



OUTCASTS

■ P.O. Box 31266 San Francisco, CA 94131-0266

June 15, 1990

TO: The Organizers of the Michigan Women's Music Festival:

We have received a copy of your letter, "A Discussion of S/M at the Michigan Festival," dated February 1, 1990. Because we have members who attend the festival, and because we function as an S/M support group, we are responding to it. It is our hope that we may help clarify some issues touched on in your letter.

It seems that a main issue is whether S/M women have a right to be present, to express themselves, and to celebrate the festival community as they would like to, as all other women are invited to do.

All rhetoric aside, this is a basic discrimination problem. Throughout the festival community there are groups of women that other women find objectionable. Certainly there has been a long-standing conflict between clean and sober women and women who choose to use certain chemicals recreationally. Certainly there have been long-standing conflicts between women who wish to experience the festival in a quiet, meditative fashion and women who wish to proclaim their joy in as loud a manner as possible. The list of such conflicts goes on, and your response as festival organizers has been, in these cases, to provide space that is segregated within the community land so that each of the groups can continue to express themselves as fully as possible. If someone wanders into these areas, they are expected to accept the standards of behavior delineated. There is now a clean and sober tent, clean and sober camping, chemical ok camping, quiet camping, loud and rowdy camping, some corresponding seating at concerts, etc. The festival has been admirably facilitating in these matters.

The festival's lack of facilitation with regard to S/M women is therefore hard to understand. You write that everyone must have respect for community space, and we agree, but the claim that S/M women's needs cannot be accommodated through the same kinds of mechanisms that other special needs groups enjoy seems grossly unfair, and discriminatory. When it has become evident in the past that there were special needs to be attended to, you

have created a space that was somewhat specialized. To fail to do so in the case of S/M women is clearly discriminatory.

The fact that there is a stridently vocal minority which opposes the right of S/M women to be on the land should, we think, be a key into the fact that S/M women need their rights and safety protected, by festival security if necessary. It was, after all, a letter from the Separatists Against Sado-Masochism last year which threatened violence against S/M women. S/M women carried out their activities privately at the festival until those Seps decided to track it down, spotlight it, and make an issue of it. The fact that those Seps have defined S/M to be violence does not in fact make what we do into violence. S/M people have a shared ethic--make it "Safe, Sane, and Consensual." What we do is not violence, but S/M is something that makes us, as a group, different.

If it is true that you intend to have a festival where difference is respected as diversity and not feared as a threat, then it is the responsibility of you, its organizers, to make the hard decisions to back up that professed intention. Allowing discrimination against even one group creates an environment for further discriminations.

In U.S. society as a whole, lesbian sexuality is condemned by some as immoral and sick. There are some "liberals" who believe it is okay for us to be lesbians, as long as we don't exhibit affection or otherwise call attention to ourselves publicly. We lesbians reject these characterizations, and act accordingly. Within lesbian society, S/M women are called sick and immoral by some. We call on you, as leaders in the lesbian community, to recognize this name calling for the discrimination that it is, and to help put an end to it by making a stand for pro-choice sexuality. We believe that the majority of festival participants would applaud and support such an action.

In hopes that the courage to make such a stand lies within you--

Sincerely,



Victoria Baker
for Outcasts

Outcasts, June 15, 1990
CC LIST

The Advocate
Avatar
Bad Attitude
The Bay Area Reporter (B.A.R.)
Bay Times
Briar Rose
Campfest
Chicago Hellfire Club
Committee to Preserve Our
Sexual and Civil Liberties
Common Lives/Lesbian Lives
Conditions
Connexions
Tony De Blase, c/o Desmondus
Publications, Inc.
Disciples of De Sade
Diversity
Dreizehn
East Coast Lesbians Festival
Eidos
Eulenspiegel
The Fifteen Association
Gay Community News
GMSMA
Gulf Coast Women's Festival
Knights of Leather
Leather and Lace (Los Angeles)
Lesbian Connection
Lesbian Contradiction
Lesbian Ethics
Lesbian Herstory Archives
Lesbian Uprising
LSM
Mama Bear's News and Notes
Mother Jones
National Coalition Against
Censorship
National Leather Association
National Women's Music Festi-
val
National Women's Studies
Association
New Directions for Women
North East Musical Retreat
Off Our Backs
On Our Backs
Outer Limits
Outlook
Outweek
Panther L L
Pocono Weekend
Portland Power and Trust

The Recruits
Dave Rhoades, c/o The Leather
Journal
The Sentinel
Shelix
Sinister Wisdom
Sisterspace
S.L.U.G.
Snake Power
Sojourner
Southern Women's Music and
Comedy Festival
Sweet Misery
Threshold
Trivia
West Coast Women's Music and
Comedy Festival
Wicked Women
Wimifest
Womanlink
Woman of Power
Women's Voices



■ P.O. Box 31266 San Francisco, CA 94131-0266

June 15, 1990

Dear Members of the S/M-Leather Community and Interested Others:

Once again the S/M community at the Michigan Women's Music Festival is under attack. Enclosed are copies of a communication from the organizers of the festival, and our response to them.

Each August, seven- to ten-thousand women (mostly lesbians) converge on women's land for music and socializing. As they have for over a decade, a substantial community of S/M women will be attending this year's festival. They have become progressively more organized, providing an outstanding experience for the "differently-pleasured" (as they have identified themselves). In response to continuing threats to their safety, sophisticated security has had to become a focus of their organizing.

Lesbians, gays, and others know well what it means to be persecuted for being part of a sexual minority. What is happening at Michigan is an expression of such persecution. Active support for pro-choice sexuality will ultimately make us all freer, and the S/M women at Michigan need our help now.

Please contact the festival to demand that they support pro-choice sexuality--write to WWTMC, Box 22, Walkhalla, MI 49458, or phone 616/757-4766.

Thank-you.

In support, and with pride,

Victoria Baker, for Outcasts

Enclosures

A Discussion of S/M at the Michigan Festival

The issue of S/M gatherings at Michigan once again surfaced at the 1989 Festival. We wanted to share our perspective on this issue as it played out in August '89 and make clear our position and policy for the future.

The subject of S/M in the womyn's community is one that has drawn our attention and illustrated our disparate views for years. It is indicative of the role of the Festival, as a reflector of our contemporary community issues, that this focus intensifies in Michigan during August.

As producers of the Michigan Festival, we have a particular role and responsibility to organize the Festival environment as a communal village which welcomes all womyn. This is fundamental to our politics and our values as Festival organizers. We strive to create a village in which the communal space is respected, where the principles of a multi-voiced community process is honored, and where the value of living in basic mutual consideration is shared. This is vital, yet not always easy, since the living environment at the Festival puts us all in a unique situation of having 7000 roommates for a week. We believe 7000 womyn can live together for this period, bringing together all of our similarities and differences, and with caring and regard, form a loving community in which we all feel nurtured and valued. It is also true that the reality of creating this safe space does limit the complete range of possible activities for each of us as individuals.

One of our first and most important goals is to offer womyn a place where they can roam freely day or night, together or alone and feel safe. This freedom and safety does not exist for womyn almost anywhere else in our lives. We are in the outdoors, without walls, or sound proof construction and with almost no privacy. We want womyn and children to be able to walk freely anywhere anytime. This freeing experience is consistently mentioned in our feedback as the most important aspect of the Festival for womyn. It is the most precious thing for us to maintain at the Festival.

In the past we have tried to avoid having an articulated "policy" regarding S/M at the Festival. We have wanted to provide the framework for an open community that works out its own issues as they arise. We believe in the group process and don't want to be in the position of arbitrary rule-makers, but rather, we want to create a respectful environment and forum in which womyn meet in mutual regard and address each other with their differences, talk with each other and come up with evolved agreements about how to live together.

We acknowledge that for some womyn the actual presence of S/M womyn at the Festival is an issue. As Festival organizers we want all womyn to be able to participate fully in all parts of the Festival. Our difficulty has not been with the presence of S/M womyn in the Festival, but in the S/M gatherings that have taken place in recent years in sharp disregard for other womyn attending the Festival.

We initially responded by calling upon SM womyn to self-monitor,

asking them to change their behavior in workshops and common Festival spaces, so that other womyn weren't involuntarily exposed to SM activity or imagery. From year to year we would have differing discussions with various womyn who offered to be spokeswomyn for the S/M groups at the Festival. We would clarify guidelines and receive agreements from the spokeswomyn that community campgrounds wouldn't be marked as S/M campgrounds, and that parties or scenes wouldn't be organized in general Festival spaces and tents. Each year these agreements would be ignored, at least by some womyn, continually placing the Festival in a "policing" role in order to uphold the expectation of open community space.

By 1989, after several years of attempting to engender cooperative respect for community guidelines, we were adamant that there could be no SM activity at the Acoustic Stage or any other Festival common space, and that SM womyn couldn't take over fire pits or campgrounds in general camping. Again, SM spokeswomyn agreed to abide by these limits in discussions with Festival representatives and then acted in disregard for the guidelines established. The group organized S/M parties in Festival workshop tents, located directly across from Quiet Camping and near a well-travelled Festival path, which could be seen and heard by womyn not attending the activities. When confronted by womyn on behalf of the Festival, the group refused to cooperate and continued their party. Womyn participating in the parties knew that they were in community space, that it was against Festival policy, and that it was disturbing to the other womyn around them.

We are now being asked to specify a clear policy statement and we realize that it is needed. We will welcome all womyn and are committed to provide an ongoing safe forum for discussion of our differences and unresolved issues. We expect that the sorting out of these broader issues of defining and understanding community values and mores will be ongoing in the womyn's community. It is not our role as organizers of this Festival to define the broader issue of how the community comes to understand and resolve the painful divisions that the S/M phenomena has brought up for womyn in the community. It is our role however, to set some guidelines for how we live together for this one week in Michigan. On a practical level, we need to have some clear guidelines of what's OK here; what's considerate, cooperative behavior and what, given the limits of our shared living environment, is not.

We will not consider banning any particular group of womyn, and likewise, we won't ban any mode of dress, which we are pressed to do at different times. The Festival will prohibit certain activities organized by the S/M community. We say "certain activities" so that we don't overgeneralize about all activities that anyone may define as SM-identified. It is not OK for any group to "take over" community space for private parties or scenes, or to define community campgrounds or fire pits for the group's use. We will interrupt any parties that are started, and we will require consideration and support for community space. Likewise, we expect that all womyn who attend the Festival do so in agreement with the basic premise that our primary shared value for this time is one of consideration for the community space. We believe it is

something we all must be able to depend upon in order to feel welcome and safe living interdependently with 7000 other people for a week.

Many womyn feel that prohibiting SM activity at the Festival is a civil rights issue, or a freedom of speech issue. Womyn have the right to be who we are, to do as we please, and to have our sexual preferences. In these circumstances, acting out SM activity in an open air environment infringes other womyn's rights to move freely and safely without fear or horror. There is welcome for all womyn at the Festival. There isn't welcome for all behavior at the Festival. We encourage S/M womyn who want group activities to create their own event at another time and place with the necessary elements for privacy and community consent. We are not set up to provide this and it is not our purpose. Furthermore, we must be clear that we are unwilling to take the responsibility, and the comparable liability that would accompany a space defined by us in that way.

An equally disconcerting dynamic in this debate, is the tendency in the community to polarize and distort each other and our various motives; to make womyn who are different from us, the "bad guys". There is something seriously lacking in womyn-identified values in the development that created a feeling of war between two groups of womyn: the Seps and the SM womyn; that created the need for womyn working on Communications/Security crews to try to protect womyn from each other rather than to act as a protective buffer between womyn at the Festival and curious or harassing boys in the county. We do not produce the Festival to get together and do espionage on other womyn, or to figure out how to manipulate womyn or "best" them in some stand-off. We call upon each of us to put aside personal feelings of righteous polarization and to work actively towards a respectful understanding of each other.

We are open to discussion and we will try to facilitate more opportunities for hearing each other and for sharing constructive dialogue as we all continue to define this womyn's community of ours. We will take a very active part in this by organizing facilitated open forums at the 1990 Festival as an attempt to better understand one another, and to work as a community to understand these issues.

W.W.T.M.C.
February 1, 1990