

AUDRE LORDE

Interviewed by Jorjet Harper & Toni L. Armstrong

Audre Lorde is one of the most eminent Lesbian poets of our time. She has been widely published in feminist periodicals, and among her books are 'The Cancer Journals' [Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1980], a chronicle of her mastectomy and its aftermath; 'Zami: A New Spelling of My Name' [The Crossing Press, 1982] which Lorde calls a "biomythography"; 'Chosen Poems Old and New' [W.W. Norton and Co., 1982]; and 'Sister Outsider' [The Crossing Press, 1984], a collection of essays and reflections. Her most recent book is 'A Burst of Light' [Firebrand, 1988]. Born in New York City in 1934, Lorde has taught for many years at Hunter College. 'A Burst of Light' contains journal entries from 1984 through 1986, in which Lorde describes coming to terms with liver cancer. In June of last year Lorde had surgery for ovarian cancer. She now makes her home on the island of St. Croix. Hurricane Gilbert -- the worst storm in recorded history -- hit St. Croix before spinning into the island of Jamaica, and Lorde was without power for two days--but it was restored just in time to complete this telephone interview.

HOT WIRE: YOU'VE WRITTEN ELOQUENTLY ABOUT YOUR BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL AGAINST CANCER.

AUDRE LORDE: And I'm still surviving! My coming to St. Croix is part of my survival kit--it's part of my battle to remove myself from the kinds of stress I was under in New York, and to seek another kind of living.

I've been spending winters in St. Croix for the last couple of years because of my health, and I just have not been able to deal with New York winters. So since I taught in the fall term--and was finished in December--I would spend the worst part of the winter here in St. Croix until the weather got better in New York. And I became very involved in the women's community here, and the whole life of St. Croix--there's something that feels very native, and it's like coming home in a sense. I've always had a particular connection to the West Indies, to the Caribbean, and it feels really good. I really moved down here permanently after the ovarian surgery last year. I became in-

volved in a new kind of mistletoe therapy called vysorel. It's a type of mistletoe that can be administered intravenously and in infusions. I spent three months in Berlin in an intensive program of infusions. I am in good shape; I am on maintenance dosages now, and I go back to Germany about every six months to have certain tests done and to consult with my health practitioner. I am still teaching at Hunter, but I'm on medical leave for six months. I may go back to New York for the term that I teach and then come back here, but this is where I would like to make a base. I'm a New Yorker and I'll always be a New Yorker, but New York City is a city for young people. I need a different pace of life, and this feels to me to be something that heals me.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

I'm working on a novel, and since I've never written a novel before I'm doing it the way I do most things--which is learn as I go. It is about a Black woman who is a Lesbian, has children, and is really attempting to survive in the late '60s and early '70s. I think good fiction--and I said this before, when I was doing the biomythography--good fiction needs to reflect the knowledge that we acquire through the lives we live, and through art attempts to project that into a space beyond our actual living and construct situations that I think highlight the things we know.

YOU'VE WRITTEN "POETRY IS NOT A LUXURY"--LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT POETS AS LEADERS. IN MAINSTREAM CULTURE, POETRY AND POETS ARE PERIPHERAL, YET IN THE LESBIAN AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS, POETS ARE VERY CENTRAL, AND IN FACT SOME OF OUR BEST THINKERS ARE ALSO OUR GREATEST POETS. AND IN REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS IN GENERAL, POETS ARE THE ONES WHO SPEAK THE TRUTH.

I think it comes from a long and very noble tradition. Certainly this was true in Africa, certainly it was true in Greece, it's

certainly true among the American Indians--that those who know how little we have to lose, those speaking the truth, those are the poets. You can measure within any society, I believe, how far that society is prepared to go to follow its vision by how highly it esteems its poets. Poetry is more than just an indulgence, more than just a pretty way of using words, it is really the skeleton architecture of our lives. In poetry we dare to evoke the feelings, to envision a future that has not yet been--and one of the reasons I feel that there was such a flowering of poets within the women's movement is for this very reason, that we had--and I hope many of us still have--a vision of the kind of future we wish to bring into being, and which helps guide our choices and our motivations of action. For me, one of the most distressing signs I've had concerning the women's movement was that period recently when it seemed as if there was a turning away from poetry, when poetry was considered once again not to be central to our lives--and it is, you see, because when we turn away from touching the poetry in our lives and from using it, however painful it may be, we turn away from possibility. We turn away from constructing something totally different from what has existed; we turn away from, I feel, the ability to use what we have to create something that has not yet been. I think it's really important to make the distinction that poetry is not a withdrawing from the Now--it is a total engagement of the Now, with the object of creating Someday.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IT IS SO DIFFICULT FOR PEOPLE TO SPEAK THE TRUTH? WHY IS IT SUCH A STRUGGLE TO SAY WHAT WE REALLY THINK AND FEEL?

I think it's because the stakes are so high, the pretended stakes that they offer us are so high for being silent. And they're not real. Silence--well, I hate to keep repeating myself, but it's true--silence never bought us anything. It doesn't make us happy, it doesn't make us safe, it doesn't make us beautiful. It makes us nothing except perhaps more comfortable, and our oppres-

sors more comfortable. But the lie has always been traditionally that if we do not speak what we know to be true, then we will be allowed to take part in the fruits of whatever the imperfect systems are that we live in. For the disenfranchised—and by that I mean Black people, old people, women, children—for all of the disenfranchised people of society, this is patently not true. But still we buy the lie that silence will protect us. To speak the truth is to demand of oneself that we act. I mean, I cannot honestly say, "Hey, this is intolerable, this is terrible" and then not *act* in some way to change it. So it's much easier to say, "Well, this isn't so bad..." and in that way we protect the status quo. That's what it's about.

RECENTLY I'VE TALKED TO WOMEN WHO ARE RADICAL LESBIANS WHO WILL NO LONGER CALL THEMSELVES FEMINISTS, AND I HAVE TALKED TO STRAIGHT FEMINISTS WHO SAY THAT LESBIANISM IS REALLY NOT IMPORTANT IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT.

Lesbianism isn't important in the women's movement? Oh, isn't that interesting. That's returning to a position of the early '70s. I thought all of that stuff was laid to rest in '75. No? Okay, well, I may not be the best person to ask this, and I'll tell you why. People, including my daughter, sometimes tell me I'm trapped in words—I certainly consider myself a Lesbian feminist mainly because when I have to identify myself as such—which is whenever it becomes necessary to underline those parts of me—I find no reason to change my language. It's not that I don't think the word "womanist" is a great word for example, or whatever you want to call it—it's just the same as I've never seen the need to change my name Audre Lorde to anything else. I see no reason at this point to change the fact that I'm a Lesbian feminist. *However*, what that means, and whatever names people choose to call themselves, is less important than what they are doing. How are they putting into practice the things they say they believe?

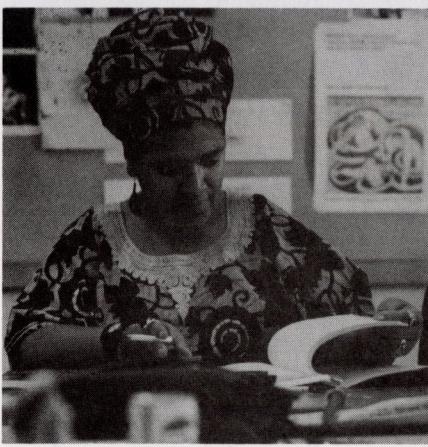
This is underlined for me again by being here. I'm going to a meeting in November of the Caribbean Association of Feminists, which is going to examine the position of feminism in the lives of Caribbean feminists today, but in a very pragmatic, practical way. In other words, what are we doing in our different dialects? This is what is so important. Sometimes I think the white women's movement, or the American women's movement, gets so bogged down in 'what do we call ourselves?' that they totally lose



Audre Lorde at twelve years old with her mother, 1946.



1969



1971

sight of: What are you feeling and thinking; what are you *doing*? How, in other words, are we putting into practice that power that's been supposedly gathering for so long?

There are many, many women who don't think twice about what they call themselves, and who certainly don't use the word feminist and don't even use the word Lesbian, though they are deeply involved in female support relationships, in loving and woman-identified societies. I've learned a lot the last couple of years in traveling, just in looking at women—and in particular at women of Color—around the world dealing with our lives. None of us live single issue lives. Lesbians and feminists should be the title of whole long lists of things in which we involve ourselves, all the way from driver, communicator, educator, warrior, whatever and wherever our lives take us. Those words should not be the be all and end all; there should never be a period or even a semicolon after that. There should just be a colon and then an explanation.

YOU'VE SAID THAT "MAKING GENERIC IDENTITY FROM MANY CULTURALLY DIVERSE PEOPLES ON THE BASIS OF SHARED OPPRESSION RUNS THE RISK OF PROVIDING A CONVENIENT BLANKET OF APPARENT SIMILARITY UNDER WHICH OUR ACTUAL AND UNACCEPTED DIFFERENCES CAN BE DISTORTED OR MISUSED." THAT APPLIES, TOO, WHEN WE CLASSIFY OURSELVES AS LESBIAN OR FEMINIST. BUT ON THE OTHER HAND WE NEED LABELS TO BAND TOGETHER.

I do not want to throw them out, because it is very necessary. I said for example, in the '60s and the '70s it was absolutely vital—"I'm a Lesbian, Black, feminist." It was crucial. And sometimes it is still crucial; I got a letter from a woman who is desperately trying to develop the strength to continue her writing, and she talks about what it means to have someone who stands up and says "Yes, I'm a Lesbian feminist." This is absolutely necessary. If there's one Black woman ever

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ABOUT THE WRITER: Toni Armstrong, Jr. is involved in special education in a pseudo-administrative capacity within the public school system. She is also a performer, publisher/editor, avid moviegoer, and collector of vampire literature.

within the sound of my voice who needs to know, yeah, it's possible, then I've got to do it.

But that doesn't mean that that's the end of it, you see? Once upon a time I used to say, "Hey, I'm not going to call myself anything—I am who I am. I don't want to be categorized; I don't want to be labeled." This was my position in the late '50s and in the beginning of the '60s. In a sense what that came out of is still true, but what I saw then was how necessary it is for people to *have* labels sometimes. But you don't stop there; once you define yourself you go on looking at what those definitions and identifications mean—how do you put them into practice in your life? How do I make real for people what I believe I am? So if someone wants to look at me and say "That's frog behavior; we'll call her frog," that's cool—just as long as you don't stand in my way. There's something very arbitrary about titles; what is not arbitrary is that we recognize how titles function and what they're for. We come back to what I've learned about the use of the word "Black" in communities around the world of women of Color. It is very affirming that we identify ourselves as Black—that there are women who I would not think of as Black who identify themselves as Black. At the same time, we must make sure that that does not blanket our differences, that we don't believe that since we all have this same title that we are all the same—because we're not. And if we don't look at the ways in which we hyphenate these identities, then we run the risk of having the differences detonate at a crucial moment, when what we are needing to do is not examine differences but move together.

LOOKING AT THE WOMEN'S MUSIC AND CULTURE MOVEMENT, HOW WOULD YOU SAY THAT APPLIES? PEOPLE ARGUE WHETHER IT SHOULD BE CALLED "WOMEN'S MUSIC" OR "LESBIAN MUSIC," AND THAT WOMEN WHO ARE INVOLVED IN WOMEN'S MUSIC SHOULD COME OUT ON STAGE AND SAY THAT THEY'RE LESBIANS.

That makes me so impatient. What do you mean, 'women should come out as Lesbians on stage'? The function of culture in any community, in any society, is to enrich us, is to make us more who we wish to be—to make me more who I wish to be.

BUT THE ARGUMENT IS, WHEN YOU SEE A WOMAN ON STAGE IN A WOMEN'S MUSIC CONCERT OR A WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL, WHAT

HELPS TO MAKE YOU MORE OF WHO YOU ARE IS WHEN THEY CLEARLY SAY WHO THEY ARE; AND IF THEY DON'T, YOU MIGHT AS WELL GO TO SOME OTHER CONCERT.

That is very true, except there are women who do that, and suppose there is a woman whose work you really, really use in your life who *you* would call a Lesbian, and maybe she doesn't use that word... maybe she does in fact call herself 'frog.' If she calls it 'frog' and you call it 'Lesbian', are you going to not avail yourself of it? Now, if she were to say, "Hey, I don't want to have anything to do with Lesbians," then that immediately is something very different. If she is homophobic, if she is heterosexist, if she is in any way anti-Lesbian, then she's got to be called on that. But if she's using different words for what she's doing...This is where I am right now. I think about my mother, and how, my goodness, can you imagine my mother, bless her heart, who has just passed on now, can you imagine her calling herself a Lesbian? But I think of what I learned from her, I think of the tradition of empowered women, I think of the woman-love, and what could be more deeply Lesbian, what could be more woman-identified than that? I think of women I know here who have a whole culture that is totally woman-centered who have never used the word Lesbian.

WHY WOULDN'T THEY?

Because they have seen it as a white person's word from a different culture that doesn't describe who they are. As I said, when I use the word 'feminist' I use it because I think it is important, but there are women who I would call feminists who would never use the word. I have worked with women who are deeply committed to women, who are highly motivated—who would conform to everything I would mean when I say feminist—but they wouldn't even call themselves womanist, they wouldn't call themselves anything. They say "I am who I am..." So it's fine.

BUT CLAIMING A SHARED IDENTITY IS PART OF BUILDING A POLITICAL MOVEMENT.

Yes, it is part of building a political movement; you're very, very right. I think, though, that it is possible to build a political movement with people identified around very specific goals to begin with. And very gradually you make for yourselves maybe another designation, I don't

know, or you come to accept one. I'm saying that the term is important, but it is not as important—I'm trying not to be simplistic, and I hope I'm not sounding as if I'm contradicting myself. Terms are important, titles are important, *names*—I have said this over and over again all my life: *it is crucial that we name ourselves*. Once we've named ourselves, we can move on—the name is not the end. And if the name that we have acquired in the process of naming ourselves begins to stand in the way of what we need to do, then maybe we need to expand the name or change the name, but we don't give up the process of naming.

PROBABLY THE TERM 'WOMEN'S CULTURE' IS PROBLEMATIC BECAUSE IT CAN MEAN SO MANY THINGS TO SO MANY WOMEN.

Yes! When I listen to Black Rose or Tracy Chapman or Shirley—who is a Calypso singer here—do I call them part of women's culture? Black culture? West Indian culture? Caribbean culture? But their music is affirming and enriching—I don't want to cut myself off from it, from listening to it.

WELL, TRACY CHAPMAN IS ACTUALLY A CASE IN POINT. A LOT OF WOMEN IN WOMEN'S MUSIC ARE CONCERNED THAT WOMEN'S MUSIC IS GOING TO BE USED AS A WAY FOR PERFORMERS TO GET EXPERIENCE AND TO DEVELOP AN AUDIENCE, AND THEN ABANDON THAT AUDIENCE WHEN THEY MOVE INTO THE MAINSTREAM--IF THEY CAN.

I see what you're saying. It is important that there be those of us who stand up and say, 'I am who I am.' But you've got to give people the right to move at their own pace, in the same way you've got to give me the right to stand up and say "Hey, I am a Black Lesbian feminist." I've got a right to do that, and I won't read or I won't go anywhere where I don't have that right. By the same token you've got to give women the right not to, because it's not yet their time. When you say women's music is afraid of being used, of course it's being used—culture is to be used. The highest thing we can be is to be of use.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO YOU COULD GO TO A WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL KNOWING THAT ALMOST ALL OF THE PERFORMERS WERE LESBIANS, AND YET THEY WOULD NEVER SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT.

AND YOU WOULD GET THIS FEELING OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: WHY AREN'T THEY SAYING WHO THEY ARE? THE SITUATION HAS IMPROVED A LOT RECENTLY BECAUSE A NUMBER OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WRITING ABOUT IT.

But you've got to make a distinction between Black and white women, between white women and women of Color. You must. For women of Color, whether we're musicians, whether we're poets, no matter what, particularly for women who are creative, we are part of many many communities, all of which are under pressure. We are fighting on many many fronts. This is a different situation from a white woman who stands up and who realizes that her sexuality is the primary front on which she battles. I think it's an erroneous belief, because all women in this American society need to recognize that it's not altruistic connections that make them part of many of the battles, but survival connections—but nonetheless I think this is a consciousness that is not very advanced yet. For women of Color it is apparent in

CULTURE CAN FACILITATE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN WHITE WOMEN AND WOMEN OF COLOR?

I think that we need to open ourselves to each others' knowledge; we need to listen very carefully to each other and to experience the parts of each others' lives that we do not share. This is why we talk about culture making us more than we wish to be. I could never have your experience because we have lived different lives, but I can listen to your music, I can read your poetry, I can recognize that there are feelings that we have that are very very much the same even though they are about different things; I can learn from your experience. But since I cannot *live* your experience—and experience is not a question of what we think, it's a question of what we feel—we need, through our culture, through our music, through our poetry, through our art, to give those pieces of ourselves realistically and authentically in ways that the other—however we define the other—who shares our goals can take in.

I said that about Angelina Grimke because someone asked me, in Lansing, Michigan, why do I always identify myself as a Black Lesbian feminist, and I said, "Because if there's one Black woman within the sound of my voice who needs to know, I do it." And then I told her about Angelina Weld Grimke, who was a Lesbian but we never knew it—I certainly never knew it—and when I was a teenager before I left home, she was living and dying in isolation in a rooming house in Harlem. It would have been wonderful that there were young Black women who needed to know that she was a Lesbian, and it would have really served me a great deal. And that's why I do what I do. I think from the letters I get from Black women all over the country and sometimes all over the world, it is important that I identify myself as a Lesbian. It helps to give them strength, it helps to let them know they are not alone. This is not contradicting the other thing I said, though, that if there is a Black Lesbian who needs to do her work and not identify as a Lesbian—well, maybe that's part of what I need to do, to take the flack for her.

I get letters from women all the time, but they're not women you would know. I just got one from this sister from Stockton California. It's all about her seeking to get power, and what it meant for her to read my work. I get these letters a lot. On the other hand, for example, in 1977 I went to MLA and Barbara Smith stood up in a meeting and said, "I'm a Black Lesbian feminist literary critic..." and it was just so wonderful. I was in the audience, and I thought she was so beautiful and so brave. If she hadn't done that, it would have been probably years before I thought about writing *Zami*—but that's the first time I thought, "hey, I've got to write *Zami*."

I have paid a lot to say the things I've said; I've also been incredibly rewarded for them. There are other women who are paying a lot to do different things. I beg you to judge them by their products. Now when Black women are actively heterosexist in their speech and in their work, that's really damaging and shortsighted, and that needs to be altered or to be turned around. That's something that's got to be moved on, but a woman who does not choose to identify herself, I've really got to give her space. As long as what she's doing has worth and meaning to other Black women, it is useful in our struggles.

AT THE 4TH INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST BOOKFAIR, YOU SAID THAT "NO WOMAN IS RESPONSIBLE FOR



JEB

Kitchen Table Women of Color Press Collective, 1982.
From left: Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gossett.

our everyday lives that we are embattled not only because of our sexuality, not only because of our sex, not only because of our class, not only because of our color, but because of *all of these reasons*. And those of us who are getting old, we realize we are also embattled because of our age. I think that these are important considerations.

HOW DO YOU THINK THAT WOMEN INVOLVED IN WOMEN'S MUSIC AND

IN A BURST OF LIGHT YOU TALK ABOUT ANGELINA GRIMKE: "WHAT IT COULD HAVE MEANT IN TERMS OF SISTERHOOD AND SURVIVAL FOR EACH ONE OF US TO HAVE KNOWN OF THE OTHER'S EXISTENCE, FOR ME TO HAVE HAD HER WORDS AND HER WISDOM AND FOR HER TO HAVE KNOWN I NEEDED THEM; IT IS SO CRUCIAL FOR EACH ONE OF US TO KNOW SHE'S NOT ALONE..."

ALTERING THE PSYCHE OF HER OPPRESSOR, EVEN WHEN THAT OPPRESSOR IS EMBODIED IN ANOTHER WOMAN." YOU ALSO TALKED ABOUT THE PARADOX OF BEING OPPRESSED AT THE SAME TIME WE LIVE IN A COUNTRY THAT IS OPPRESSING OTHER PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD. IF WE'RE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR CHANGING THE PSYCHES OF OUR OPPRESSORS, AND YET WE ARE IN AN OPPRESSOR SOCIETY OURSELVES, WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THIS?

We are not responsible for changing the psyche of our oppressors; we are responsible, though, for fighting that oppression, for altering the oppression. The question of altering the psyche of our oppressor becomes pertinent when that oppressor has something that we share, i.e., like another woman, like another Black person. We are responsible for altering our oppression; for changing the circumstances of our lives and the constructs under which we live. I may be able to do that by altering your psyche, but altering your psyche is not my primary function. I know that you are a woman; I would like not to have to meet you in the open battlefield, toe to toe, with a machete—I'd like to not have to kill you in order to alter the conditions of my life. But if I have to, then I must. I cannot back down simply because you are a woman. It is not my responsibility to alter your psyche; it is my responsibility to alter your actions. The question of being both oppressed and oppressor—I have learned a great deal traveling as a Black woman. I am a Black woman in a society that defines rights as male and white. I am also a citizen of the most powerful country in the world. Now, if as an African-American I do not stand to that—in other words, recognize the fact that there are powers I have that a woman in Bangladesh does not, that a woman in Burundi does not have although she is Black and she is maybe a feminist, there are things I can do that she cannot do. If I do not accept responsibility for my power, then I am throwing it away; then I am giving it to both of our oppressors.

It is very important, I feel, for women to recognize that. Being women will not save us from being responsible for using our power; being Black women will not save us from being responsible for using our power. Because we are oppressed, we must be very careful not to believe that gives us carte blanche to take advantage of the privilege that results from oppressing others.

Women's music is a real case in point, because we use incredibly sophisti-

cated machinery, even down to these clever little Walkmans that we listen to our cassettes on; every single woman who listens to one of those cassettes, or runs a computer—and I do, and perhaps you do—needs to *know* what happens in the sweatshops which are womanned by women in Asia. We need to know what happens in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. We need to know what that expensive machine that we're listening to our music on means in terms of eyesight of the women who are going blind assembling microchips. And if we



1974

don't, then we can't talk about women's music or feminist culture. I would love to see an article in *HOT WIRE* about that; instead of me on the front page, a group of Malaysian women who work to assemble the parts of the machines that we use to make women's music possible. Women's music is a very potent force for change; the women who are involved in women's music are also a very potent power for change, and we need to see the connections we have to women all over the world.

YOU'VE WRITTEN ABOUT THE EROTIC AS POWER. LESBIAN THERAPIST JOANN LOULAN, WHO'S WRITTEN *LESBIAN SEX* AND *LESBIAN PASSION*, SAYS SHE FEELS "BUTCH AND FEMME" IS AN ESSENTIAL PART OF LESBIAN SEXUALITY, AND THAT WE ARE WITNESSING A "BUTCH-FEMME RENAISSANCE."

If we go back to the whole paradigm of the early '50s and the '40s when what it really meant was a male/female dichoto-

my that mirrored all of the kinds of distortions shown in the larger male/female society—no! I cannot accept the fact that retrogression is progress. If on the other hand you're talking about the genuine differences we all carry around inside of us, the polarities and the extremes and the contradictions that each one of us represents, and how the things lie down inside of us and how we play them off against each other in a relationship back and forth—that feels to me to be something different. That feels to me to be looking with closer and closer scrutiny at what the actual mechanics of relating between two people are. Again, I would say if it's a question of a name, a question of the words you use, that words come often loaded with their own history, so I hope that people who take part in saying "butch and femme" are not simply taking the old definitions. If they are, I think that's very destructive and very retrograde. If they are, on the other hand, redefining what butch and femme means, then I say great. I am not wedded to the use or non-use of words; I am wedded to not having them be used lightly and not having them distorted.

I said it about being Black: it's not our destiny to fulfill white America's mistakes. And it's not the destiny of Lesbians to fulfill the mistakes of the sexist world. It's not our destiny as women to relieve male mistakes, and we are going to do it unless we begin to—here we come right back to where we started, the question of what vision and poetry is all about. Poetry, music, constructs visions of what has not been; it doesn't show us the path to go backwards into our past. We need to know our past, we need to accept and learn from our past, and we need to move forward.

The function of women's music, like the function of poetry, is to make us more who we wish to be, and therefore more powerful in terms of fighting the battles we all share. And we cannot take one without the other. Most of what American culture has done, and American learning, has been to make us receivers, passive absorbers. One of the functions of women's culture is to activate us. I'm less interested in the fact that you believe the same things I believe as I'm interested in getting you off your duff and putting yourself behind what you believe—and I'm willing to meet you. I believe we won't be too far apart. ●

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FAITH NOLAN

*"I'm a working class,
Black lesbian.
In everything I do
I have to fight for that
voice to be heard."*

Faith Nolan is a folk-blues singer, guitarist and songwriter. She is a folk-blues musician in the widest sense of the form; not only does she play guitar, sing, and write her own songs, she also plays blues harp, bass, banjo and tambourine, and is constantly experimenting with other instruments from drums to berimbau. Of course the folks-blues is so much more than instrumentation—it is also moment, event, subject; the poignant expression of the soul; the truth, the telling on ourselves and the world; the telling about your trouble; the telling about your bad ways; the calling down about the oft-times meanness of everyday life. "It's about everything," Nolan says. "It's about reality, love, being broke, struggling for justice, lesbian rights, Black rights. It's about working people's lives, and always has been. When I sing the blues I'm trying to share that everyday emotion. You see, the blues is a durable form. It was made for such expression."

Faith Nolan was born in Nova Scotia, on Canada's East Coast. Life for Blacks in Nova Scotia was not—and still isn't—an easy thing. Black Nova Scotians are known for their plain talking and their cutting sense of humor. No exception, Faith brings these to her music in her pointed lyrics. Contrary to popular myths, slavery did exist in Canada, and similarly to Black Americans, Black Nova

Scotians still live under unequal conditions. Nolan grew up in both Halifax, Nova Scotia, and in the working class Cabbagetown in Toronto in the '60s. Her commitment to representing the life of Black and working class peoples in her songs is a conscious commitment, and one that is grounded in her own life experience, which—along with the experiences of women she grew up with—fill her songs.

Her music is her political work. Nolan definitely has an explicitly social and political agenda. And she remains firmly rooted in her race, class, and gender as she composes her lyrics and music. Like the lyrics of the song "Regina" on her album *Africville*:

*Regina why did you kill that man
the policeman took your statement
he said there's no defense
for killing a white man
it just don't make sense
you sit in the jail cell
for trying to save your life
because you're a black woman
because you're not white
Regina why did you kill that man*

The story is taken from the real-life experience of one of Nolan's childhood friends, and Nolan doesn't pull any punches about the racist and sexist reali-

ties in our lives. Nor does she pull any punches about how class operates, or about the rights of working class people. Her song "Box Factory" on *Africville* tells of her experience working in a factory at nineteen:

*I worked in a box factory
from six a.m. 'til three
only nineteen and in tip-top form
and I be tired every morning*

*We'd go to lunch for a half hour
the boss would use our time
to lecture us on power
He said you'd better move faster
or your job would soon be gone
He'd lie and drone on and on*

*There's no union in a sweatshop place
There's no union to help me fight anyway*

Whether it is about Black rights or gay rights, she is unequivocal in her call for liberation. She is a socialist and a feminist and a gay rights activist, and she employs her music in bringing these issues to her audiences. Her reggae-style song "Divide and Rule" (from *Africville*) has virtually become the anthem for progressive struggle in Toronto.

In performance, Nolan is pugnacious
continued on page 57

ABOUT THE WRITER: Dionne Brand is a poet and writer living in Toronto.

