

WOMEN'S FESTIVALS KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

It's been at least a decade since the death knell began to sound for women's music festivals. Comics started making jokes about the demise. Authors and filmmakers began to produce histories about women's festivals at a furious rate.

It's no wonder. The nation's two founding women's music festivals, the National Women's Music Festival and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, each draw fewer attendees now than a decade ago. Longtime festivals like New Mexico's WiminFest.

But this cloud of dwindling numbers and fallen festivals has an exciting silver lining. Many organizers see a newly invigorated, increasingly aware generation of women now discovering music festivals. "There is absolutely a new movement in the twentysomething crowd," says Lisa Vogel, co-founder of the 33-year-old Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which draws about 4,000 today, compared to a historic high of 8,000. "As our size has shifted, the women who are coming are women [are]...interested in things that are independently organized. There's definitely a politic, a radical feminist politic, being rebirthed."

In Laytonville, Calif., home of the tiny Northern California Women's Music Festival, organizer Linda Stonestreet sees the same thing happening. "We had some young women last year and the year before that attended that were in their early 20s, and they were just in tears because they were overwhelmed by the experience." Stonestreet said she was inspired to start her festival in 2003. "I just thought 'Wow, this is a part of our culture that's dying, that could go the same way as women's bookstores, and just drop off the face of the earth and not be relevant.'"

Stonestreet and anyone else worried about the future of women's festivals should spend some time talking to Laurie Haag of the Iowa Women's Music Festival, or Sharman Petri of the Houston Women's Music Festival. Petri took over the Houston festival from founder Shirley Knight in 2007—like Stonestreet, to continue a tradition she felt had grown essential to her community. Remarkably, Houston had continued for 12 years with no sponsor support.

And in Iowa City, Iowa, Haag continues to shape a tradition she started 14 years ago after being inspired by the National Women's Music Festival. Now about 700 women and men annually attend the Iowa City festival.

Ironically, the Iowa City festival has a lot in common with the first annual Los Angeles Women's Music Festival, put together over six months last summer by Miria Jo and Gayle Day.

Both festivals illustrate what may be the future of women's music festivals: an integrated audience (both male and female) expressing feminism through empowerment of female musicians rather than workshops or discussions. The 50 mostly local female artists drew a crowd of 2,000 to the First Annual Los Angeles Women's Music Festival last August.

Proceeds funded animal rescue groups, and the array of booths included a version of the alternative healing area of massage and other pampering, but the festival was as much an informal job fair for musicians as a concert. "This was about the music industry, not just the fan experience," explains Miria. "Our goal was to really support the female performers."

Much of the audience consisted of music industry types, including talent scouts, record executives and publishers. While the organizers would have liked a larger crowd, they proudly point to some tangible results: One festival performer received an endorsement deal, another a spot on a national television show, and several others earned bookings. — *Christine Hawes*



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