimately linked to the vibrant lesbian-feminist cultural movement that had taken root when I moved to Atlanta in 1977. A naïve young folk singer at twenty-seven, I had finally admitted my attractions to women. Earlier, in 1973-74, as a hetero newlywed, I became a member of a consciousness-raising (CR) group for six months in California while completing a clinical internship in music therapy. There I attended my first “women-only” gathering. Somewhere in the forests of northern California, our group consumed organic food prepared and served by strong women in jeans and soft flannel shirts. I saw my vulva and cervix for the first time, up-close and personal, with mirror, flashlight, and plastic speculum. I heard Margie Adam sing and speak about a new women’s music movement. Women’s music . . . hmmm. I am a woman, a folksinger, a musician. I am beginning to write original songs. Sounds like me. I had listened and learned from recordings of Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, and Carole King since I was fourteen. I tucked the term “women’s music” in my back pocket for future reference. Meanwhile, I was challenged in our weekly CR group and excited by what I heard. My eyes opened to the injustices women faced, injustices inherent in traditional roles that I had never questioned. I hadn’t considered an alternative to marrying that sweet hippie boy I had held onto for the last ten years. I listened to each woman’s story and was moved by our common concerns. I was also intellectually—and otherwise—stimulated.

After my internship, Dave and I moved back South to Athens, GA, where we rented a room in a large Victorian house on Bloomfield Street, inhabited mostly by radical lesbians living near the University of Georgia. Dave took care of some badly needed

repairs to the house. I worked part-time and was immediately drawn into intense late-night conversations and continued CR with Deb, Pat, Carol, Anastasia, and Leslie.

Deb was a theatre major with a mischievous smile and unbounded energy. We flirted. She dressed me for my folksinger gigs at the B&B Warehouse. I loved her attention. Finally we kissed. Not long afterward, Kay, the organizer of the California CR group, moved across country to live with us at the Bloomfield house. One afternoon she became my first woman lover. We seduced each other with wine and deep talks "up on the roof" outside her second-story room.

Dave had outside love interests as well. This was the 1970s. We were questioning everything, including traditional marriage. What was this marriage anyway? We were definitely *not* monogamous. My relationships with these women were becoming more important to me than him, and finally I told him so. He was not concerned. They were only women, he said. I was furious. He had inadvertently admitted that women were not as important as men. What did that say about our marriage? I breathed a sigh of relief. My consciousness had been raised, the personal was political. I was getting stronger. I would be divorcing him soon.

My next memory is attending a conference of the National Organization for Women in Athens, hearing Gloria Steinem, and performing at a lesbian "alternative" event (where all my new friends seemed to be). I was ready to pursue the next course in my lesbian-feminist education, to make the paradigm shift from male identification to woman identification. I returned from a summer course in jazz at the Berklee College of Music in Boston in the summer of 1975 and filed for divorce. By that time, I had found comfort with three women on Bloomfield Street. Women were my first priority. I moved to Atlanta.

Atlanta opened her doors wide onto my new life. Her symbol was the Phoenix rising from the ashes, and my changes felt as profound as the image of that fiery bird. By day, I worked as a

music therapist at the Georgia Mental Health Institute. Several nurses and therapists who worked with me were "out" lesbians. They introduced me to happy hour at the Tower and Ms. Garbo's, two very different lesbian bars, one working class, and the other a little more upscale. Charis Books and More was down the street on Moreland Avenue—"more" being more feminist literature than I had ever dreamed of—and a community bulletin board advertising all the events in and around the Little Five Points/Candler Park area where I lived.

By 1975, Lucina's Music had formed, the new lesbian-feminist production company, founded by ten members from the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA). According to their charter,

Ten women have banded together in Atalanta, the city of the self-resurrecting Phoenix. We call ourselves Lucina's Music, invoking Her name and strengths. We felt the void in this city, and we are working to let womn's voices be heard. We have committed ourselves to the production and propagation of Womn's Music and Culture.¹

The "Artist's Introduction" to the new production company read:

Women Make Music: We are singing, playing and composing works about the things which touch women's lives. All too often, however, these efforts are denigrated, ignored, and kept under control by the male-dominated music industry. That leaden hand has exercised a powerful grasp upon the throat of women's creativity. But rather than obligingly being throttled, women's music across the land is stirring, strengthening, and growing. Small ruptures and attempts to loosen the stranglehold appear—an artist here, an independent record there. . . . This movement is gathering voice, as women set up record companies, distribution systems, and production groups to develop women's music.

¹ ALFA Archives, Box 24, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture in the Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke University.

Happily, this phenomenon is not erupting just in other parts of the country. Atlanta is now beginning to shake off its own heavy hand, becoming more receptive to female artists. This city has never been the most hospitable provider to gain any exposure for their work. Yet, a substantial audience exists in Atlanta for female artists who play and sing about women's concerns. The problem revolves around getting the artist and audience together.

Last fall, a group of ten area women decided to expedite matters. Thus, an all-woman concert production group came into being. We have emerged as producers dedicated to providing, promoting, and nurturing music by Atlanta women, for Atlanta women.

We call ourselves Lucina's Music, after the light-bearing Goddess who created all the civilizing arts (especially music). She seems to smile on our endeavors....²

Fast forward...1978. A psychiatric nurse at Georgia Mental Health told me about a women's coffeehouse where I could perform at the Little Five Points Pub. It was sponsored by Lucina's Music. Elizabeth, a local poet, was reading her work. A lesbian was singing original songs. I auditioned at the ALFA House, and the women who I auditioned for agreed to let me on stage. That night I sang Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Joni Mitchell songs, sported wild Janis Joplin hair, and wore a purple-flowered dress. I tried my best to look like, sing like many of the women I admired, . . . but I don't remember any of the other women in the audience wearing a dress. Most of them were wearing blue jeans and those soft flannel shirts.

Later, I heard about an ALFA party at the house on McClendon. I mustered up the courage and decided to take myself there. A respectable source reports that I flew into the ALFA House, long hair flying, and headed straight for the piano at the other side

of the room. (I believe I wore jeans that day.) It was easy to hide behind the piano keys. I decided to play background music, and accompany these women and their important conversations. These were *real* lesbians, after all, tall, strong, butch and brash, smart and political. I envied their spitfire confidence, intellect, and easy sexuality. I, on the other hand, was shy and femme-looking. Music was the best way to connect. Music is, after all, vibrational, magnetic energy. These women would be attracted to my music making. If I played, I reasoned, eventually one of these women would come to *me*.

My strategy worked. Eventually, a strong, fine woman approached the piano; we exchanged smiles, names, pleasantries. I stopped playing to talk to her. Her name was Phyllis, and she was a drummer—a drummer—I had only met one other woman drummer. She wanted to start a woman's band. Would I be interested? The invitation was perfectly timed. I made my way OUT and IN to the burgeoning Atlanta lesbian community.

In the midst of this lesbian-feminist cultural uprising centered at the ALFA house, our band was born: Her name was "Anima Rising." The name came from an old Joni Mitchell song. The "feminine aspect of the divine" was rising—akin to that phoenix rising from the ashes—and our aspirations of making it in the music business rose as well. Soon after Phyllis and I met, KC (on bass) and Jan (guitar, flute, with a voice like a country diva) joined us. We were all songwriters, wearing our own unique styles and egos. Jan was a counselor at the mental health center where I worked. She was biding her time, saving her money so that she could go mainstream with her music. Her ultimate goal was to win a Grammy Award. KC was the youngest, a political radical, opinionated poet who wrote a regular column for *Southern Voice*, the Atlanta gay/lesbian newspaper. I was discovering jazz, and had started to play piano and hotel gigs around Atlanta. Phyllis played rock and roll to jazz to, well, *anything*.

² *Ibid.*

We began to rehearse when a mutual friend, Marsha June, opened up her living room to us. At least twice a week we rehearsed there, our music peppered with marijuana, political discussions, and dreams of becoming Women's Music Stars. We had heard



Beth York performing with Anima Rising at the Pagoda in 1979.

about Olivia Records, Cris Williamson's *Changer and the Changed*, and Meg Christian's *I Know You Know*. We sent a demo tape to pianist and songwriter Margie Adam, who kindly wrote us back and urged us to continue.

We performed all around Atlanta. Ms. Garbo's was a regular gig, a smoke-filled women's bar on Cheshire Bridge Road with an established clientele. Our music wasn't exactly the dance music of the time. We were performing original, sometimes political songs, songs with a message, songs about loving women. "Ain't I a Woman" was one of Phyllis' songs, inspired by Sojourner Truth. We followed Margie, Meg, Cris and Kay Gardner, and the growing national women's music scene. We expanded our performances to more gay- and women-centered performance venues: the Little Five Points Pub, Georgia State University Women's Center, the Pagoda in St. Augustine, Atlanta Pride, and Little Five Points community celebrations. We performed at benefits for ALFA, WRFG, and the Karuna Counseling Collective. We opened for Medusa, a duo consisting of Flash Silvermoon and her partner Pan. We were going places and *fast*. In the meantime, Lucina's was producing Meg Christian, Margie Adam, Terese Edell, Linda Tillery, and Mary Watkins.

We were also on the bill for another Lucina's Music coffeehouse at the Phoenix Fellowship, January 20, 1979, "childcare and work exchange" provided. That night we shared the stage with nationally known women's music artists, Betsy Rose and Cathy Winter. Sandra Franks presented a one-woman performance portraying Harriet Tubman that night. The room was packed, and the crowd was rowdy and supportive. We were sounding good. On January 31, 1979, I wrote in my journal:

Our music emerges from a variety of experiences
 Anger from our oppression
 Sorrow at being misunderstood
 Strength and joy in discovery
 In an atmosphere of creative acceptance

Where minds and hearts
 Wrestle and toil
 Emerge with a fresh perspective,
 Perhaps a new song
 The totality of our individual experience
 Comprises the whole
 Of who we are as women.

In March of that year, Phyllis and I approached the women of Lucina's Music with a grand proposal for a women's music center. They listened politely and suggested a "separate structure and bylaws," but agreed to sponsorship. We could create our own space, our own support network and umbrella for other organizations devoted to women's music. We did not follow-through. We were too busy performing to create a new organization!

We weren't the only local lesbian musicians performing in Atlanta at the time. Fonda and Dede and Pretty Good for Girls played jazz at upscale clubs in Buckhead. Dede was an excellent bassist, arranger, and singer-songwriter. Fonda played a mean jazz piano, as did Penelope, who was a traditionally beautiful solo artist. The Fabulous Scallion Sisters was Dede's other band. The difference between those artists and Anima Rising was that the messages in our music conveyed a lesbian-feminist point of view. We were happy and comfortable in all lesbian and women's audiences. Gail Reeder and Sisters of No Mercy were even more radical than we were, even though some of those players were straight. But we were all women making music, at varying levels of radicalism, feminist consciousness, and "outwardness."

Reviews were positive. One Atlanta music critic wrote, "Each member of Anima Rising is a qualified musician in her own right. Put them all together on stage and the result is slick—tight musicianship and strong, clear vocals."³ Another wrote that the band had "slick rhythms and smooth lyrics about changes in life,

looking for love, and feeling happy. . . . Although the band is not OVERTLY feminist, the fact that all the musicians are *women* does, and should, influence their music..."⁴ The critic continued, "Members like Phyllis Free, 'simply got tired of playing supporting roles to further some male musician's career.' Anima Rising is a cooperative outfit that provides an outlet for the band members' talents. Each woman is a writer, and the band strives to create a blend of all five different styles."⁵ That was an understatement.

"Strives to create" was an operative ideal. What we began to discover was that not all of us equally embraced lesbian-feminist politics. Not all of us wanted to make a political statement through our lyrics. It was hard to make a living as a musician and keep lofty ideals intact. We kept our day jobs. We hadn't hired a manager to find regular bookings and we certainly weren't ready to take a leap of faith and go on the road. Negotiating contracts was not our forte, and the venues that were a good fit for our music were few and far between. We didn't have enough original material to make a studio recording—and besides, we didn't have the money to book studio time. Ladyslipper Music, the new women's music catalog and distribution company in Durham, NC, was not knocking at our door—and we weren't ready to knock on theirs.

Disgruntlement set in as we debated what our next step should be. Should we branch out and perform cover tunes so that we could sign on with a manager and pursue club work? That would mean a commitment to making music our livelihood, and we just didn't feel ready. Meanwhile, one night, as Anima Rising was playing in Athens, GA, I introduced the band members to our opening act, an Athens friend who was also a singer-songwriter. Jan R was a soloist who was booking herself on the Holiday Inn route to fame and glory—affectionately known as the "chittlin' circuit." She played and sang cover tunes and originals that had a swinging, easy

3 M. Lampe, "Atlanta's Women are Anima Rising." *Signal*, Georgia State University, March 4, 1980, p. 29.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

sound. She had a good business head. She was easy to connect with. So easy that Phyllis fell for Jan. And Jan fell for Phyllis. And Jan began to rehearse with us at Marsha June's place.

Jan was sweet and seductive in a femme, hippie sort of way. She joined us for a few performances, and afterwards, in our conversations during rehearsals, began to mention her own gigs. She wondered if any of us would join her. We could keep Anima Rising intact, but a new band, Jan R and Friends, would enable those of us who wanted to play more regularly to quit our jobs and hit the road. Phyllis was ready; I was ready to discharge myself from the mental health center and leave Atlanta to seek fame and fortune. Off we went, believing we could be true to both bands. After all, as feminists, we had questioned monogamy as a patriarchal construct. Jan, Phyllis, and I played as a trio in Gainesville, FL, in Arabi, GA, in Chattanooga, TN, and our favorite, Hilton Head Island where—as fate would have it—Phyllis fell in love again, this time with the tennis pro at the resort where we were booked.

When we finally made it back to Atlanta, it was clear to Anima Rising—and Jan R and Friends—that we would be left waiting as Phyllis departed to live on Hilton Head Island. Ironically, in July of 1980, a journalist had just written a rave review and article about Anima Rising—with a picture of all of us—Jan R included—in the upscale *Atlanta Magazine*: "They take the stage like any band: high-stepping over wires, strapping on guitars, noodling to check sound levels. But when the lights come up and they face the audience with their first chord, it's not business as usual. The five players are all women."⁶ Anima Rising's final shows in 1980 were performances at *Womonwrites*, the lesbian writers retreat, and the closing of Ms. Garbo's bar. KC asserted, "Playing original music means that we're playing ourselves, and we're singing

ourselves." For those three years, we sang ourselves fiercely, proudly, beautifully.

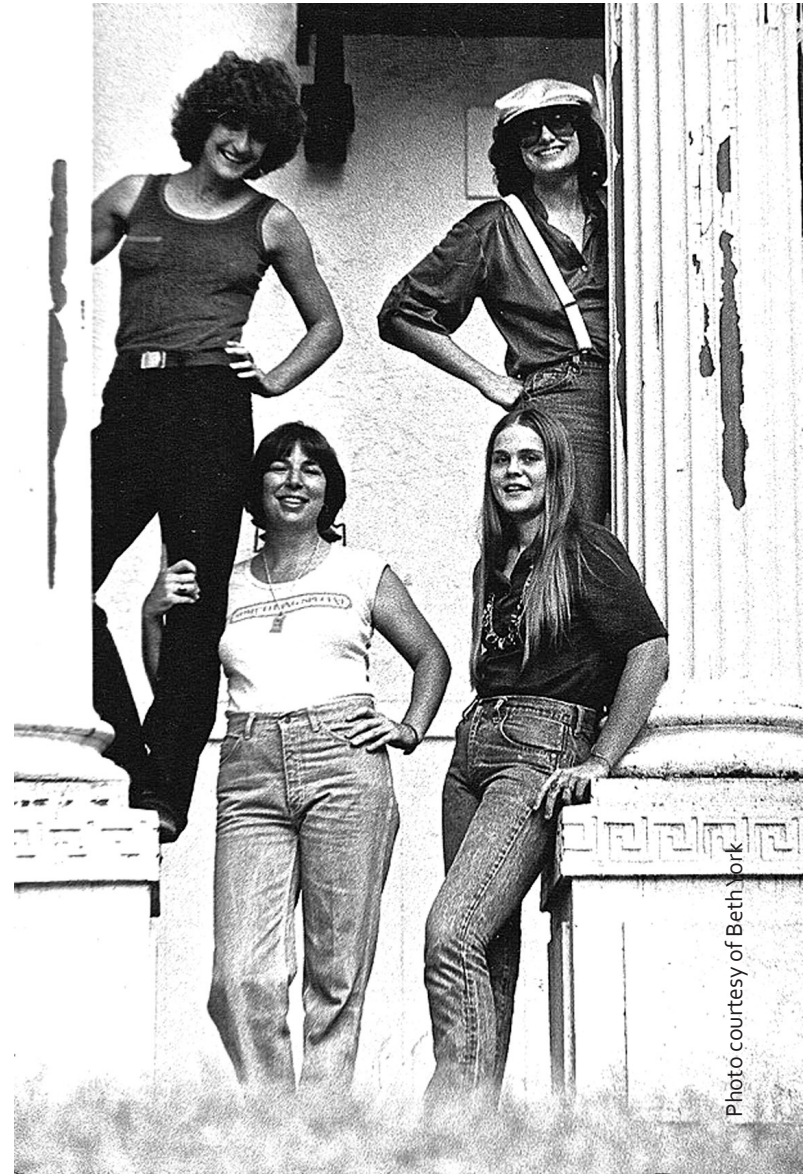


Photo courtesy of Beth York

Anima Rising publicity photo, Atlanta, GA, 1979.

6 Patricia Thompson, "On The Cusp With Anima Rising," *Atlanta Magazine* 20:3 (July 1980): 27.