

# Trouble in Paradise

## Michigan Women's Festival Bans S/M, But the Controversy Rages On

by WICKIE STAMPS

"Why would I pay \$185 to go to a place that for most lesbians is a sexual candy store, but when it comes to me, they are basically telling me to check my sexuality at the door?" asks S/M lesbian Marla Stevens, referring to the 15th annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which will take place Aug. 15-19. "Once I walk into the festival," Stevens quips, "I'll have the privilege of putting my clit on hold and attending workshops where other lesbians tell me how my sexuality is oppressing them."

What Stevens — and hundreds of other lesbians — are talking about is the new anti-S/M policy that was hatched this winter by festival organizers. In a statement dated Feb. 1, 1990, festival owners said that they have a problem with "the S/M gatherings that have taken place in recent years in sharp disregard for other womyn attending the festival." The policy asserts that "acting out S/M activity in an open-air environment infringes on other womyn's right to move freely and safely without fear or horror." The mandate is not printed in the festival brochure but was sent to a majority of the festival's 500 paid and volunteer staff. The workers are expected to enforce the decree.

"People at Michigan have been trying to get the festival to make a policy about sadomasochists for years," explains singer Alix Dobkin, who has been a performer at the festival since its inception and has been on staff there since 1982. "There needed to be some common sense, but there wasn't because these sadomasochists, by their very nature, just have to push something as far as they can possibly go and get as much attention as they possibly can."

"They weren't satisfied," Dobkin charges, "with just keeping quiet and going off where nobody could see them and doing their party thing. No, they had to be totally visible and be in everybody's face."

They forced this confrontation."

But Susan, who requested that she be identified by a pseudonym, believes the festival organizers were pressured into establishing an anti-S/M policy. "There is a very small, frenetic group of women at Michigan who are the Anita Bryants of the feminist movement," says Susan, who attended the festival for six years but states that under no circumstances would she return to the event. "They are extremely vocal and terrified and don't believe in free expression and communication."

"The owners of the festival are too responsive to these crackpot minorities," Susan continues, "and instead of looking at things in a measured way, they bowed to pressure. The women in power, who started fairly neutral, became the allies of the vocal pro-censorship minority."

One of the festival's producers, Lisa Vogel, contends that she had no choice but to establish a policy to curtail S/M activity at the festival. "We are really trying not to take a position on S/M," Vogel insists. "Our role as producers of the festival is to create a shared, safe community space. The main thing that we are offering women is that they can walk anywhere on this land and be safe and not be subjected to something that is going to trigger absolute horror."

### A LESBIAN NIRVANA

Unearthing the facts that led to the festival's anti-S/M policy was like hopping into the trenches of a war zone. All but a handful of interviewees feared retaliation from other lesbians. The leatherwomen often broke down into tears. Many of the women outspoken against S/M who were contacted refused to be interviewed. Anonymity and off-the-record comments were standard requests. Vogel would concede to an interview only if she could approve her

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quotes before publication.

But discussions of the festival haven't always evoked such anger and fear. For the 6,000 attendees, most of whom are lesbians, the Michigan festival — the oldest and largest of over a dozen yearly women's festivals — is their home, the heart of their culture. Each year, lesbians from around the world travel to the festival grounds, known as the Land — 650 wooded acres privately owned by Vogel and coproducer Barbara Price. The Land is surrounded by Manistee National Forest in northern Michigan, situated approximately 20 miles east of Lake Michigan.

For five days, festivalgoers attend hundreds of workshops and over 36 musical and theatrical events. For the majority of the women who attend each year, the festival is an erotic lesbian paradise. "Nudity is virtually a dress code at Michigan,"





SHOSHANA KOTHAIZER

stand on S/M at first."

Informally, festival organizers had dropped hints that S/M women should camp and play in the Twilight Zone—the most isolated camping area on the Land. These were "the go-do-it-in-the-bushes years," says Martha. Although some S/M women opted for the Twilight Zone, the location was inaccessible to S/M women with disabilities. And because it was a general campsite area, playing there was in direct conflict with their principals. "We don't play in the general camping areas, because we can't make that consensual for those around us," explains Martha.

### CLASH AT MICHIGAN '89

Tension reached a breaking point months prior to last year's festival when a statement, written by anti-S/M lesbians calling themselves SEPS, was disseminated across the country. The statement was a call to action against lesbian sadomasochists attending the 1989 festival.

The authors of the SEPS letter, writers Julia Penelope and Kate Moran, asserted that lesbian sadomasochists have a "warped sexuality" and "thrive on violence." The statement, which demanded that lesbians "actively challenge and make [sadomasochists] uncomfortable," mentioned tossing firecrackers into the midst of a play party but then said that because S/M lesbians would enjoy this violence, the SEPS would probably not do this. Further plans, which the authors encouraged be kept clandestine, were to be discussed at an upcoming conference.

Similarly, Vogel believes that S/M activity has no place at the festival. "Historically, this group of S/M women have not been real cooperative," Vogel argues. "We asked them not to come together in group scenes in community space, and they refused. If the only basis these S/M women have for

their participation at the festival is to do these public scenes, Michigan is not the appropriate place for them to be. They should organize their own festival."

As the 1989 festival swung into full gear, the visible members of the S/M community were deliberately made uncomfortable. According to several members of Women Hedonists Into Pain (WHIPS), a lesbian S/M group that organizes exclusively at the Michigan festival, on day one, S/M women were greeted with blatant anti-S/M signs posted in the outdoor toilets. Then graffiti appeared in the form of anti-S/M slogans framed with a skull and cross bones.

WHIPS members who camped in Bush Gardens, a general camping area, immediately ran into trouble with festival coordinators, who accused them of illegally opening a closed fire pit. The coordinators also told the WHIPS members that because they were sadomasochists and other women at the festival were afraid to come near them, they were blocking other women's access to a limited number of festival fire pits. Negotiations with a festival mediator began immediately.

The play space chosen by the S/M women in 1989 quickly turned into a war zone. By the first party, security was two women deep—one row of festival security and a second row of S/M women acting as guards. Walkie-talkies crackled constantly.

As night fell, S/M women on their way to the party were jeered and booed and had flashlights shone on them, several WHIPS members report. Some S/M women turned back, went to their tents, changed into "vanilla" drag, and then, after crossing the security lines, entered the play tent and reoutfitted themselves in S/M gear. Other S/M women arrived at the play tent in tears. At the play tent itself, bands of four or five women would sporadically circle the tent chanting, "Nazis! Nazis!" at the leather-

women inside.

According to WHIPS members, the festival negotiator—with security accompanying her—entered the tent and told women that the party was not a sanctioned festival event and that any festival worker who participated in the party could lose her job.

### BREAKING OFF NEGOTIATIONS

By early Saturday evening, the fourth day of the festival, negotiations broke off. "We were told that the festival would no longer negotiate during the festival itself," explains Martha, who acted as one of the WHIPS negotiators, "and they still would not recognize any sanctioned play space. So there was nothing left to negotiate." At this point, approximately 150 leatherwomen, who had daily touched base at the WHIPS campsite to get updates, decided to proceed with their leather show and party.

"To us, the festival was disallowing our sexuality," Stevens contends. "So we decided that our protest would be to have the party anyway, for by simply practicing our sexuality, we would violate their unreasonable regulations. If they found that civil disobedience, then so be it."

Dobkin and the festival organizers were not impressed with this strategy. "The S/M women have a lot of investment in being martyrs," Dobkin charges. "They like identifying with sexual radicals, but in my opinion, they are sexual reactionaries."

"There are women who do drugs, and they are not supposed to do that at the festival, so the S/M women should just quit doing what they do for five days," Dobkin asserts. "After all, you can't commit violence against women, because that is one of the policies of the festival."

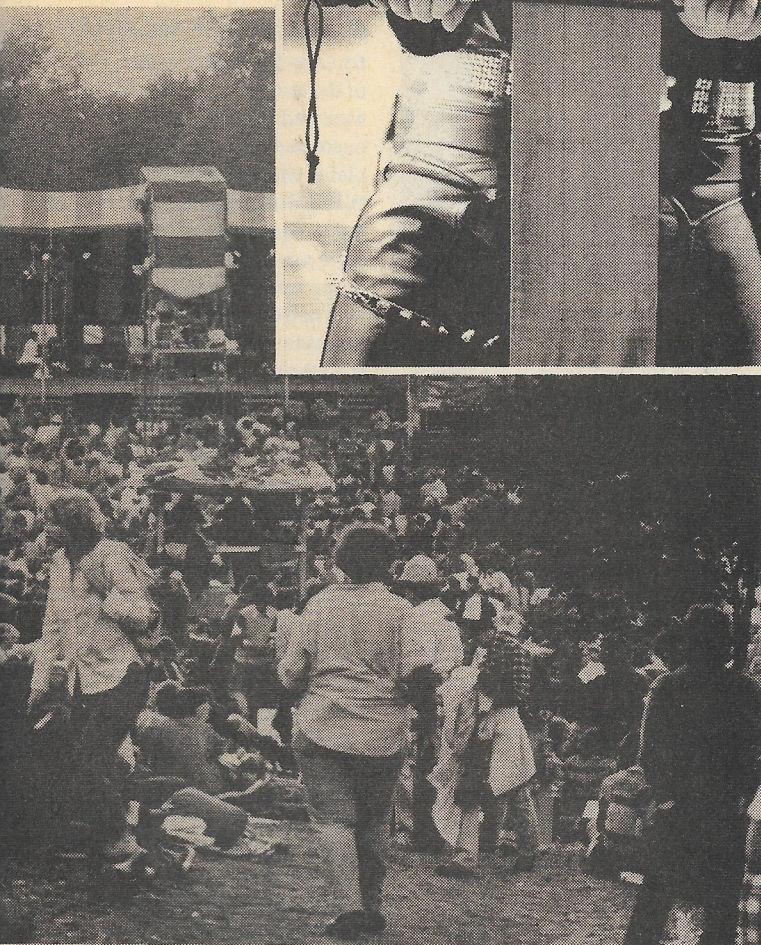
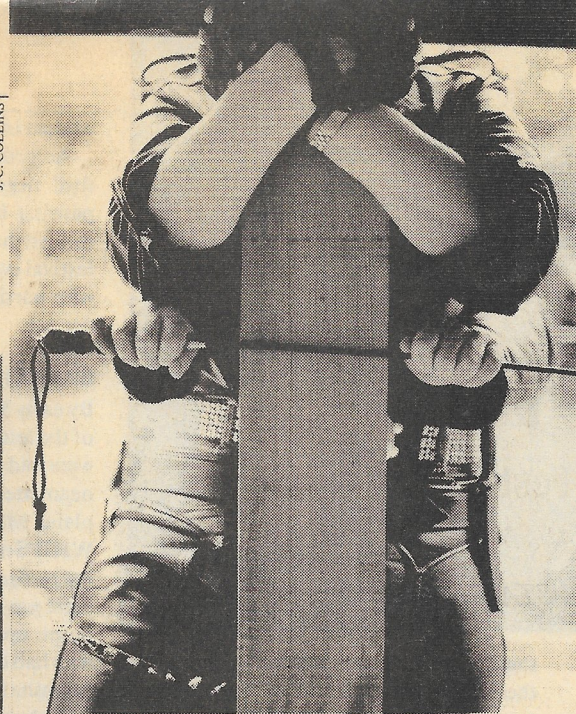
On Sunday, before the festival was over, festival workers, in what participants say was an unprecedented move, took down the workshop tents. They started with the one the S/M women had been playing in.

As of this year, Michigan has now joined ranks with other women's music festivals, such as the New England Women's Musical Retreat and the Gulfport Mississippi Festival, in limiting S/M activity. "But rest assured," says a WHIPS leader and negotiator who wishes to remain anonymous, "there are a whole group of women who will be attending this year's festival who are determined to play and celebrate their own brand of eroticism. Last year, we really tried to be good girls and got kicked in the teeth. The producers think that this year's policy is the final word, but I can guarantee that is not the case."

The sex wars continue—even in paradise. ■



J.C. COLLINS



KATIE NILES

Explains Peg, an S/M lesbian who has been attending the event for years, who asked to be identified only by first name.

At the festival, a lesbian can drink in the sight of thousands of women embracing and kissing. As she strolls through acres of campsites, she'll see signs clearly demarcating nonmonogamous and singles camping areas. And she can pursue her interest in the nightly singles parties that are attended by 500 to 600 lesbians. Needless to say, the camps are legion.

But while most lesbians can openly feast on their sexuality at the festival, the lesbian sadomasochists are compelled to fast. Their play parties—a cornerstone of S/M culture—are now forbidden at the festival.

## HISTORY OF CONFLICT

Over the past six years, S/M activity at the festival has become increasingly controver-

sial, and the tension between S/M lesbians and their opponents has mounted to a frightening and possibly dangerous pitch. Feminists in the militant antipornography movement have been the most outspoken against lesbian sadomasochism, claiming that S/M is violence against women.

An antipornography march at the 1984 festival protested against a lesbian who advertised for an actress for her lesbian erotic video. According to several sources, one S/M lesbian who was standing on the sidelines was "stepped on, spat on, grabbed, and poked" by some antiporn marchers.

For years, rumors—overheard in showers and food lines—of impending protest against S/M women have rolled over the Land. "In 1986 there were rumors that the antiporn women were going to storm my table because they had decided that I

was abusive to my lover," says S/M lesbian Victoria Baker, a craftswoman who, along with 150 other craftswomen, peddles her wares at the festival.

Martha, a leatherwoman and long-term festival worker, concurs. "By 1988 we no longer felt safe leaving our tents unattended, for there were consistent rumors that our campsites were going to be trashed. 'So we started bringing walkie-talkies to communicate between campsites and our play space. They monitor us, so we monitor them.'"

Antipornography workshops have grown at a steady pace. By 1986 there were daily workshops against pornography, and last year, in what participants say was an unprecedented move (and in violation of festival policy prohibiting announcements from performance stages), a workshop specifically against S/M was announced from the stage.

## BITTER SPLIT OVER PLAY SPACE

As antiporn and anti-S/M activity increased, so did the S/M community's visibility. Play parties, which have been happening for years but were smaller and confined mostly to tents, began to blossom.

"Our play parties function very similarly to lesbian bars," explains Stevens. "Not only is it where we can socialize, but it is where we teach each other, disseminate safe-sex information, and comfort and support each other's coming out."

In 1984 S/M women—who have no sanctioned play space at the Michigan festival—started playing on one of the unoccupied performance stages called the Acoustic Stage. "We felt it was out of the way, and we could secure the few pathways," says Peg. Adds Martha, "We put security around the stage, not to keep non-S/M women out but to give them a choice to not go if they didn't want to."

Vogel, however, has a different perspective on the S/M gatherings at the stage. "We have open community space, and the S/M women, some of whom are exhibitionist in nature, surround a space and tell you you can't walk in there," Vogel insists. "This is in contradiction to the safe space of the festival." Festival organizers tolerated the S/M women's use of the Acoustic Stage for several years, but in 1988 festival security came down and tried to break up the party.

For years, S/M women and the festival organizers have Ping-Ponged over the S/M women's need for an area of their own. "Basically, we have been loosely negotiating with the festival for years," says Peg. "We just wanted to find a good location to play that wouldn't disturb others. But the Michigan festival didn't want to take a