

**Kendall Hale**

**NEW HARMONY SISTERHOOD BAND**



*What seemed like a little thing to do—play music in a feminist band—now has turned into one of the most exciting phenomena of our lives. We have watched as women’s culture has grown from a few attempts to today’s present mushrooming of books, songs, movies, and plays. There is real emotional satisfaction in making women’s music, but that is not all there is. It is important for me to realize that we are not simply entertainers, but that we are creating the strength for a movement that has the greatest potential for change this country has seen in decades. I am firmly convinced (yes, I have read political and economic theory, Mr. Leftist) that women’s culture is revolutionary, and, best of all, it is accessible to large numbers of women.*

*-Marcia Deihl, New Harmony Sisterhood Band  
(All Our Lives, A Woman’s Songbook, Diana Press, 1976)*

For some sixties youth, music itself *was* the revolution. Others listened to the charged messages of folk-rock singers and then took to the streets in protest. As for me, when I was an infant, my mother sang songs written by Mormon pioneers crossing the plains in covered wagons:

*Put your shoulder to the wheel, push along.  
Do your duty with a heart full of song.  
We all have work, let no one shirk.  
Put your shoulder to the wheel.*

On every family car trip, we harmonized America's favorite folksongs, including many by Pete Seeger and Woodie Guthrie. My childhood connection to music continued with the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1962, Mom sang along with Negro spirituals on a record of Civil War songs. At sixteen, I played Bob Dylan and Joan Baez on a guitar, with the only beatnik in town. After the Beatles, music was like food: without it I felt dead.

In the early 1970s, I heard both the Chicago and New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Bands. They blew my mind. I knew then that I wanted to combine feminism with my childhood folk singing and classical violin training. At the time, the three seemed incompatible. But then, I began listening to Holly Near and Chris Williamson, both powerful feminist musician/song - writers making the national scene. Then, in 1973 when I was studying left-wing politics at Cambridge-Goddard, an alternative graduate school, I heard women singing *Custom Made Woman Blues* and *Don't Put Her Down*, by Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerard, a country/bluegrass duo:

*Well if she acts that way,  
It's 'cause you've had your day,  
Don't put her down,  
You helped put her there.*

Immediately I started jamming with these women from school. After practicing a couple of months, we sang for our first audience, at a women's party, and were cheered enthusiastically. We were amateur songwriters and musicians, but our voices matched a call from a growing sisterhood. It was the beginning of connection between the feelings, hopes, and dreams of the women's movement and what became the New Harmony Sisterhood Band.

In our early gigs, five of us fumbled with our instruments and voices, but our lack of technique was overridden by our message. The passionate wild energy between the band and our fans filled me with love for performance, in contrast to the scary violin recitals of my girlhood.

At the time, we could not have imagined how inspirational our performances were or the tremendous support we would receive from hundreds of feminist women and men over the next seven years.

“Men don’t have to define their songs as ‘men’s songs’ because almost everything that exists in this culture was created by men,” we announced to all our audiences.

After we played and raised funds for women’s celebrations, women’s centers, and women’s studies programs, we were sought by activists from all over Boston. We played free for union drives, striking workers, liberation movements, and early nuclear power protests. In 1976, we recorded with Paredon Records, a record company under the cultural wing of the Marxist-Leninist newspaper, the *Guardian*, and two years later, we traveled south on a tour we created ourselves.

Five of us met weekly for two hours of outrageous, irreverent fun. In an eclectic folk/bluegrass style we sang angrily about being born female. It would go like this:

“It ain’t me babe, noo, noo, noo, it ain’t me babe,” Deborah is imitating Bob Dylan in a nasal drawl, twanging her acoustic guitar.

“Down with cock rock!” pitches Katy, gyrating her hips.

Marcia howls beside her on a mandolin, “ And I’m tired of fuckers fucking over me!” She curtseys. “And this ladies and gentlemen is a new musical genre. Live from a real lesbian living room in Boston!”

We all get hysterical as Marcia’s mandolin leads us in chorus:

*When I’m walking down the street and every man I meet says,  
‘Baby ain’t you sweet’  
I could scream-----.  
But although those guys are sick and think only of their prick,  
It ain’t sweet I feel;  
I just feel good and mean---*

*They whistle for me like a dog and make noises like a hog.  
Heaven knows they sure got problems I agree---.  
But their problems I can't solve  
'cause my sanity 's involved,  
And I'm tired of fuckers fuckin' over me.*

*-Beverly Grant, 1971*

I yell when it's my turn to present a new song, "Attention, attention." Tapping my violin bow on a music stand, I roll up my bare leg and croon into the microphone verses I finished at two that morning:

*Went on down to the Two O'Clock Lounge,  
looking for a quick day's pay,  
From packing meat on the assembly line—  
Now it was me who was prey.  
Can you dance baby, baby, sweet baby, Can you dance?"*

Katy and Pat stare at me in disbelief: "true feminists" do not shave body hair. But I had just been laid off from a local meat packing plant after working only six weeks. My unemployment checks were running out, along with my small savings account. Believing it might be possible to make some easy money until I could refocus my organizing strategy, I'd shaved my legs and blindly walked into a "den of sin," as my grandmother would have described it.

"Did you really go into that sleazy, topless joint in the middle of downtown?" Deborah asked. "And by yourself?"

"Yes and yes," I groaned, "And I stayed just long enough to be shocked at the working conditions those women put up with! Thick smoke under dim lights and creepy, Mafia-looking men scared the shit out of me. After some weirdo guy watched me walk across the stage in a bathing suit, I freaked out and ran!"

Our New Harmony member Deborah Silverstein spoke for all of us in her 1974

copyrighted song, *All Our Lives*”:

1. *The men listen and then say, I'm sympathetic babe.  
I know what you women have been through all your lives.  
But I'm not the one to blame, I didn't write the rules to this lousy game.  
But you've got nothing for us men already on your side.*

#### CHORUS

- Well you want to see some sweetness, not just streams of angry words.  
You really dig the music but the message is too tough.  
It seems we've forgotten about happiness and love.  
You think we've said what we have to say but enough's enough.*
2. *Well, I understand their point, they don't think we should exploit  
The first chance we've ever had to fight back all our lives  
We're told to soften our approach, let some tender feelings show,  
And give our sympathizers equal time.*
  3. *Well, I've only this to say, I look forward to the day  
When women won't have to fight for an equal chance all their lives,  
And the purpose of our songs is to move this fight along  
Until there's room for more than just the struggle to survive.  
It's not that we've forgotten about happiness and love  
But until the times have changed, it's not enough.*

The New Harmony Band became a family for all of us, with caring support, as well as pain, competition, egotism, and disagreement. The product became a unique blend of my classical fiddling, Deborah and Katy's lead and back up guitars, Marcia's mandolin, autoharp, and recorder, and Pat's base. With our music reverberating through our bodies, into the furniture, out the windows across tree limbs skyward over Cambridgeport, we were a true sisterhood, with a song in the heart of the Boston women's movement.

New Harmony was my link to the women's movement, but within the band we also

experienced many of the ideological struggles and political line battles playing out in the left. Often we nearly came to blows over absurd shades of difference. Labels were everything. I represented Marxism-Leninism, Deborah became the socialist feminist, Katie Tolles, a libertarian, Marcia a feminist anarchist, and Pat Ouellette a lesbian feminist anarchist.

Squeezed into Marcia's tiny living room, between her piano, gas heater, and TV set, we were surrounded by plastic toy animals, dolls, old high-heeled shoes, bizarre off-color comic strips, and black-humor postcards. This paraphernalia was hanging, sitting, peering, and pasted on the refrigerator, doors, walls, and end table. Together with Marcia's comedian personality and Deborah's horny dog, Timber, it brought relief to our emotional sessions of confessions and personal stories woven around class, race, nuclear power, and third world liberation issues. We debated the lyrics and message of each song.

We had come together to play women's music, but the question became, which women: middle class, working class, African American, Hispanic, gay? And which issues? Was it OK to sing a traditional women's song, or did it need to be feminist?

Before Pat joined, I was the only gay-identified woman to bring lesbian songs to heterosexual women. Ironically, when the band broke up, I was the only straight member. In 1974, we copyrighted "Unfinished Business," by I.M. Reluctant.

### *CHORUS*

*I've got some unfinished business, well I just want to say  
I've got some unfinished business to take care of today.  
Well I know what's on my mind, and I think that it's time  
To tend the unfinished business that we left behind.*

*Well they say that it's not natural.  
They try to make you scared  
To be a homosexual with feelings to share  
With a good friend who it's plain to see  
Is of the same sex that you just happen to be.*

*Oh, it's so easy to run, it's so easy to hide,  
It's too easy to find the ways to  
Not find the time,  
To dig my head out of the sand and  
Look for the words  
To answer the ones who say  
We're out of our minds.....*

I was constantly preaching to my band sisters: “We’ve got to sing about the oppression of poor and minority women too, not just privileged, white feminists like ourselves.” I wrote about capitalism and imperialism in songs about my jobs, union organizing, black women's battles, Puerto Rican freedom fighters and other issues new to the white middle class women's movement.

“Yeah, Kendall, but your lyrics sound like a political speech,” complained Katy. “Cut the rhetoric!”

“But she’s got the right idea. Gay women have been oppressed for centuries,” exclaimed Deborah. “No matter what their skin color or social class was!”

Within a couple of years, we created and arranged a song list linking historical figures like labor organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and pilot Amelia Earhart to the most burning social/political issues of our day.

Our Paredon record title “Ain’t I A Woman?” was taken from Sojourner Truth’s famous speech at a suffrage convention in 1851. New Harmony’s mentor from the Cambridge-Goddard program, Lanayre Liggera, put the powerful speech to music and we sang it for years at almost every concert. In their catalog promoting women’s music, Paredon said of our record:

*From the title statement taken from a speech by Sojourner Truth through songs about the frame up of Ella Ellison, the Joann Little prison rape case, and pioneer woman pilot Amelia Earhart, to songs about women in working class struggles, the strip mining destruction of mountain America, and songs about the painful process of self-discovery*

*and “coming out” for lesbian women, the words give voice to experiences particular to women but of concern and interest to all.”*

During two years that I worked as a welder in the Quincy shipyard, from 1976 to 1978, I continued to perform with New Harmony Sisterhood. I was living in two separate worlds, one on the performance stage, the other staging construction at General Dynamics. Often my voice was too hoarse from breathing welding fumes to sing, once causing us to postpone a recording session. At times I wondered if throat cancer would be my punishment instead of carpal tunnel syndrome, which plagued some welders. The band members, as well as my family, would have rejoiced at my leaving this “hell hole,” but I was in the grip of duty to Marxism-Leninism and the revolution came first.

At one point a *Guardian* interviewer asked me if I thought think the left had been slow to appreciate cultural workers. I replied:

On the left people don't believe to a large extent that cultural work is political work, and they don't really see it as a priority. Most of the party-building groups do not really appreciate the importance of how people relate to culture. Mass media and the music industry do control and powerfully influence people's emotions and thinking. Also, because our band is all women and sings about women, we have encountered a lot of sexism. Most of these organizations are male-dominated and have a weak position around the woman question as a whole. We've had people really trash us for being bourgeois feminists: Women's music could not be working-class music, because it was feminist.

Feminist was a dirty word then, as it is today. Many people, the left included, believed we were man-hating separatists. But women who loved themselves and their sisters were listening, and by the spring of 1979 our record had reached some feminists in Philadelphia. This led to other invitations to perform further away. We rented a van and headed south to Philadelphia, Richmond and Norfolk, Virginia, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Lexington, Kentucky. On our way to Norfolk we passed through Washington, DC, to join 70,000 demonstrators in front of the Capitol in the wake of the “Three Mile Island” incident. To convey

our support for the protest, we sang “No Nukes for Me” at a Norfolk coffeehouse the following night.

“We barely survived a melt down,” I breathed into the microphone.

“Shut ‘em down! Shut ‘em down,” a voice bellowed from the audience.

I continued, “We sang this song in Plymouth, Massachusetts, at one of the biggest anti-nuke rallies ever held against the Plymouth Nuclear Power Plant! Join us now in the chorus!”

*“No Nukes for me ‘cause I want my world to be,  
Free from radiation poison falling down on me,  
Those reactors that they’re building are a giant hangin’ tree, hangin’ tree,  
Don’t you build your hangin’ tree over me.”*

After our concert on May 8, 1979, the local *Ledger-Star*, wrote: “There are no leaders in the group. On stage, as they would have it in life, all are equal. They take turns speaking, and Pat Ouellette steps forward to tell names ‘so if you have any particular tomatoes to throw, you’ll know where to aim them.’ The words are angry, yet there’s a positive sound in their music, a hopeful note that-very slowly-things are improving.”

When New Harmony broke up in 1980, it was a traumatic divorce. At a time when I was most distant from my family of origin, Deborah, Marcia, Katy and Pat had sustained me through a rocky seven years of multiple lovers, communes, jobs, and political organizations. Belonging to a pack of wild women who howled at the moon and everyone else gave me the voice I’d always wanted. Singing from our hearts, we told stories that few people had ever heard. But underground conflicts, combined with different personal agendas, forced us to split up. Marcia wanted to take her music in a new direction. Katy and Deborah were rivals. Pat wanted to move to Western Massachusetts. It was the end, but I didn’t want to let go.

The women of New Harmony individually incarnated into many musical expressions lasting well into cronehood. At a summer solstice party in Jamaica Plain in 2004, I backed into one of those sweet old crones, watering a blooming tiger lily with a bit of spilled wine.

“It’s Marcia Deihl! I squeel at her through a mouthful of chips and salsa. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“No, I’m just twenty pounds lighter with grey hair,” She snorts back. “ I used to binge after every concert.”

Laughing, we embrace harmoniously, take the subway to Harvard Square, and sit down in Club Passim to remember this is where Joan, Bob, and our band sang of civilization and its discontent.

