

But it was also deeply meaningful and moving. Rebeca Quintana reflects: "Being able to contribute to the community fed me, supported me. Through the arts is how you reach people. We weren't always appreciated. But at the concerts themselves . . . and the euphoria after the concert . . . I have fond memories of that high. It brought me closer to those people. When we see each other, we know what we did together." Sandy Malone remembers: "We made this happen, and it was so easy. It's not like it was a burden, or anybody was whining about how to lick the stamps. Standing in back of the room together, looking over the crowd with Ferron up there singing, knowing that we made this happen, it's just mind blowing." Jo Hamby takes a more emotional stance: "Live music touches me more than recorded music. The energy created puts a smile on people's faces. It brings us closer together, brings tears to our eyes."

The music drifts down from the stage, circling each woman before sailing out the door. It chases down the alley to the womyn holding hands. It rushes into the streets, the country roads, down the rivers. It finds the small sweet places in our womon souls bringing us up, pulling us together, giving us voice. It merges with the beaches, the bayous, the mountains, valleys, and hammocks. Here, in the South, womyn's music hovers in the sweet air as we breathe and remember. Yea, music! Yea lesbians! Womyn's music? Oh yeah, that's how we got this way. That's how we found each other.

ATLANTA FEMINIST WOMEN'S CHORUS

Charlene Ball

Origins

In the 1970s, lesbian and gay male choruses arose from burgeoning lesbian and gay cultures. So did feminist choruses, with both lesbian and straight women. Singing together in public as openly lesbian women or gay men became a way of coming out, proudly claiming public space, and creating community, while singing in feminist choruses asserted the power, creativity, and culture of women. The Atlanta Feminist Women's Chorus (AFWC), founded in 1981,¹ managed to combine both lesbian pride and feminism, creating a unique experience for the women who participated. This interview by Beth York with the AFWC's founding director Linda Vaughn and three former members of the chorus describes how the chorus got started and what it meant to some of the women who participated.²

Beth: Eleanor Smith's and Sharon Sanders' history of the chorus says that a few of you met at the ALFA House to sing and began to rehearse without a director. Then Linda Vaughn met Judy Aehle and asked if there was a women's chorus. Judy said, "No, but I know people who want to have one, and we need a director." Linda agreed to direct, and Judy spread the word and

1 A website for AFWC states that the group began in 1981: http://www.womenarts.org/network/profile_959.html. It was online and saying this as of 2013. The ALFA timeline gives the "first solo, full-length concert (at First Existentialist Church)" as of April 1983. There was a short concert at ALFA's tenth anniversary party in August 1982 (ALFA timeline). Legal documents say AFWC was incorporated in 1987. By 1988, the organizational structure had expanded to include an Assistant Director, President, Treasurer, Secretary, and committees: (1) publicity, (2) library, (3) social, (4) place, (5) membership, and (6) grants. The chorus also had an Auxiliary who ushered at concerts and sponsored fundraising events.

2 Beth York interviewed Judy Aehle, Linda Vaughn, Charlene Ball, and Shirley Chancey, on July 21, 2012, in Atlanta.

set up a meeting at ALFA House. Linda directed AFWC for twelve years, from 1981 to 1993.³

Linda: I had been in a women's chorus in Cincinnati. When I was transferred to Atlanta, I was looking for that woman energy. I felt a need [for] that connection.

Rehearsals, Reception, Repertoire, and Feminist Processes

Beth: Let's talk about early rehearsals in the tiny space at the ALFA House.

Linda: We would have sopranos in one room and altos in another. It quickly grew from twelve to twenty-five. At thirty, we moved to Eleanor Smith's house in Virginia Highlands.

Chancey: We rehearsed in different rooms. Linda would stand in the middle of the two rooms in the doorway [directing]. We rotated houses.

Beth: Then rehearsals moved to the First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta.

Linda: A lot of the advertising was word of mouth. Charis Bookstore was important.

Beth: One report of the first concert says that . . . ten women wanted to join right away.

Chancey: When I saw the Chorus that first time, all of these people came barreling down the aisle at the ECong in their blue jeans, and I remember thinking, "Oh, I gotta be part of this." I was one of those ten women who came running up after the show.

Beth: You already had a sense of women-only space with women's music performers that Lucina's and Orchid had produced. By 1983, Orchid was folding. You come in the same year, build it into a grassroots experience for women to experience their own power and voices.



Atlanta Feminist Women's Chorus. Director Linda Vaughn is far left, front row. (Charlene Ball Papers, manuscript # W102, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.)

Chancey: You didn't have to audition. [Linda] molded us into something that people wanted to see and hear. They enjoyed the music, the performance, the show. But it was more than that. They wanted more of what they saw on stage—bonded, strong women.

Beth: You became role models. How did you decide to incorporate the word "feminist" into the name?

Linda: We voted. Some people would not identify with a [lesbian] group. They couldn't feel safe doing that. Not everyone was lesbian. Straight women joined.

Beth: So the term "feminist" was more inclusive. Looking at an early concert flyer (April 10, 1983), I see songs from Mozart, Cris Williamson, Holly Near. You didn't do *just* women's music. Choosing the music was a group process or . . . your decision?

³ April 29, 1989, spring concert program, ALFA archives. AFWC archives are in the Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta, but ALFA archives are in the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University, Durham, NC. The ALFA collection at Duke contains many AFWC documents.

Judy: Early on, Linda was it. [Linda] did a great job of balancing different kinds of music in the program. That's part of why people came. There was upbeat stuff, serious. No committee could have come up with that variety.

Linda: The music spoke to various audiences . . . [and] different strengths of the chorus members. We got people who had studied music [and] people who had never sung in a chorus before.

Charlene: Every concert had something that was zany and goofy, sexy, romantic, elevated, and spiritual.

Chancey: Later, a music selection committee was formed. Otherwise, every issue was done by consensus. [W]e kept a structure that allowed everyone a voice. [W]e would have serious disagreements, [but] everybody's desire was to make it work. It was precious, and we were going to savor every drop of it. We knew we were creating something unique.

Beth: It sounds like every woman felt heard in those meetings.

Chancey: [E]veryone was helping. "I'll get this Xeroxed." "We'll do this program." "I'll draw this."

Charlene: There was a lot of volunteering. Linda Rye did some of the artwork. I did press releases.

Chancey: We set our ticket prices, but if there were any organizations who let us know they were coming, like the battered women's shelter, we gave them tickets. If a woman wanted to come, but couldn't pay, they had to let us know. We helped chorus people who couldn't afford the uniforms.

Linda: Or someone who couldn't afford to travel.

Beth: By 1985, flyers advertising AFWC concerts [mentioned] sign language interpretation and wheelchair accessibility. You always had sign language interpretation.

Linda: Gail McKay. We auditioned signers.

Linda: We had . . . [members] in wheelchairs. We were part of the reason they built the ramp at the First Existentialist Congregation. I was approached by a woman who wanted to start an African American gay chorus in Atlanta. Our hopes were to combine the

groups. [Over the years, eight African American women were chorus members.] We had Asian and . . . Native American women.

On Tour

Linda: The first trip out of Atlanta was the March on Washington in 1987. Robin Tyler [organizer of the Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festival] was handling the music for the March. She called and said she would like us to be the women's chorus there.

Linda: It was [our] first gay rights march. ABC News said 200,000 people marched that day, but I'd say it was a million.

Beth: Here's a letter to you from Jeff Cone:

I cannot tell you how proud it made us to hear . . . "The Atlanta Feminist Women's Chorus." . . . You looked great and sounded fantastic. . . . "Love is the Answer" had the crowd on its feet. . . . You were a major part of a weekend . . . that changed peoples' lives. You've secured a place for yourselves in lesbian and gay history. . . . [T]hank you for your excellent work. . . . !

Chancey: We referred to that concert as our "coming out." We saw the strength in community. Standing on that stage, looking across to the Washington Monument, seeing nothing but a sea of people.

Beth: [You took part in] a concert to celebrate Therese Edele's fortieth birthday in Cincinnati. [You traveled] to Denver for GALA [and] to Miami to sing with the Miami Gay Men's Chorus. [You became] a part of GALA [and networked] with choruses all over the country.⁴ How were you invited to sing at Terese Edell's fortieth birthday?

Linda: Terese Edell . . . wanted us to come. When we got there, we were exhausted. The sound equipment died during the performance. [But] we were well received. We sang "Jubilant Song," a choral piece by Norman Dello Joio—exciting and far above our previous expertise.

⁴ GALA Choruses is an international alliance of 170 gay and lesbian men's, women's, and mixed choruses. GALA Choruses produce a choral festival every three years. www.galachoruses.org

Beth: [Other] “most memorable performances?”

Linda: [S]inging “Moon” in Miami [with the Miami Gay Men’s Chorus]. People in the chorus were crying. I got that with “Jubilant Song,” too.

Beth: In some of the classical and popular songs, you played with gender. When lesbians were singing, it gave the song a whole new meaning.



Photo by Jan

Atlanta Feminist Women’s Chorus Director Linda Vaughn directing a rehearsal. (Charlene Ball Papers, manuscript # W102, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.)

Linda: I would change lyrics occasionally, which was fun.

Charlene: There was a Brahms song, “I Send You Greetings,” a love song to a woman by women, because we were singing it. When we were performing at Southside High School [Fall concert, 1990], two women sang love songs to each other; another woman sang a raunchy song.

Linda Vaughn Leaves

Beth: The April 10, 1993, program announced that Linda would be leaving the chorus as Director. Linda resigned after the spring concert of 1993. She had been director for twelve years.

Linda: 1993. I wasn’t diagnosed yet, but I was sick. I thought I had done as much as I could. I announced it a year in advance. In retrospect, that was not a good thing to do. When it got to be a hundred voices, every week became a struggle.

Charlene: The times had changed. By then [the 1990s], there was no longer that sense of a united lesbian community.

Beth: We got older. Priorities changed. We were making life decisions. Were we going to have kids? Buy a house? We were thinking about establishing ourselves as adults.

Judy: We were having rehearsals sometimes two or three times a week.

Chancey: [G]oing to Florida, going to Cincinnati. [A] lot of people joined before or after those large events, like the March on Washington. We were a hundred-plus voices by then. Rehearsals were more complex. Our reputation . . . was building across the country. It’s one thing to create a beautiful sound from thirty untrained singers, but to create that sound when you have over seventy-five untrained singers is quite another.

Beth: After Linda, Rev. Glenna Shepherd was Chorus Director (1992–93). Robert Glor was Interim Director and then Director from September 1994 to July 2000. Eileen Moreman was Director after Robert.⁵

Final Thoughts

Linda: There are lots of things I miss. The whole energy that is forever gone. You have people who never knew about or

⁵ Shepherd’s dates are from her resume, <http://www.deaturucc.org/about-us/leadership/rev-glenna-shepherd/employment-experience-and-education/>. Robert Glor’s dates are from Eileen Stone, President of the AFWC for several years.

experienced this movement. Now there are many outlets for music and many different role models.

Beth: How did being in the chorus change you?

Judy: It was a profound sense of community. The experience of singing regularly does something nice to you. I felt like I was a part of something bigger.

Chancey: I can remember walking up the E Cong steps. I could feel the stress leaving my body.

Charlene: The Chorus helped [me] to be more in the world. It gave me creative inspiration.

Beth: I have a copy of the speech that Linda delivered to the chorus when she was leaving.

Dear Wonderful Chorus:

As I think back on what being with this group has meant to me, some events come to mind....

—Our first performance at the Acme Theatre with 100 screaming women in attendance

—A jam packed E Cong with an enthusiastic rendition of Dolly [Parton's] "9-5."

—The first Southern Women's Music Festival and a sizzling hot Mary, Carolyn, and 50-voice chorus rocking . . . the 1008+ mainstage crowd to "Sisters are Doin' it."

—The return flight from the '87 March, when you could see on our faces the importance of what we had just accomplished—

—A chorus member's joyous tears after her first concert—

—Washington, '93 on the Kick Off Stage . . . —

Your presence in this chorus has affected me in ways that can never be duplicated. I thank you for your hard work, great music, wonderful spirit, and endearing love. . . .⁶

CRESCENDO, THE OLDEST LESBIAN CHORUS STILL SINGING IN THE SOUTHEAST

Sage Morse

Crescendo was founded in August 1991 as the Tampa Bay Gay Women's Chorus, and made its debut at the Tampa Bay Gay Men's Chorus' holiday concert that year. The driving idea behind its founding was to co-host GALA (Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses) in 1996. It was soon clear that there was a need for a lesbian chorus in the area, and in 1992 it became Crescendo: The Tampa Bay Womyn's Chorus. The mission statement has been modified over the years, but it states: "Founded on lesbian and feminist-centered values, Crescendo: The Tampa Bay Women's Chorus is an inclusive women's chorus committed to the performance of music and activities that inspire, educate, and unify." The vision statement further clarifies: "To give voice to the desires and dreams of all people who seek to co-exist in a world of unity and kinship." Sunny Hall was the founding Artistic Director. It is now the oldest lesbian chorus still singing in the Southeast.

With the gay men's chorus, Crescendo co-hosted the Tampa Bay Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in its beginning days. The festival has grown to become the largest film festival of its kind in the United States.

In addition to performing one or two major concerts each year as well as several smaller community events, Crescendo has produced local concerts of Sweet Honey in the Rock, Cris Williamson and Tret Fure, Cris Williamson, Lea DeLaria, Nuru, and Suzanne Westenhoefer. In 2009, they performed with Cris Williamson. Community outreach has included such activities as Adopt a Highway, Paint Your Heart Out, and songwriting workshops for the women of the local spouse abuse shelter. Proceeds from recent concerts go to support local organizations dedicated to eradicating abuse in all its forms. The chorus also

6 Excerpts from Letter to Chorus from Linda Vaughn (n.d.), AFWC Records, W-100, History of AFWC, 1988-91, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta.