

Transcript of the Q & A Session with Chat Notes (edited for clarity)

Q: Who were the other members of the Olivia Collective?

A: The top woman wearing a sweater vest is Jennifer Woodhull. Next to her on the other side of that thing sticking up is Kate Winter.

I'm (Ginny Berson) in the middle. On the bottom wearing the Olivia t-shirt on my right is Meg Christian and on my left is Judy Dlugacz, and Judy is the person who is now in charge of Olivia travel and all the cruises.



Ginny Z Berson

Originally there were 10 of us. Two of the women dropped out kind of immediately because they weren't really interested in doing a record company.

And then Meg and I went to California, drove to California in the summer of 1973 and then again in the summer of 1974, because we were finding it really hard to be a record company in Washington, DC. And so we thought maybe California; then we went to Los Angeles and came back and said we need to move to Los Angeles, and three of the women, then said, “Yes, but we don't want to go.”

So, then there were the five of us that moved to Los Angeles and really became the core collective of Olivia Records.

Q: One of the other questions was: what was the first Lesbian album Olivia produced.

A: The first album was Meg's album. It was called *I Know You Know*, and we recorded it in the fall of 1974 and Cris Williamson was very involved in it and Margie Adam was very involved in it. And I don't think that there's other people that you would know that were very involved in it.

That was the first one and that came out; we had a terrible time getting it out. It's one of the reasons we decided we had to move to LA because we did this album, we sent it off to the pressing plant which was in LA, and they sent it back, you

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know, “This isn't the time of vinyl.” They sent it back; they sent us back a test pressing which we listened to and there was this noise under it, which we kept saying was *whoosh*, there's *whoosh*; you could just hear it under the music. We'd send it back and they say “We don't hear *whoosh*,” they send it back and we'd say “We hear *whoosh*.” And finally, we got to LA and went into the pressing plant with the test pressing and put it on their turntable and said, “Listen to this.” And they said, “Oh you mean the *whoosh, whoosh*; well, why didn't you say so?”

So, anyway, that took us some time—Meg's album was delayed but that was the first album and then the next one we did was Cris's *Changer and the Changed* in the summer and fall of 1975.

Q from B.E.: I came across you and Meg in San Diego, at the [name garbled] Women's Coffeehouse, way back in the 1970s. I just wonder how, I mean you must have been on the road a lot. Can you even estimate how many states or did you go cross-country? Was this before LA, after LA? When was your major move to just you and Meg going around to many different environments, would you say? Any kind of feedback on that one?

A: I have a lot. I don't know. We did drive across the country. In both summer 1973 and 1974 I had a job teaching Spanish. So I was kind of tied to the school year.

And during the school year Meg stopped doing clubs and we were getting gigs for her in women's colleges and women's centers in the East Coast.

And so we would drive up there she had a little...We bought a sound system. I learned how to do sound, I mean. That was one of the things about this time. None of us knew how to do anything. And we were called on to do everything. And so we just did it because that was part of the ethos of the time: our rejection of anything that smacks of male supremacy, although we didn't necessarily call it that, but you know, male identification or men, basically, we just rejected it and said, “We'll figure this out; you can't do this well; that's a challenge. We can do this.”

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So, you know, and then we would drive across country until we got to LA. I was teaching school and Judy was a kid. I think Judy was teaching, too. I can't remember what Judy's job was. We have, you know, full time job or part time jobs.

We got to LA, and Jennifer and Kate had moved to Albuquerque and they were teaching in the Women's Studies Program at the University of New Mexico. We all got to LA, and we stopped having our outside jobs. And so, um, and then we really started hitting the road and basically that's what we did. We just toured and toured and toured and it was, you know, the first year that we, Meg and I, drove across the country. We camped. We stayed at [...]. We knew nothing about camping.

And then the second year we upgraded; we stayed in Motel 6s. And, you know, and then after that we started, we started really connecting; that was on our way across. Then we started really connecting with women's communities and we would stay in women's houses.”

Q by L.D: Before my question, and you sort of answered, and I was curious to see if you all could make a living but I don't think I can even say this without crying how much Olivia records meant to me and to the women of the North Shore Lesbian community in north of Boston, it was phenomenal and I know that probably the majority of women on this.

Zoom today feels that it was beyond belief. I happen to be blessed enough to have been the right age. You know I was in my later–middle 20s when all of this stuff, when the records, kept coming out. I do have a question, though, because I think every time Olivia came to Sanders Theater in Cambridge, I was there.

How did the women who were performing keep up that incredible authentic energy? I never felt like it was canned, you know—if you say there were thousands, and I'm sure there were, of concerts. How did they do that?

A: Well, you know, first of all, we were young. We certainly couldn't do it now, but it was an exchange; there was such an exchange of energy; there was so



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much that we got from the women's communities. I mean, it was so apparent that the music was doing what we wanted, that it was getting into women's hearts, and that was so powerful for us. And, you know, I would go up and do a wrap on stage, but I was not performing.

And perhaps the performers would have a different answer. I'll tell you something. There's a story I write about in the book about, I think it was Sanders; now it's part of Harvard...

And it was some concert; I think Margie was there, and Meg, and I don't know who else, but Meg was the first one on. Maybe it wasn't there. I don't remember. It was a big hall, like 800 people, and Meg walked out on the stage and the response—she hadn't even opened her mouth. And there was so much energy that, I mean, she was literally knocked backwards.

I mean, it brings you to tears. It brings me to tears, too, because it was so wonderful to see this. We were building this movement. And everybody was part of it.

And that's why we kept going, because it was, you know, it wasn't a concert. I mean it was a concert, but it was so much more than a concert; it was—we were building a movement. We were changing the world. We were trying to create the world we wanted to live in. And that is so energizing and that is so powerful.

I don't know what else to say.

Q from chat: What was the year of Women on Wheels, and was that tour as major, major, major as my memory of it? And when you answer that one I have another one after that.

A: Okay, Women on Wheels was February of 1976.

And it was, for people who don't know, it was Meg, Cris, Margie, and Holly.



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And they did, I believe, seven shows up in California. I'd have to think about it. I have a whole chapter about that also in the book.

We're public and then they did a show at the California Institution for Women, which is a women's prison in California, and yes it was major. It was major, major.

It was major for a lot of reasons. They were big shows. They were. First of all, these four women were at the time kind of the iconic women's music performers. They had the biggest followings. They all had albums. Margie's album wasn't our first album; it wasn't out yet, but it was in production.

They were the most well-known. And they did a lot. They did, you know. They all did solo sets, but short solo sets, but then most of the shows, they were playing with each other and they were perfect. And they were selling out halls. You know, in Oakland we did two shows at the Oakland auditorium that were 2,000 people each, and women were coming from all over the West Coast to go to the show that was closest to them because it was the, the, the Big Four, as they were known.

And they were great musically. They were just terrific. You know, beautifully done, really well-produced shows. And then the dynamics that were not so pretty backstage but you'd have to read the book to find out what really happened.

Q: So my other quick question. I don't remember the Women on Wheels thing because I think I wasn't quite out yet, but I do remember Meg and Cris at Carnegie. How the heck did that come about? That was earth shattering for me, that I was able to get into Carnegie Hall and actually go to that concert. And I've always wondered how did you even get there?

A: So you know what? I don't know because I had left Olivia by then. I left Olivia in 1980. So that's a question to ask Judy. Sorry.

Q from BK: Thank you. My question actually is irrelevant because I was going to ask about the connection to the Michigan Women's Music Festival and so I think it's irrelevant.



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A: Well, I would just say this. We certainly [unclear] the Michigan women's music. I mean, I can talk about Michigan forever but, um, you know, there was a lot of commingling. Certainly, all of our artists played at Michigan. The whole idea behind the Festival of another women's institution and women's land was so important.

Story from Pokey Anderson: I was a distributor and produced concerts, and then I'll tell you another story just in a second, but I just think that you know, okay, maybe we didn't overthrow patriarchy but the connections that we made. And the ability to see each other as, as you know many of you have said was so important to see, “Oh my gosh, look this. All these people in this community.”

And you know of course we're Lesbians, right, so some people at concerts did organize each other in the way that you organized Meg, and you know later they tell me, “Oh, yeah, we met at this concert, blah blah blah.” Another connection that certainly changed my life was [unclear].

So, the Houston women would talk to the Austin women because there weren't that many of us that were active and paying attention, and you know they go, “Oh my god, you have to hear this music. It's ‘Gym Teacher’ by Meg Christian” and so stuff was handed over hand-to-hand, person-to-person in the very beginning before the distributors did anything.

And then, Cris's album came out and I listened to it and I jumped up and I was like, “I have to take this over to the community radio station branch in Houston.” There were two women, straight women feminists, who had a radio show and I just walked into the station, handed them this album, and said, “You have to play this right now on the air.”

And they did. And the reaction was so amazing. Then they'd call me occasionally to be a sub and then eventually, they got bored with doing the show and I was doing the show. So, for 11 years I did a women's music radio show in Houston.

A: Ginny: Yeah. Anyway, thanks, thank you, Pokey, and I just have to recognize your presence at the 1977.



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Q from SG: Good to see the other distributors here. I'm happy to see all. It's been decades for most of us; I think it's really true. And actually, two questions. I was curious about what you feel the role of distributors really was and how we added to what you've been talking about today, and my other question is, are you in touch with any of the other former alums?

A: Um, yes, I, and I'll happy to go into that. The distribution network was really important to me and I feel like it was a really incredibly valuable network. You know, on the most basic level, the selling of records, the getting of records into record stores and into mainstream record stores and into the chains and getting airplay was, you know, if you know if you have a record company and nobody can buy the record do it really have a record company [unclear].

So, there was that, but it was more than that. I remember when we would have distributor meetings, when we would bring distributors together. And there was community and there was a sense of, you know, Jane in Eureka Springs, and you know, Sissy and Austin and Pokey and Liz and, you know, and it was like we're in this together. We're doing it because I honestly feel like underneath everything was that we were trying to build a movement, and we were, and it was very haphazard and, you know, you're selling records and you have another job because you know maybe you're making \$15 a month selling records and you have 17 other things going on. Maybe you've just come out and all of that is going on.

But it was the beginning; it was the beginning of saying, you know, we really are everywhere, and we can figure this out together. I mean, as the distributors grew and got less isolated and if I remember correctly, the distributors started putting out their own newsletter and really started saying, you know, taking power in this and I don't know I think it was.

To me one of the things that I am most proud of was being part of that, of helping to create that. It was also a source of great controversy and fights; everything was a source. We thought about everything.

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In terms of the other women, yes, I am in touch with all of the other Olives. You know, not excessively. That's not the right word. Not extensively, but Jennifer and I talk. I have had contact with Kate and you know when I was writing my book, I had to go talk to all of them because I couldn't remember stuff. I would find notes that I had taken about this business I read. “What is this? Who remembers?” With this was nothing anybody remembered, but everybody remembered pieces.

But yeah, Meg and I talk regularly, and Judy and I and so, yeah, I'm still in touch, we're still in touch.

Q from Liz ??: Wow, so great to see you and hear you, and you know, you keep saying we were trying to start a movement, but we started a movement and you all did. I mean, I was in South Carolina and a little Podunk place, and the encouragement [from you]. I mean, I think I don't know how it ended up that you asked me to be a distributor or if I volunteered. But you were so wonderful and then you were like, how about producing a concert?

I knew nothing. You said you knew nothing. It was an apartment clubhouse. You had the sound system; you were in your little white car with Meg. Don't worry. You sent me the posters. I hand printed the info on them. I mean, what you started is so powerful. I mean, it's still going. You know, that was a beginning. And just to have our own community and see ourselves and yes, there was so much fighting, but that's part of like something growing, you know, but looking back.

Thank you so much for all you—thank you for writing this book and doing this talk today, just incredible.

A: And it's great to see you. Thanks, Liz.

It's great to see you. [We] sat next to each other at dinner...

But that's right. I think that also goes back to [SG's] question about the role of the distributors. The distributors in many cases were more than distributors. They were also the women that we called when we wanted to produce a concert.

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They were also the women that we called when we wanted to know if they can get us on the radio station, because not everybody was like Pokey and had their own radio show. But, yeah, so they were our connection with the local communities.

Comment from MM: And before I [give next question from chat] though, I just want to interject. You said this before, I think, maybe, but big hand of applause for all the bookstores that sold all the records and schlepped those things around. I did, I did bookstore work and those things are heavy.

It was great to sell them but also the radio folks who did have radio shows. I had a radio show in Minneapolis in the 1990s and so I remember the first time I did an “oldie show” and was pulling out all the oldies at that time, Meg and Cris and everybody.

So the two questions from the chat 1) how did Margie Adam get involved with Olivia? and 2) is there any possibility of getting *Lesbian Concentrate* on a CD?

A: Well, okay, so I have *Lesbian Concentrate* on a CD because I knew a guy. I worked with a guy who had a CD converter, you could put your vinyl on and make it a CD.

But the question is, I don't even know who owns the master. I assume Olivia has the master but I don't know what the answer is; I have no idea. I suggest you find the technology and do it yourself because I don't think Olivia is going to do it.

Margie was involved. She recorded on her own label (Pleiades), and she was involved, so we met Margie. We had this amazing trip, our second trip to California, so it was the summer of 1974.

I think we had met Margie at the National Women’s Music Festival. And so when we went to California, we spent a lot of time in LA and then we drove up to Margie's house; she was living in Santa Barbara.

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And we walked in and Margie had an avocado tree in her yard and it was like, who even knew that avocados grew on trees? You know what I mean if you're from the east coast. In 1970, I didn't know that. I mean, I had never seen an avocado grow. And so that was kind of amazing, anyway.

So we hung out with Margie for a while and I think there's actually a picture in my book of this that I took. Meg and Margie started playing. She had a piano in her house and Meg was on guitar and they just started playing and then we started to think about her. You know recording her album, and the first song on Meg's album, her first album, is “Hello Hooray.”

They started playing and Meg started playing the song “Hello Hooray” and Margie just started playing along; you know that's what musicians do, and it just makes my head explode. It was so exciting. Margie added this kind of baseline boom boom boom boom, and then Meg started and it grew from there.

So that was our like first real strong connection with Margie and then, you know, and then I mean, so Margie and Cris were lovers and then they weren't lovers and then everybody, you know, was lovers with everybody.

And Margie was involved in working with Meg on *I Know You Know* and then she came to California. She was in California. We were in California to work with Cris on *Changer*.

We wanted to record Margie, but we did not want to record Margie right after we did Meg and Cris, because we did not want to have women's music defined by basically white acoustic soloists. We wanted to say that women's music was bigger than this and so we asked Margie to wait, but she said she didn't want to wait and so she put out her own record, which was fine that was, you know, obviously what she could do. So we have, you know, over the years, they performed together. She sat in on albums or she didn't.

We had fights. We made up, you know, the usual. Everybody, as somebody in the chat just said, everybody was lovers with everybody except for the people who weren't. And that's how she was involved. I can't even remember the question but I think that kind of gets to it.

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Q from CP: I mean, you had such high hopes for changing the world and you did probably as much as anybody did to change the world and Lesbian directions. But that turned out not to be viable for you for a couple of reasons. But could you talk a little bit about what it was like for you, having to let go of those dreams, having to go in a different direction, having to make a living and support yourself.

A: I never let go of the dreams. I still work to change the world.

I do it in different ways. I've always had to make a living. I mean even at Olivia, you know, and I'll leave that alone. Um, I've always been very lucky to have more or less movement jobs.

You know, I worked in community radio for a long time, which was kind of hell but also wonderful. I worked in community radio for a long time. I do racial equity work now. I get paid for it. And I mean I work part time but I never let go of a dream but what I understood was that the contradictions of capitalism are just too huge to kind of confront head on, which is what we were trying to do. And this was in the 1970s, when I was doing Olivia and it's only gotten much worse.

I think of revolution differently. I think of liberation differently. I think I've changed differently. I work in my neighborhood. I work on social change in my neighborhood because I think that's where we can be effective. But I have never let go of that. I wake up in the morning and think about how are we going to do this today? How are we going to make the world? I want change. I want change. How things are now is not okay. And I really have an idea of how it could be, and what liberation could be for all of us.

I'll never stop working for that.

Q in the chat: Was there a transwoman in the collective.

A: There was a transwoman. We hired a transwoman, Sandy Stone. As an engineer in, I think, 1977. I don't honestly know; I don't remember if ... yes, I think she was not living in the collective, but not everyone did.



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We expanded. So, we, at one point, there were, I think, 14 of us all together. We had brought two or three of our distributors to LA and they were now part of the collective. That was Sandy Ramsey, Liz Brown, and Robin Brooks.

We decided to move to the Bay Area, largely because we wanted to work with Linda Tillery. And she couldn't move because she was taking care of her mother, and then we brought in Mary Watkins and we brought in Michelle Clinton. And I think Sandy was part of that; I think everybody was part of the collective.

So yes, the answer is yes.

Q from E.B. I would like to ask you about the conflicts, and how do women deal with conflicts. I'm sure if I went back to a NOW conference, there'd still be some kind of conflict. And I don't have a solution for that. Did you work towards finding some solutions?

A: Well, I think that we're always going to have conflict because we don't, you know, we're just not going to agree with each other. I think, really, the question is, can we learn to deal with conflict without demonizing each other.

And I also feel like there was a point, at that time, that I identified so strongly with my positions, you know. I try not to do that anymore. I am not my positions. And I have opinions about things, and I have some information and thoughts but that's not me. And I can change them. It's like, in a certain way, if you argue with me about if I want to have a women only concert and you don't. We're gonna have an argument about this. Well, if I say we're not, I'll let go of having a women only concert, that I've somehow betrayed my identity ... And I don't think that's true. I think part of that is a function of age, of just like: I've been doing this long enough now to understand something about how human beings work.

And also because I've had a lot of experience. I worked at a Pacifica station for 15 years so I know a lot about conflict that may go over a lot of your heads, but maybe some of you know what I'm talking about.

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I think that's the answer: that we have to learn. We have to learn how to find what we have in common, focus on that. Understand that we're going to have differences and respect that. Okay, you want to do it this way, I want to do it this way, is there something like a Venn diagram where there's some overlap and we can do it together.

Q from ML: I have actually two questions. So, were you able to support yourself, it would feel a bit, and then the other question is, why did you leave?

A: Um, yes, we were able to support ourselves through a combination of [ways]. I mean at different points as different people came in, it changed. When it was the five of us, a couple of us collected unemployment, and then everything that Meg made and the concerts went into the common pot because the five of us were the original five.

We were also living collectively so we shared all of our resources, as we expanded and there were more, we began to have revenue from selling records, although really not enough. We still took turns collecting unemployment.

We had more musicians; some of their money came in. So, none of us, except for some of the musicians, did some outside gigs.

But none of the rest of us had other jobs. You know, it didn't cost so much to live then; also, you know, we rented a house in LA and I don't know, and all five of us lived there when we moved in and probably we paid \$200 a month rent. I don't remember what we paid but you know the cost of living was so much less. So none of us had to have outside jobs.

I left in 1980 because it became clear to me that we could not be a successful business, and the kind of political organization that I wanted to be. And, I mean, we were losing money.

If we were going to be, you know, a business, what we would have done was like the way the record industry works. You have a hit record. The next year you get the hours in the studio and you make another record, and the next year you get

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that artist in the studio and you make another record. So you don't go and say we don't want our label to be associated with this kind of music only. So we're not going to record. So, you know, you don't do what we did. You record Meg and then you record Cris, and then you record Meg, and then you record Cris, and then you record Meg, and then you record Cris, and the hell with everybody else.

And that's not what I wanted to do, and I didn't want to. I wasn't interested in being a business. I was interested in being a political organization, and a movement building organization, and I knew we couldn't do both.

And so it was clear that to survive, we had to act more like a business. And so, go for it because that's not what I wanted to do. So, I left on very amicable terms, and I just understood I couldn't do it the way I wanted to do it so I needed to go do something else.

Q from SL: I went to school in Wisconsin University. And I went to a few concerts at the local place and I was like, “What is this?,” you know, I came out after you did your organizing, and I never realized how central the whole music business was to actually quote “organizing the Lesbian community.”

I kept hearing “the left” speaking the language you use. You don’t use communist terms for how people organized. And so I wanted to know if you were a red diaper baby or what happened; you obviously had a content.

A: I was not a red diaper baby. But, um, you know, I came of age during Vietnam.

Honestly, I think the first thing that really radicalized me was that I really wanted to be a baseball player, and I was a very good baseball player, and I could not play baseball because I was a girl. And that was, like, so unfair. And then I found out all these other things that I couldn't be because I was a girl but the real radicalizing experience for me was the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement.

Seeing dogs attacking children, because they wanted to—I mean, it's just horrible and I was just a kid, but it was horrible and so I was very involved in the left. I was very involved in the anti-war movement and then I joined the Peace Corps after



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college, and my intention was to basically (this is so embarrassing) bring Marxism-Leninism to the people of Panama, which they hadn't actually asked for and, you know, whatever. Just a little arrogant.

But, yeah, so I did come from the left; I came from the left into the women's movement, and it was a great step for me.

Question from the chat: Because you've been talking so much about liberation and music and movement building, one of the last questions in the chat: what music today fuels your yearning for liberation?

A: Oh, that's tough. I have to think about that. I listen to music when I'm cooking. That's about the only time I listen ... And it touches my heart, the music, but I can't say that it fuels my passion for liberation in the same way.

NOTES FROM THE CHAT

To Get Ginny's Book:

<https://www.auntlute.com/olivia-on-the-record>

Aunt Lute Books offers a 20% discount through end of year (2021) - HOLIDAY20.

- Liberation - Lesbian - Love!
- I'm reminded of the Red Star Singers' song about women's liberation: "I still ain't satisfied:" "They call me Ms.; they sell me blue jeans..."
- *Once a Fury* (movie): <https://onceafury.com/>
- Yes, please, someone write a book about The Furies, while there is still time to do first person interviews!!!!
- Music as the bridge to healing and community.



Liberation Start with “L”: An Olivia Records Story

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Ginny Berson – December 9, 2021 – OLOC Zoom Presentation

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- It was so powerful in the 1970's to go to Sanders Theatre and see our community, and hear our stories. So grateful for OLIVIA!!!
- And selling tickets brought women in to bookstores, too!
- The political and financial foresight and daring and caring she is narrating were astounding.
- Forever grateful for the radical visionary women.
- What about Holly Near? Holly Near was on Redwood Records...
- The music itself was raising consciousness in the most efficient way possible!
- It was so energizing. We didn't need to sleep, which is how we got so much done.
- I'm wishing that all my Lesbian worlds were watching and hearing this. It's so great.
- The energy of that time was so soul lifting!
- Also remember Olivia released a 45 single with Meg on one side, Cris on the flip, prior to the full-length Meg LP.
- All hail the distributors and Sandy Ramsey's newsletter!
- Women's Independent Label Distributors (WILD network). Helping each other learn the business of distribution.
- Hooray for the distributors! No distribution; short circuit.



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- Have to leave now. But want to say that if we needed to do today what we needed to do back in the 1970s, we would do it despite our age. That drive does not really change with age. Here we are today. Love to you all 🥰.
- Remember the good old days also included, as she said, “always had to make a living.” I think that often is lost on the young. So often all this was done by women who were “making a living” at pre-feminist rates and pre-feminist jobs.
- Re: transferring your vinyl onto CD: Easy if you live in San Fran Bay Area. Take your vinyl to Down Home Music in El Cerrito, to an employee named JT? Or maybe JC? For \$15 and a week’s time, he’ll do a great job making you a CD.
 - if you live out of reach of Down Home Music, check for a small music/record shop in your area that sells old music, esoteric music, etc. Likely someone there has the equipment and skills to make a CD of your vinyl.
- I loved the book. I came out late, though I’d been listening to the music for years before I had the nerve to come out.
- The music stands.
- Proud to be a Leftist Lesbian Feminist. It’s the only real alternative to racial **heterosexist capitalism**.