

'Women's music' – then and now

By Susan Wilson
Special to the Globe

Flick on your favorite Top 40 radio station or TV music video channel. Pat Benatar is belting out, "Stop Using Sex as a Weapon," while two other rock megastars, Annie Lennox and Aretha Franklin, are roaring, "Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves." Wander into your favorite Boston live music club and check out the band personnel. Sure, the standard "girl singers" are still there. But they've been joined by "girl" drummers, bandleaders, songwriters, managers and sound engineers. What more appropriate name, in fact, for one of the area's hottest, top-drawing groups than "Girls' Night Out." They're seven of the most accomplished musicians in town. And they're all women.

It's likely that most of these female artists would use the terms "musician" or "women in music" rather than "women's music" to describe what they're doing. Still, that controversial and often misunderstood entity called "women's music" helped create a consciousness and a precedent that made all these women's new careers, new images, accomplishments and refreshing lyrical excursions possible ... and acceptable in America of the '80s.

But what of the original movement? Whatever happened to "women's music" in its older, purer form? It's still there, to be sure. But if there ever was a consensus about what "women's music" is – who performs it, who listens, what its purpose and content are – that agreement is gone now.

A decade ago, when "women's music" was younger, cohesive and militant, pinning it down was simpler. It was a progressive, musical-cultural phenomenon that grew out of the burgeoning women's movement. It was music by women, for women and about women's lives, an alternative to what was perceived as the sexist, man-made, commercial music of the day – and a means of support and solace for women changing their roles and images. Its following



The "Sisterfire" concert in 1982 drew a crowd to Tacoma Park, Md.

SUSAN WILSON PHOTO

Holly Near, above, and Aretha Franklin deliver music with a message.



and leadership were predominantly white, middle-class, lesbian and feminist, and its heroes were folk or acoustic-music oriented singer-songwriters like Cris Williamson, Holly Near, Margie Adam and Meg Christian.

Among its earliest anthems were Meg Christian's humorous, lesbian, first-crush tune, "Gym Teacher," and her tongue-in-cheek taunt to homophobes:

WOMEN'S MUSIC, Page 67

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