

Women's Music in the Cornfields: The National Women's Music Festival in Champaign-Urbana, 1973-79



Kristin Lems, Musician and Founder,
National Women's Music Festival
Illinois History Conference, October 2, 2026

Fall, 1973
Our battle cry!

(*Daily Illini*
Nov 16, 1973)

**NO GOOD WOMEN
MUSICIANS ON CAMPUS?**

**WE'VE HEARD OTHERWISE!
AND YOU CAN TOO, AT OUR
WOMEN'S FOLK FESTIVAL**

Tonight at 8 and 10 PM

TOAD HALL — Fifth and Daniel

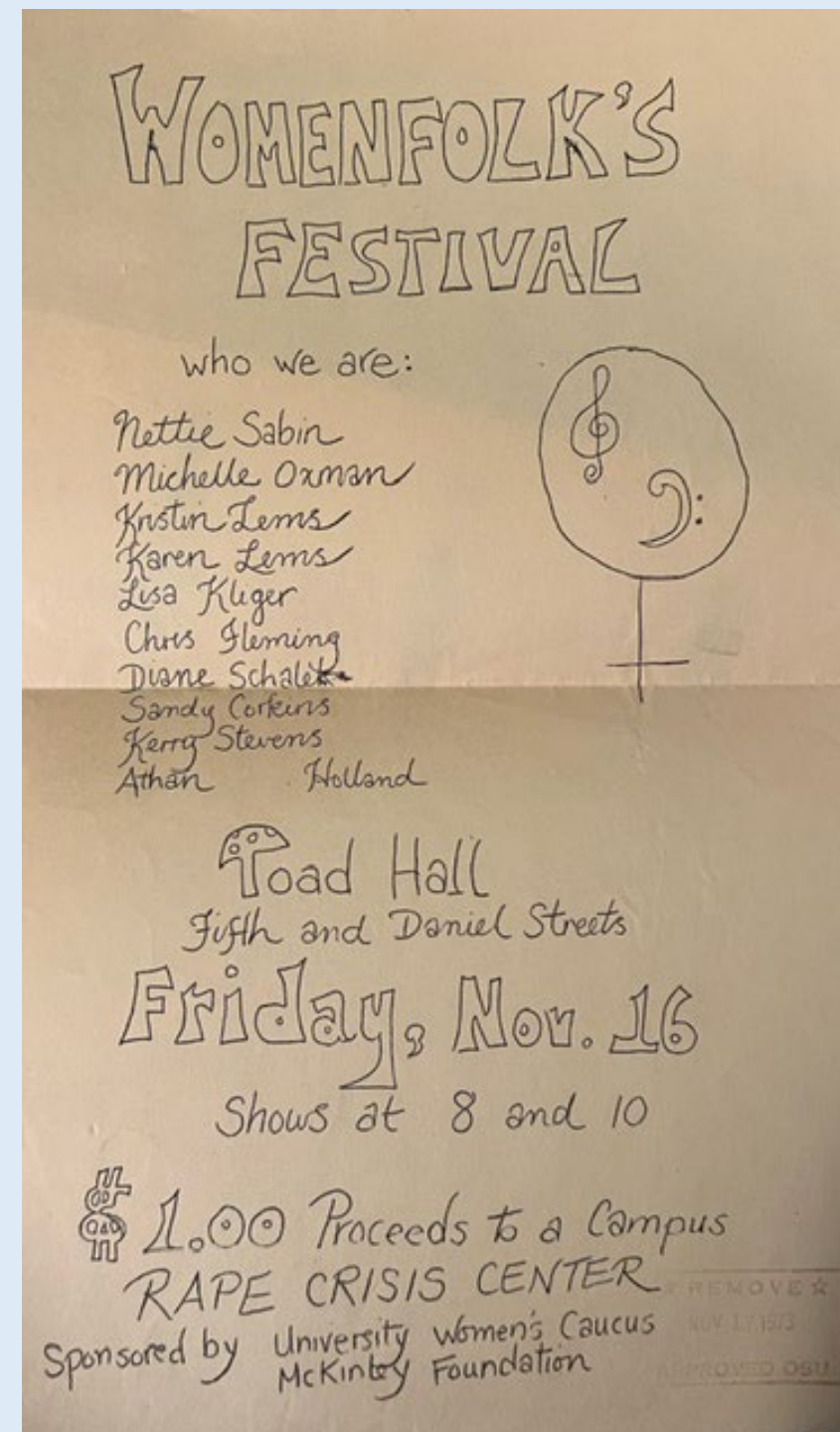
Admission \$1.00

All proceeds go to a campus rape crisis center

CHECK US OUT, PEOPLE!

sponsored by
University Women's Caucus
and The
McKinley Foundation

November 16, 1973
Handwritten poster
\$1 admission, 2 shows
Proceeds to newly formed
Rape Crisis Center



November 16, 1973

“Rather than preparing a show along the traditional lines, in which each performer hopes to outdo the other in “charisma,” the women have been cooperating on each other’s songs in all capacities.” –
Daily Illini, Nov. 16

November 16, 1973

Be heard at Women folk's Festival

By THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT ASSOCIATION STEERING COMMITTEE

Tonight at 8:00 and 10:00 PM is the Womenfolk's Festival being held at Toad Hall. This folk festival features all women performers. The purpose of the festival is twofold. Firstly to give the women involved a chance to be heard and a chance to perform in an all women's context. The performers in this evening's program have all had musical experience on and off campus. Rather than preparing a show along the traditional lines, in which each performer hopes to outdo the other in "charisma", the women have been cooperating on each others songs in all capacities.

A lot of women in town have felt discouraged from pursuing existing performing channels. Whether intentional or not, other folk festivals have been overbalanced by male performers. We conceive of this concert as the initial propulsion for what may be many such efforts. Since we ran the ads for the concert, a number of women have approached us who want to play classical music together, or read their poetry together, or share in their dance. We envision the possibility of a Champaign area rock group and perhaps a women's artists' union.

Secondly, and of the utmost importance is the fact that all proceeds are going to the Rape Crisis Center. The Center is being established to accomplish several purposes.



Soapbox

Firstly a hot line will be set up by February. The volunteers who answer the phones will be trained to meet the rape victim, make sure she sees a competent and sympathetic doctor; and to help in taking the case to court. Also the Center will be willing to counsel past rape victims. Anyone who is interested in getting involved in the Rape Crisis Center can come to meetings on Wednesday nights at 7:30 p.m. at the University YMCA. Also on Saturday at the University Place Christian Church a group from the Chicago Rape Crisis Center will make a presentation from 2:00 to 4:00 PM including a movie called "The Rape of Pauline." This is for women only because of a lack of space.

Please help support the Rape Crisis Center and women musicians in Champaign-Urbana by attending the festival tonight.

"Happiness is student power" was the most catching slogan emblazoned on the many banners and picket signs during the Berkeley student strike of December, 1966.

But, as college administrators know only too well, Berkeley and its rebellious student body is not an isolated phenomenon among the vast variety of American campuses. Far from being an exception, Berkeley has become the paradigm case of the educational malaise in the United States, and, in the last few years, that malaise has been transformed into a movement. Indeed, a spectre is haunting our universities—the spectre of a radical and militant nationally coordinated movement for student power.

Obviously the cry for power in and of itself is a vacuous demand. Student power is not so much something we are fighting for, as it is something we must have in order to gain specific objectives. Then what are the objectives? What is our program? There is much variety and dispute on these questions. But there is one thing that seems clear. However the specific forms of our immediate demands may vary, the long range goal and the daily drive that motivates and directs us is our intense longing for our liberation. In short, what the student power movement is about is freedom.

What do American students think of the educational institutions in which they live an important part of their lives? The most significant fact is that most of them don't think about them. While the last few years have seen a marked and dramatic growth in a new radicalism, we should not forget that

THE DAILY ILLINI

Friday, November 16, 1973

Women protest, set their own folk fest

By EV BASILE
Staff Writer

This weekend's Womenfolk's Festival is designed in part to give creative women musicians an opportunity to perform and use material that they have not had an opportunity to offer to an audience.

"The idea for the festival had been festering around for a while," Kristin Lems, organizer of the musical event, said. "It was only coincidental that the Red Herring had scheduled its folk festival for the same weekend. Being new in town, I didn't even know there was an annual folk festival, but since we had set the date, I could see no reason for changing it."

Lems said that the all-women folk festival would give female musicians who felt intimidated by other coffeehouses and their attitude towards women musicians a chance to perform in a more relaxed atmosphere.

"As far as I'm concerned, it is

somewhat galling to see Red Herring advertisements for their festival calling it a 'folk's festival' when no women are scheduled to play in any of the sets," Lems said.

There are numerous complaints from many of the women planning to perform tonight at Toad Hall criticizing this year's Red Herring fall folk festival.

According to Michele Oxman, who has played open sets at the Red Herring and attempted at one time to audition for a previous Red Herring folk fest, "This is the first time no auditions were held. In previous years, intentionally or not, the festivals have been 'rigged' by people voting only for musicians who were Red Herring hangouts—who just happened to be good in addition to being hangouts."

According to Geri McGill and Bill Murphy, both managers of the Red Herring coffeehouse, per-

(Continued on page 30)

Women's folk fest...

(Continued from page 22)

formers for the folk festival were chosen on the basis of technical instrumental proficiency and on the basis of audience rapport. According to McGill, only one woman who had played at the coffeehouse's open sets was considered qualified in both these areas, but when approached about performing, declined to do so in a formal set.

Another consideration in profit making musical events that McGill and Murphy brought up was billing performers who would "draw a crowd." Since no auditions were held, "because of hard feelings involved in choices of previous years," Murphy said, performers who were well known to the community were chosen to guarantee attracting a crowd.

According to Lems, who has played a set at the Red Herring, "There are definite vibes discouraging women in folk music—the Red Herring seems to be one of these places."

One woman who had no complaints about the Red Herring was Athan Holland: "As soon as Les Urban (a member of the group Appaloosa), found out I was in town, I had no trouble whatsoever getting open sets at the Red Herring. I feel that the Red Herring has turned out some outrageously talented musicians."

Proceeds from the women's folk festival will go to Women Against Rape (WAR), a group organizing a rape crisis center and a rape "hotline." The festival will feature the performance of "Women Walk More Determined," which was

Beginning of a huge cultural movement that lasted through 1979 – extensively reported in Daily Illini, News Gazette, CU Courier, Illinois Entertainer, and nationally!

First National Women's
Music Festival
May 28-June 2, 1974

SIX DAYS LONG!!



Full article by rock critic Ellen Willis
in the *New Yorker*, June 24, 1974

“Almost everything that could go
wrong did, and almost everybody
had a good time anyway.”

PAID MY DUES

Quarterly Journal of Women & Music \$1

VOL. I
NO. 3

KRISTIN

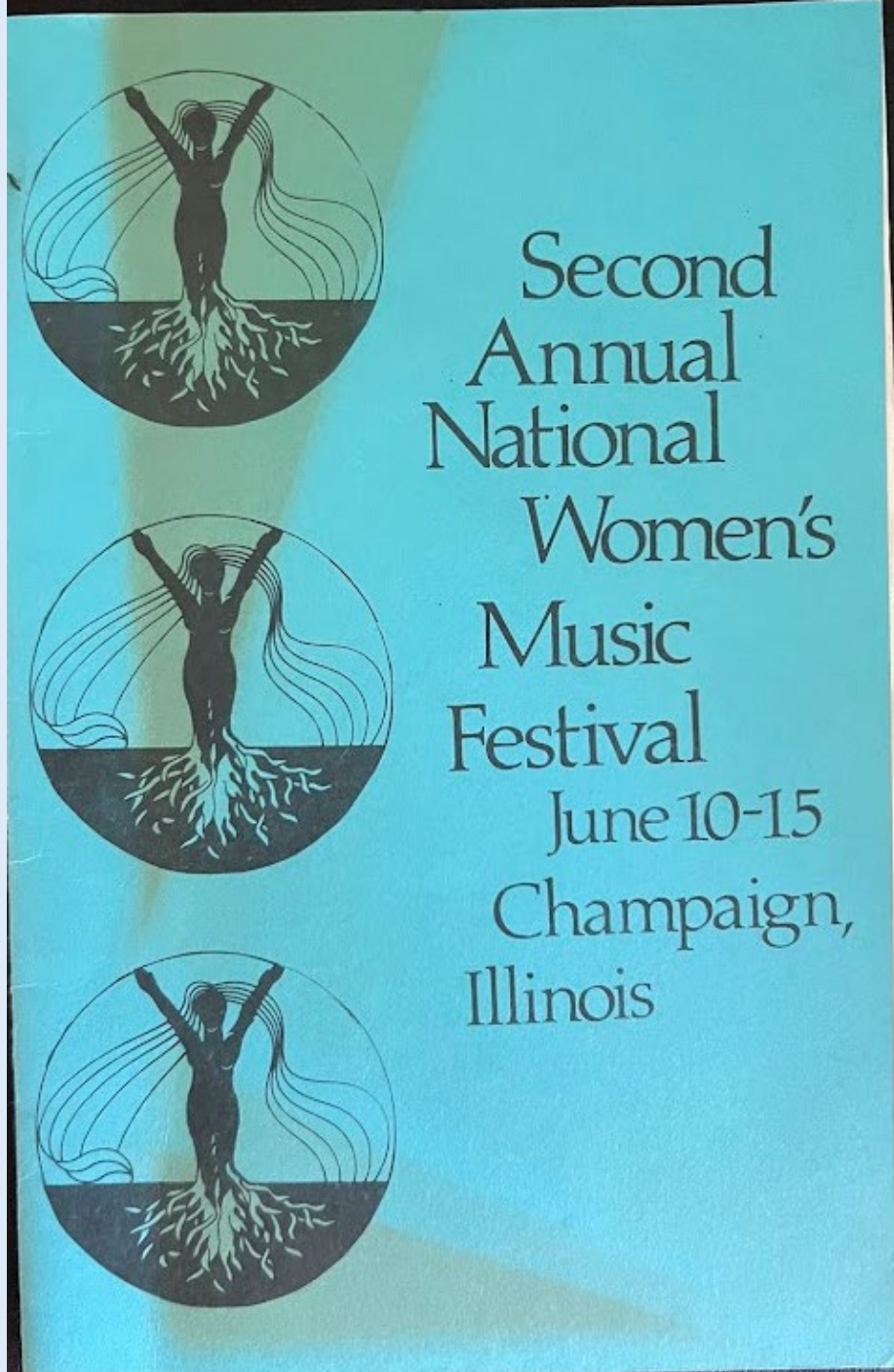
First National
Women's Music
Festival



First year of *Paid my Dues* Magazine

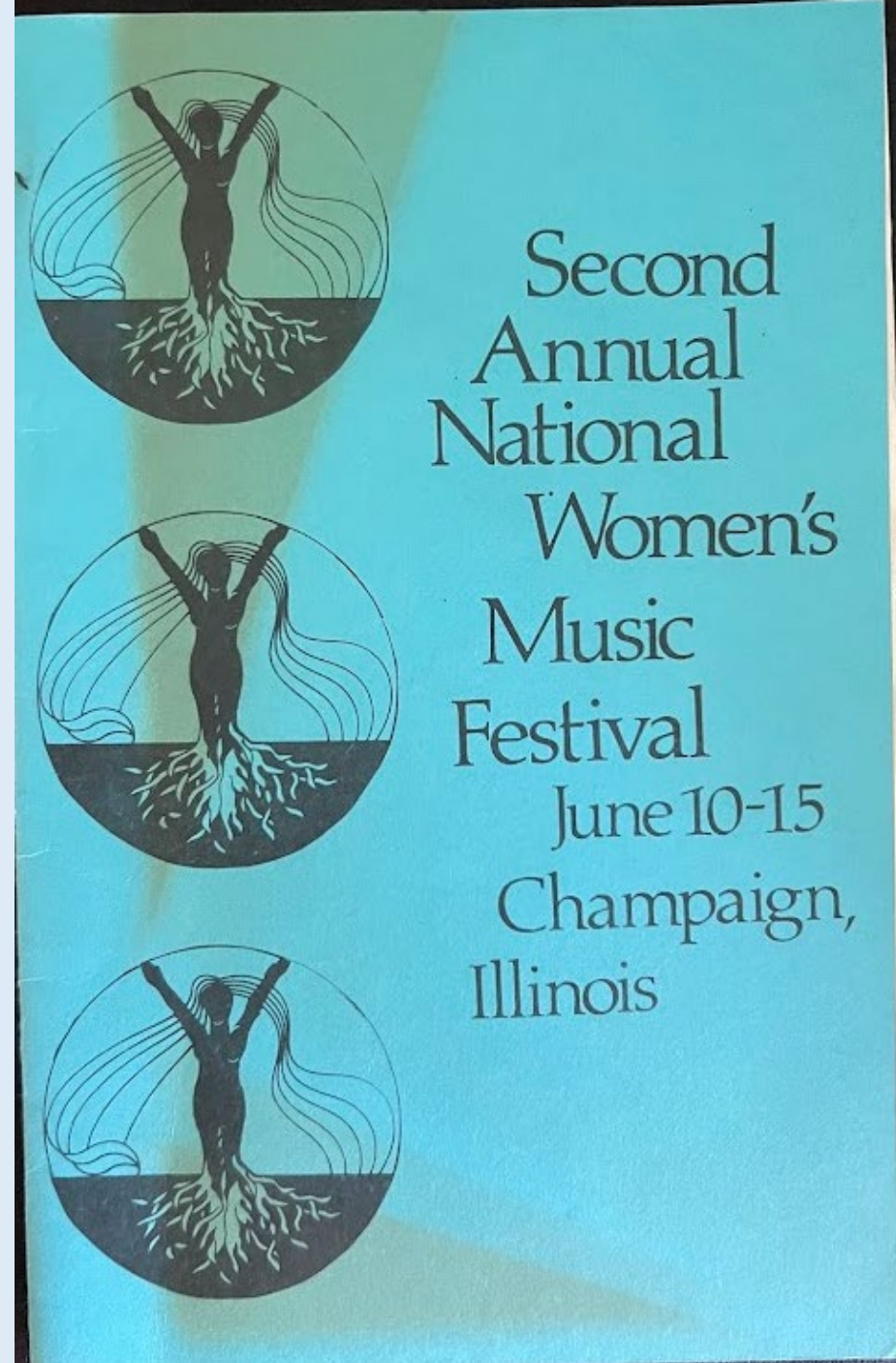
Issue #3 devoted to the First
National Women's Music Festival

Second National Women's
Music Festival
June 10 – 15, 1975



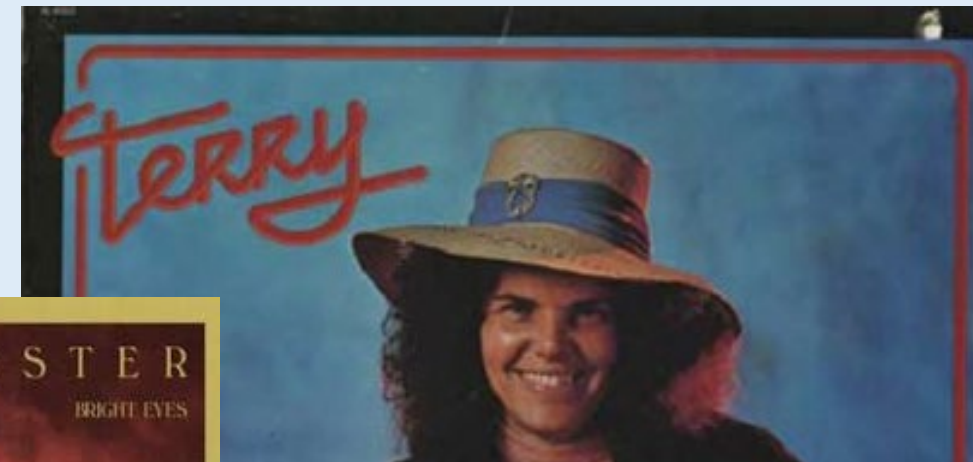
Covered by National Public
Radio's "Folk Festival USA

(tapes are still in the U of I
library archives – and need
to be digitized!)





2nd Festival
collective, on the
roof outside our
Illinois Union
office, which we
had for 6 years



Some better known women musicians attended the Second Festival - Vicki Randle from the Tonight Show, Melissa Manchester, Terry Garthwaite, and Bessie Burkes from the Georgia Sea Islands

Lynn Van Matre, 1975, review in *Chicago Tribune*

“The concept of ‘women’s music’ in fact, strikes even me, a practicing feminist, as naive and paradoxical”.

Georgia Christgau, *Ms. Magazine* article
about the second Festival, published 1975

“Despite pretensions toward building, as the brochure states, “a strong new culture reflecting women’s beliefs” as an alternative to the “sexist and profiteering packaging of music to serve business interests”, the festival is, simply, a talent show for unknowns....I was not as concerned as the organizers claimed to be with establishing an alternative music industry. I wanted to make eye contact with a few reputable women from the existing one.”

Every year: Fundraisers along with rallies!

announcing La Salamandra's first

WOMEN'S NIGHT

this Sunday - 8 pm
at La Salamandra - ~~Telegraph~~ by Dwight
original, folk, new, + special

MUSIC

- ☆ Lynn Messinger - songwriter, lead-backup guitarist
- ☆ Kitty MacKinnon - singer, radical feminism instructor
- ☆ Kristin Lems - songwriter and streetsinger

donation benefit for the survival of the
National Women's Music Festival

EVERYONE WELCOME

ORDER NOW! National Women's Music Festival

T-shirts - \$5.00 each
(7 styles)

a.  2nd national women's music festival

b.  National Women's Music Festival
Chicago, Urbana

c.  NATIONAL WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL
MAY 28 - JUNE 2
CHICAGO, URBANA

d.  National Women's Music Festival

e.  Chicago, Urbana

f.  NATIONAL WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL

g.  NATIONAL WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL

Specify style, T-shirt and ink color and 2nd choice

Highlights Tapes
(cassettes only) - \$5.50 each

Specify year(s) desired

AN EVENING OF WOMEN'S MUSIC

featuring

Equinox  Lynn Lloyd 

Kristin Lems  Tim Year  Ms. Safman's Ladies' Choir 

May 5th 8:00

Lincoln Hall Theatre
Univ. of Illinois, Urbana

Admission \$2.00
Free to those pre-registered for the 1975 National Women's Music Festival

Sponsored by
National Women's Music Festival

Yes, male musicians helped fundraise for the Festival
Also: annual teeshirt designs, annual highlights tapes

Every year: Fundraisers along with rallies!

Student Advocate the free all-campus newspaper

Oct. 24, 1975

Vol. 1 Issue 5

Champaign-Urbana, Ill.

Women's Music Festival to Hold Fete

The National Women's Music Festival will hold a fall musical celebration Sunday, Nov. 2 at Wesley Foundation, Green and Goodwin. In contrast to last year's all-music WomenFest, the program, according to NWMF organizers, will include a spaghetti dinner, a craft fair, and slides of the 1975 Festival. There will also be a concert during dinner and afterwards. Dinner will be served from 5:30 to 7:30. Tickets can be purchased at Discount Records, Record Service or at the Festival office in 374 Illini Union. The cost of the dinner and concert is \$2.25.

Spokesperson Ross Dudovitz said

of the event, "We want to both generate interest in local women musicians and craftswomen and to innovate new programs around the campus long before our Third Festival. We also hope, through an evening which should be great fun, to raise money to erase our remaining debt."

The program includes Blind Billy Elliot & Band, Sue Brennecke, Joy Walker from CAUTION, Bill Thomas and Debbie & Lou. There will

E.R.A. Rally Set for Today

Proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment (E.R.A.) are planning a noon hour rally on the quad for today, Friday, which marks the continuing struggle for passage of the Amendment in Illinois. Speakers at the rally will focus in on why the E.R.A. is necessary as a constitutional amendment as well as pointing out the accomplishments that have been made over the past year with regard to passage.

The rally is being organized by the University of Illinois E.R.A. Task Force, a subcommittee of the Women's Student Union, and is co-

sponsored by a substantial number of campus groups. The event will feature various local speakers including Professor Fred Gotthelf, Champaign Council person, Mary Pollock and others, as well as folksinger Lynn Keller, guitarist Brian Dunn, flutist Charles Meyerson, and songwriter Kristin Lema, who will perform her "Ballad of the E.R.A." and other original songs.

Illinois is one of the four states targeted for passage of the Amendment in this legislative session. Sponsors of both the Senate and House bills have stated that "the E.R.A. has never been in better shape in Illinois."

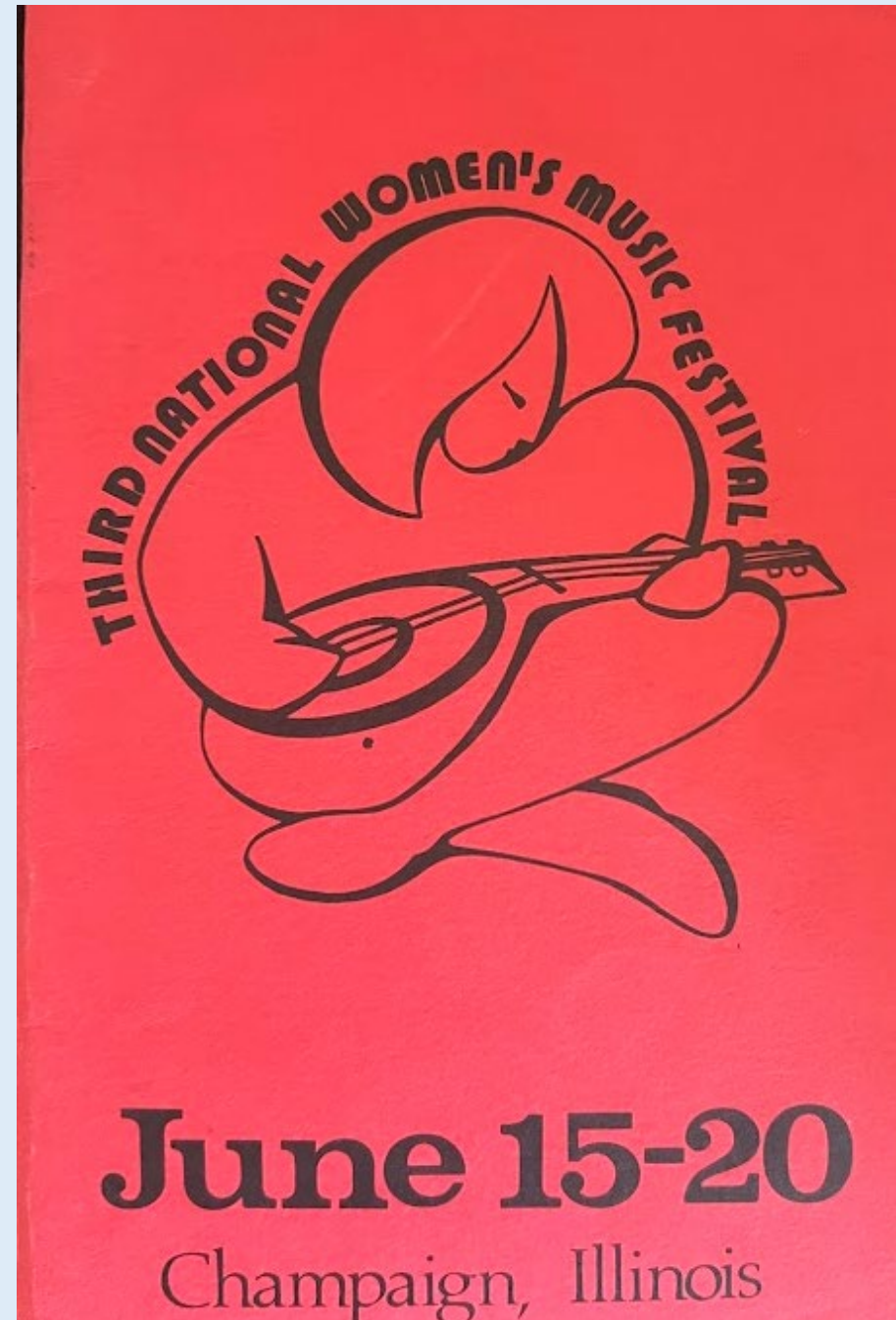
proved, while the second bill is also pending Senate approval, after which it will have to go back to the House. Passage of either bill will make Illinois the 35th state of the necessary 38 states needed to make the Amendment a law to the United States Constitution.

Spokesperson Mary Skubic of the E.R.A. Task Force is confident that today's rally will generate an already growing excitement and confidence on the U or I campus and across the state about passage of the E.R.A. in Illinois. Buttons, bumper stickers, literature and baked goods will be available for sale at the rally. The proceeds will go to groups actively working for passage of the E.R.A.

In case of inclement weather the rally will be held in Room #112 Gregory Hall.

Also, rallies for the ERA and other feminist issues during the year, sponsored by the Festival, and during the Festival!

Third National Women's
Music Festival
June 15-20, 1976



Innovations!!

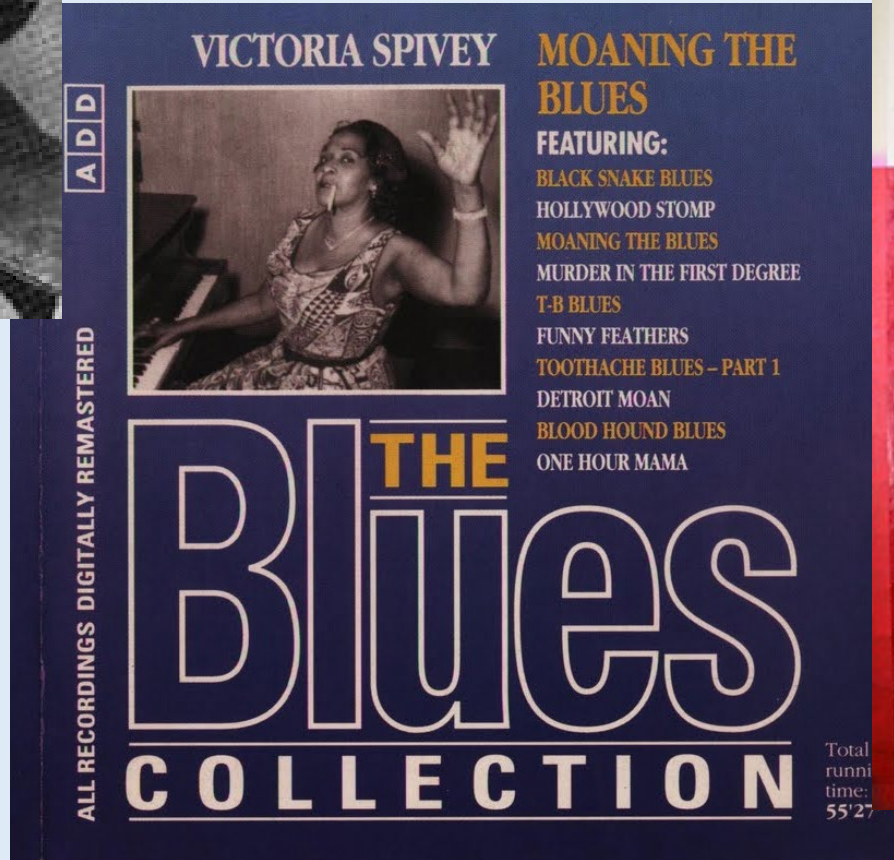
- Student run, community supported!
- Free childcare for children of attendees, provided by male volunteers
- Free community housing – volunteers matched with registrants
- Round robins on the quad, every day
- Jam sessions on stage after the evening concerts
- No musician paid – expenses only,
- All performers had to do a workshop



Victoria Spivey – Blues legend

1906–1976

Possibly her last performance – she passed away 3 months later

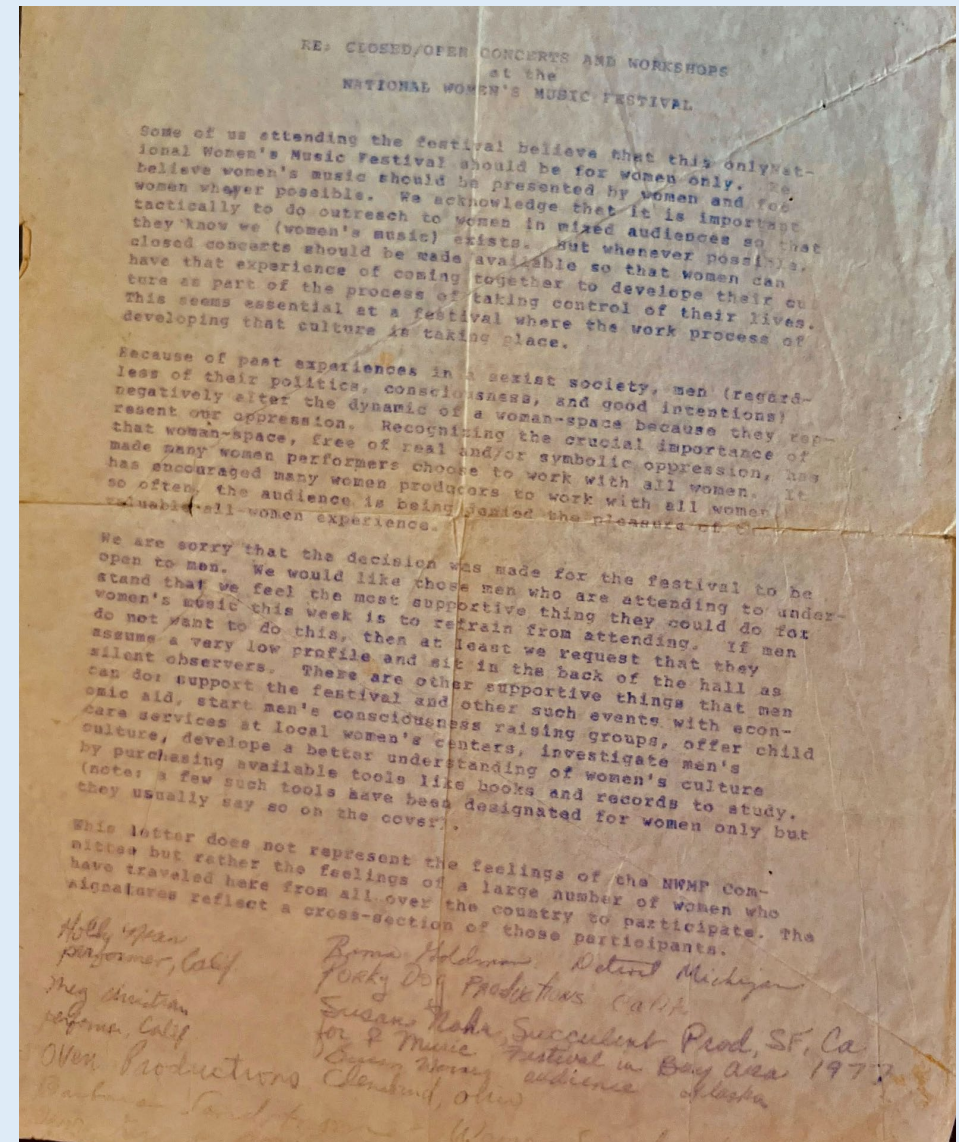


“Women only” conflicts
threatened to end the
festival in 1976!

Two performers performing the same
evening leafletted outside the
Auditorium
with opposite positions

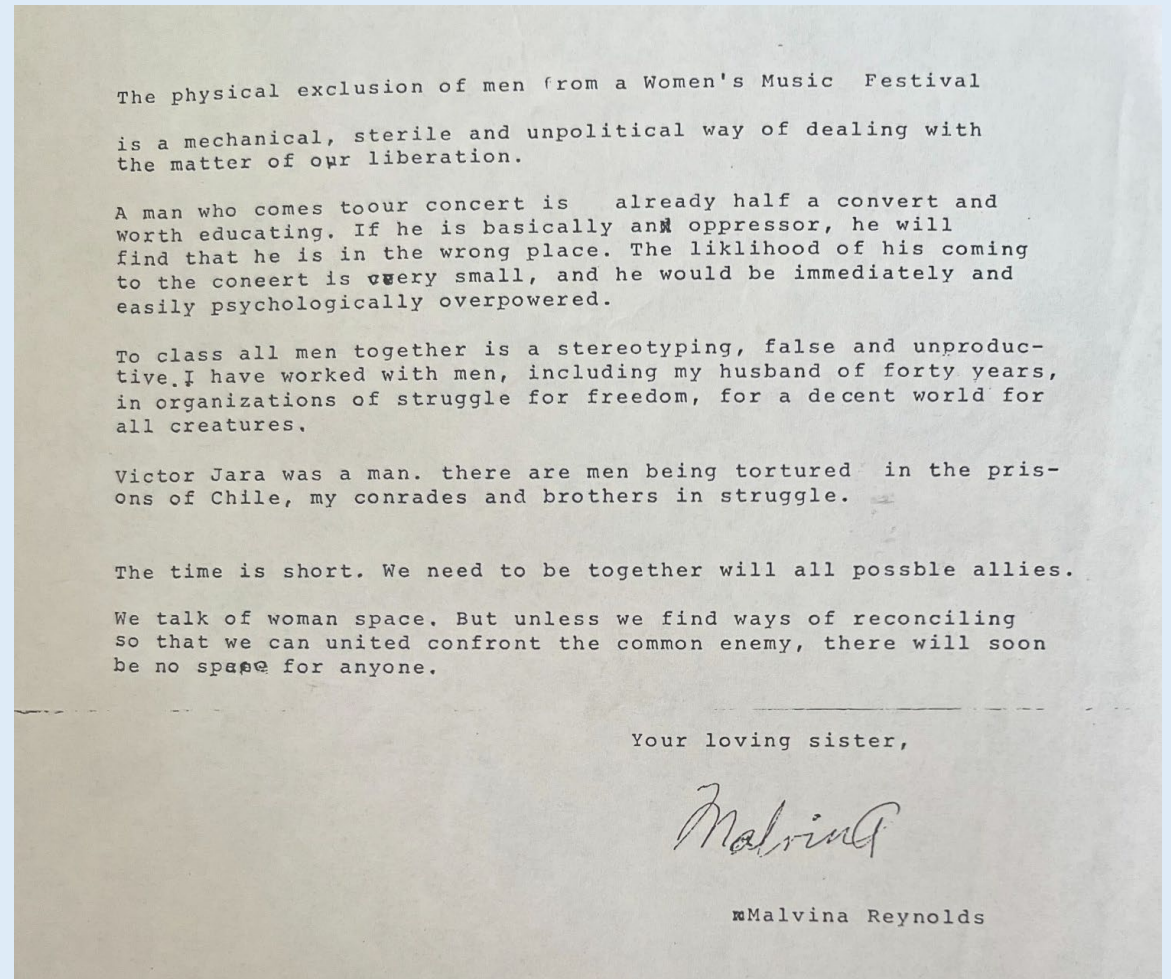
Holly Near and Meg Christian's flyer

“We are sorry that the decision was made for the Festival to be open to men. We would like those men who are attending to understand that the most supportive thing they could do for women's music this week is to refrain from attending”



Malvina Reynold's flyer

“The physical exclusion of men from a women's music festival is a mechanical, sterile, and apolitical way of dealing with the matter of our liberation.....We talk of woman space. But unless we find ways of reconciling so that we can confront the common enemy, there will soon be no space for anyone.”



More!

Topless frisbee
player arrested
June 20, 1976!!

“five or six
other topless
women escaped
before police
could
apprehend
them”

Woman arrested for topless game

A female playing frisbee topless on the Quad was arrested by University police Saturday and charged with disorderly conduct.

Five or six other topless women escaped before police could apprehend them.

Sharon Wood, 21, of St. Louis, Mo., was arrested after a citizen's complaint was made to police about 3:30 p.m. Saturday.

According to a University police, Woods was charged with disorderly conduct under an Urbana city ordinance, but not indecent exposure because the latter is a state charge and would have required holding Woods in the county jail over the weekend.

Disorderly conduct is a misdemeanor and carries the penalty of a fine of up to \$500 and-or a sentence of up to 90 days in the county jail.

Woods was freed after posting \$25 bail, but was ordered to appear in Urbana city court July 1.

Wood was attending the National Women's Music Festival held at the University June 15-20.

An unofficial demonstration was planned after Woods' arrest by other women attending the festival to show their support for her. The women planned to assemble at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and remove their shirts in unison, but the demonstration never materialized.

Ms. Conception! Cherry Wolfarth, Lynn Keller, and me –
1976 Festival We were worried that there wouldn't be
enough rock 'n' roll, so we formed a power trio!



But there was!
Saturday night
3rd Festival!
Signed with a
Major label



Fourth National Women's Music Festival

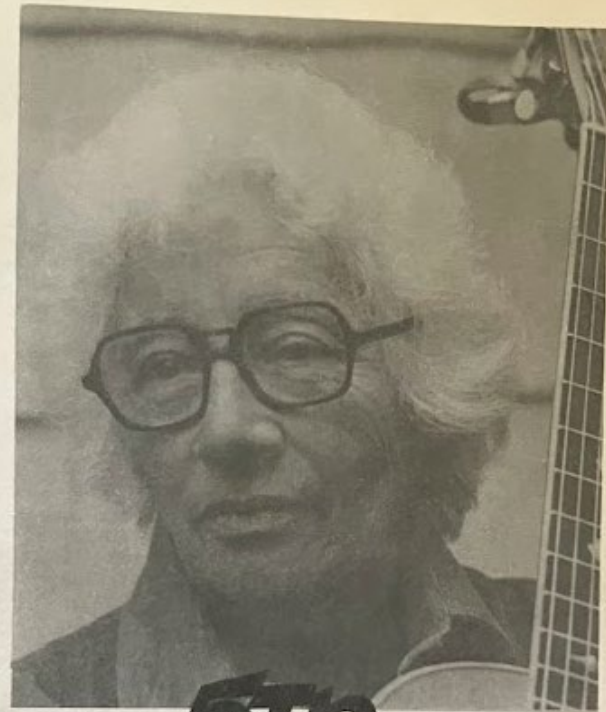
June 28-July 3, 1977



More Innovations!!

- Work exchange option
- Other art forms – visual art, drama, poetry, films about women musicians, including those performing there!
- Open jam rooms to try electric instruments
- Many “how to” workshops about musical and performance skills
- A “pickup” orchestra rehearsing daily and playing compositions by women
- A “pickup” choir rehearsing daily and performing women’s works
- Debut of several works by living women composers

Fifth National Women's
Music Festival
June 13-18, 1978



5th
national
women's
music
festival

JUNE
13-18

First Festival orchestra, under the baton of
Maestra Antonia Brico!



Festival Collective 1978

Mary Van Horn

Cecilia Haasis

Laura Bordeaux

Sherry Cmiel

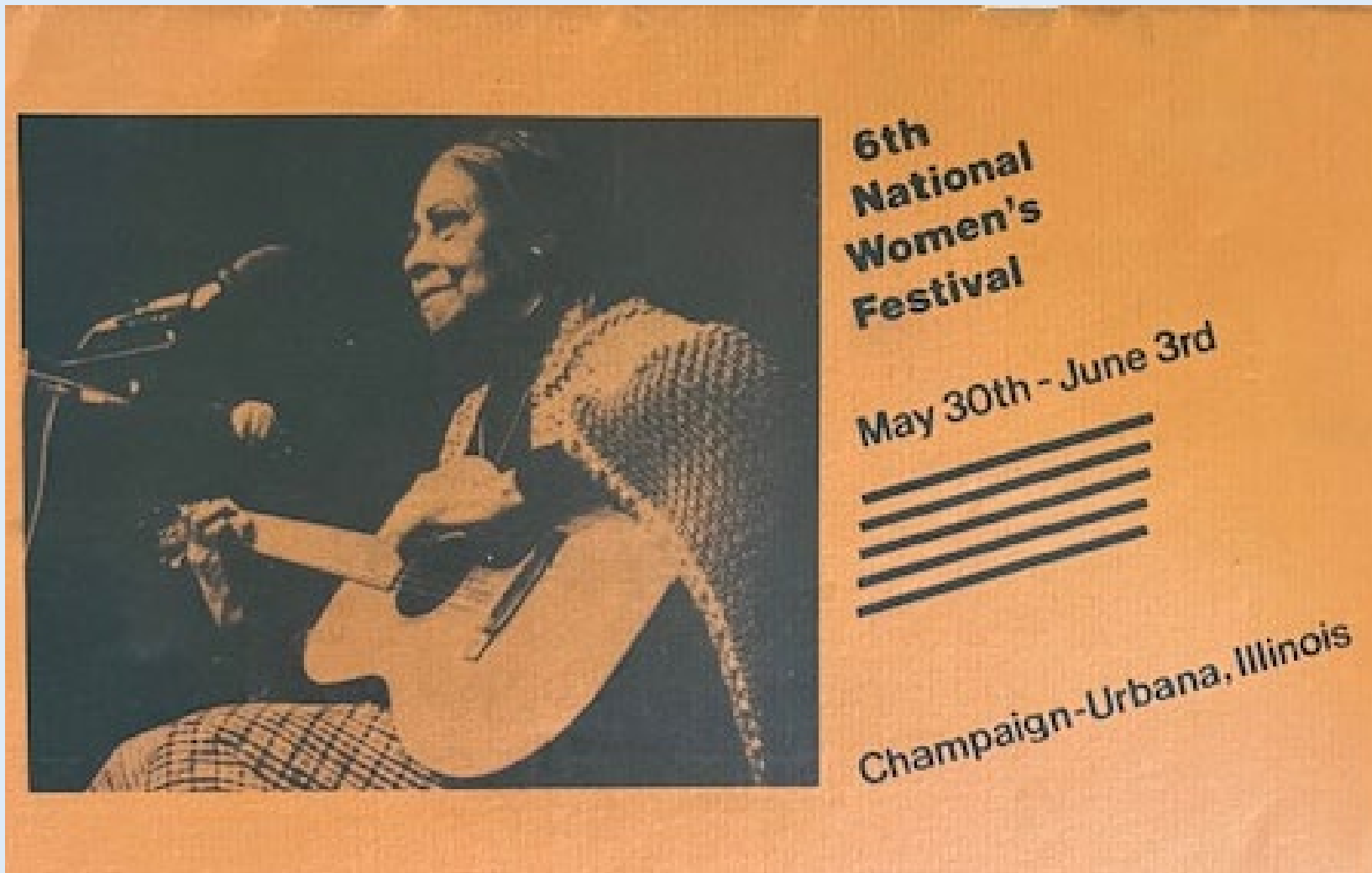
Barb Schoolenberg

Ann McCallister

Kristin Lems

all students at U of I





Sixth National Women's Music Festival
May 30 – June 3, 1979

Slide guitar diva
Ellen McIlwaine
performed at the
sixth Festival and is
subject of a new
movie, “Goddess
of Slide”!





Keynoting at the 50th Festival July 4, 2026
wearing the original T shirt made for the first Festival

Now under contract with
University of Illinois
Press: my memoir and
interviews about the
National Women's Music
Festival 1973-1979
on the U of I campus in
Champaign-Urbana!

Kristin Lems

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