

LADIES are doing it for themselves

SOPHIE MOORCOCK reports from this year's **LADYFEST**, the indie music phenomenon that's sweeping the world

Using ambitious programming with punk diy and politics in action, Ladyfest presents great bands, art and writing, and the impressive events, combined with multi-faceted feminism, has created an inspiring and mercurial movement.

This year, there were events all over the world – Europe, US, Asia and Australia – each featuring on several days of gigs, exhibitions, discussions, film or whatever regional organisers wanted to include. Britain's were hosted by Bristol, Exeter and Manchester. Festivals organise independently, but there is a real sense of community, with the net encouraging consensus without losing creative momentum.

Ladyfest was launched in Olympia, USA, three years ago to wide acclaim, and instead of capitalising on the success, the inventors threw out a generous message: you can do it too, they said; here's how. Energetic co-operation and good humour are at its heart, and it really shows in the atmosphere at festivals.

Venues are hired, bands booked, submissions sought, discussions planned. It's incredibly time-consuming work, must cost a fortune and, apart from performers (and not always then), no-one gets paid – poor women with rich spirits make it happen.

Men are welcome to events, are in bands and sometimes help with organisation, but take a back seat. Benefits in the preceding months – and occasionally a little sponsorship – fund the main events and if there is any money left afterwards, it's donated to, for example, women's safe houses, or given to another LF to keep the ball rolling.

The mix of straight women and dykes as organisers, participants and punters is very refreshing, and stronger for its "what of it" attitude. These mainly 20-somethings are here to tell us that this women's scene is where it's really going on and demonstrate that, with a little imagination, anything is possible.

As Ladyfest continues to grow, different ideas emerge about where to take it next. A single, massive festival every year (because many of us can't afford the fares and entrance fees to go to more than one), or lots of smaller events to ensure local input and influence? Because of a history of women being undervalued, Australian organisers are suggesting being paid, but that doesn't seem to be on the cards elsewhere.

That questions like these are asked reflects the strength and intelligence of Ladyfest. Meanwhile, it's the best fun in years, and the talent and audience gravitating towards LF events speak for themselves – that's really the point.

UNSKINNY – tune in, sign on, pig out

Hilarious, irreverent comedy by Lucy Sweet, dedicated to unabashed excess on a string with a "feature" on Culinary Shite from her "farmhouse kitchen high above the slums of Glasgow", and strips on Giro Chic, "a small taste of the crazy rock roll fashions of Britain's dispossessed!", and Ready Steady Drunk. The prolific Sweet also produces *Chica* – "embrace your inner slut" – a spoof women's mag including Stockport's premier sex columnist, Katie Slag, whose "reputation spreads from the toilets of Rotters nitespot to the Genito-Urinary clinic at Manchester Infirmary".

www.chicamagazine.co.uk



HOOKER

The stage just seems too small for the huge presence of singer-songwriter Zoe McVeigh whose band Hooker has been together for about three years. "I wanted to be in control musically. I had so many songs in my head and luckily I've found the people to work with – Danny and Matt. The main thing with Hooker is that it's simple. It's catchy, powerful, punchy, raw and to the point", says Zoe. There are traces of Siouxsie and PJ, but Hooker has outgrown any musical crushes and has a confident style all their own, and Zoe has a charismatic connection with the audience. The crowds love them and the clubs are playing the CD to popular demand. A second mini-album is in the pipeline, there will be a tour next year and the soonest you can see them is: 19 Nov Wigan @ Lux Bar, 20 Nov Newcastle (venue tbc), 27 Nov Bath @ Moles Club with Grav Train. www.hookerstuff.com

THE COMIX FESTIVAL

The Comic Book Queens presented the largest-ever exhibition of women's "comix" in the UK, originally in Bristol and then Manchester. www.bway.net/fly



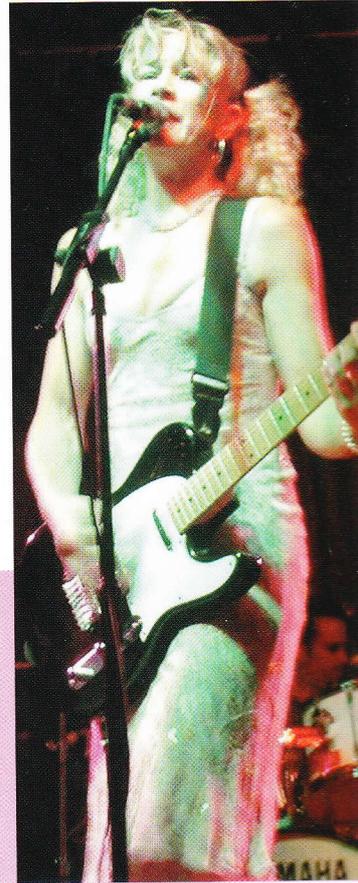
LINUS

Andy Roberts, guitarist with Linus, is “currently listening obsessively to the new EP by Hooker,” says Tammy Denitto, the singer. The Buzzcocks and *Jesus Christ Superstar* are a couple of the diverse influences on Linus, who played Ladyfests in Bristol, Manchester and Amsterdam this year. “I love the idea of women organising events for other women, just taking things into their own hands and just having fun with music and combining it with their political viewpoints,” says Deb Van De Geugten, the bass player. Linus is playing *Frock On* in Glasgow this December, which came out of Ladyfest last year. Tammy says, “I think pop girls – nice girls – are visible and allowed to exist, but indie girls in music are few and far between. Mainstream success means ingratiating yourself, and that’s too embarrassing for us.” www.linusland.co.uk

HOLLY GOLIGHTLY Strange romance, most shades of love, and Jean Rhys finds solace with Truman Capote in a motel somewhere between Manchester and Mississippi. The wry observation in the lyrics and mesmerising cycles of slipping and sliding guitar intrigue, seduce, and just won’t let go. Beautiful ugly all the way. www.bollygolightly.com

MOOZ

Haunting and playful, Mooz weave words of strychnine and honey through gritty guitar, graceful drums and a wild and wistful bass. There was no resisting the lure of this breathtaking band in Bristol – they break the rules, and it works – and they’re funny. Sadly, the drummer is going to Australia and they say they are no more. We’ll see. www.mooz.org.uk

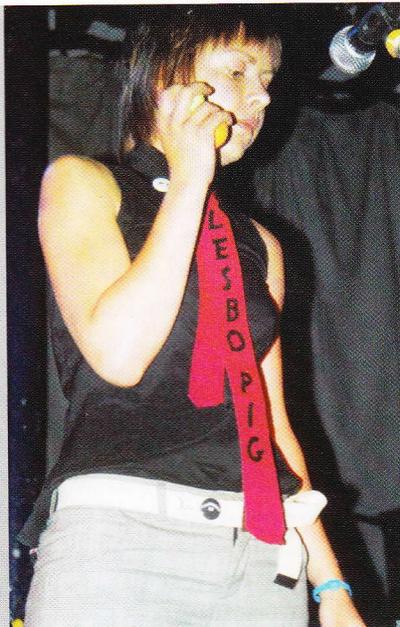


RITA LYNCH

Her soulful and edgy songs take me into the eye of her storm; one minute I think my heart’s going to break, the next I’m smiling at her home truths. Never fails to shake me to the core and then kiss me better.

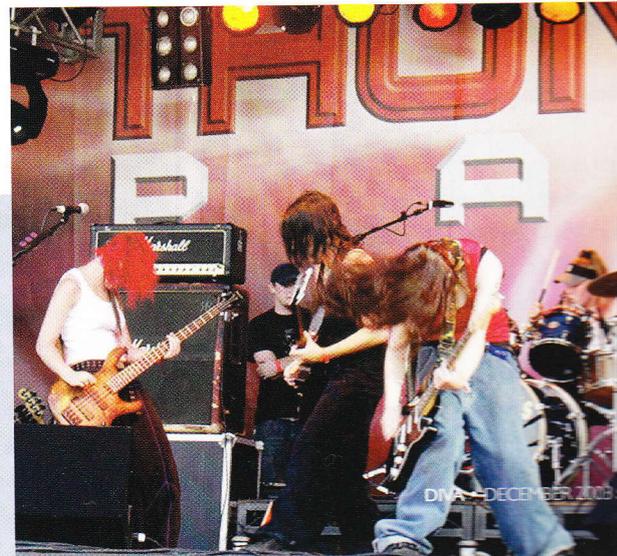
LESBO PIG

The best name for a band ever. Intensely queer – with songs like *Up Yr Ass* dedicated to Valerie Solanas and *Sexual Deviant* – and understated, with spoken word and quirky sounds. Their little CD, *Trailer Park*, comes with hand-printed pig – for lesbians; you’re on your own. lesbopig@hotmail.com



SUFFRAJETS

Romping rock ‘n’ roll and a stomp-and-sashay show from a stylish group of young, gifted mates. The Suffrajets are moving up (with Sony at their side, who allow them full control of their record releases and image). The first single is *Distinction* – the video for that is on Scuzz TV. The second single is *Just Good Friends*, and you can see the video on Kerrang TV, Scuzz TV and MTV2 (maybe). They’re running a competition to find a name for the new album, out next year, and any ideas can be sent via the website. www.thesuffrajets.com



launch

Seen and heard at Ladyfest

"I was wondering why it seemed as if gnarly dudes had taken over independent music once again, and why so many amazing punk-rock feminists seemed to be working separately from a community. So I just started thinking of something positive punk girls could do together that would be meaningful." *Allison Wolfe (AKA Babe Truth, pictured) interviewed in the Bristol listings 'zine, LF instigator and singer with Hawney Troof.*

GLOBAL TAKEOVER

"It's girls in different countries hearing about it and saying, I want to do this, and getting people involved in their local scene. The internet's got such a big part to play in it, with girls e-mailing each other in different countries so we're in touch but we're not intrinsically linked. We help each other out, and advise each other, but there's no-one in charge; each group works how they want." *Sarah Rose, organiser, Manchester.*

"It's a great opportunity for non-professional promoters to create something that's not really out there yet, and I like the idea that Ladyfest has mushroomed. You can take the name, but it's not a brand." *Tania Van Schalkwyk, organiser, Bristol.*



MUSIC

"I like playing Ladyfest because everything else is so male-oriented. It's all about NME boybands with scraggy hair, talking about how much they drank. That's not what I do music for." *Zoe McVeigh, singer in Hooker.*

"As a lesbian, I think it's important to have women's bands being heard. I suppose having lots of benefit gigs before the big event means you don't have to get big sponsorship to pay all the fees and artists." *Karen, attending Manchester benefit.*

"The internet's helped us reach people all over the world who've idly searched for us. It's more effective than the old fanzine days. It's interesting, hearing people proclaiming the end of the music business. Music journalists are losing some of their influence because you can find music for yourself and decide what you think." *Tammy Denitto, singer with Linus.*

ART

"We want to provide a demystification of the notion of The Artist, as this is historically situated within the male arena and absent of female experience." *Organisers of Ladyfest London last year.*

DANCE

"The dance performed by ordinary Solonese completely "turned upside down" the traditional dance which is supposed to be very softly danced, and full of Javanese ethics: they're not young, not lean, the silver hair is not neatly combed,

the lips aren't red with lipstick, but with areca-nuts they kept chewing all the time. Very relaxed, and just as they like it." *Ladyfest Jakarta organisers.*

"Looking to express the inner glitter of your soul? The Actionettes gently guide you in the ways of synchronised 60s' dance to a sound track of retro girl-group soul and pop." *Bristol's invitation to a workshop by the wonderful Actionettes dance troupe.*

FEMINISM

"Take a video camera and make a documentary/ film, long or short, "professional" or amateur, boring (okay, try not to...) or amazing on the theme of FEMINISM. Like... what do you have to say/ show about it... for or against, with or without, or both, and send us your work." *French (Nantes) organisers' submissions' invite.*

"We want to tell people that the word "feminism" isn't a negative term. It means anti-sexism, not reverse sexism. It means including women, not excluding men. We also want to show how necessary feminism still is." *Belgium (Liege) organisers.*

"If there's an opportunity to programme a woman who's just as interesting and talented, it could be taken. Women are seen as a novelty. Sex sells still. That's how it is really." *Lady Lucy, organiser, Bristol.*

"A sceptic might quip that riot grrl has come a long way in 10 years: from women who can't play guitars properly to women who can't operate synthesisers properly. And the sceptic might have a point." *Anxious man reviewing LF gig last year in The Independent. See the Slits' interview on breaking the rules.*

"There's almost a backlash in society over what the meaning of the word is." *Karla Hodgson, organiser, Australia.*

STRAIGHTS & DYKES

"We have such a mix of people. A lot of the organisers are gay, a lot of the bands are gay, but a lot of them aren't. It's not really anything that comes up in conversation; we've never had a problem with that." *Sarah Rose, Manchester organiser.*

"I don't know who's gay or straight, I haven't got a clue, I don't care; it's about women, and that's how it should be." *Hazel O'Keefe, Manchester organiser.*

EEEEEE

"Grass-roots and non-profit organisations often represent, and are symptomatic of, a larger gender issue; that being, how historically women have been undervalued and underpaid." *Karla Hodgson, organiser, Australia.*

"If it started to operate on a commercial basis, it would lose what it's all about. There'll always be younger women who haven't experienced it before who can carry it on." *Deb Van De Geugten, bass player with Linus.*

WHAT NEXT?

We're planning a 'zine, and women can get involved by contacting us through the website. *Annie Tollafield, organiser, Manchester. www.ladyfestmanchester.org*

"Things go in cycles; there'll always be a new bunch of people with their ideas. In Glasgow, Ladyfest mutated into Frock On, which is doing really well." *Tammy Denitto.*

riding female reggae spirit

With subversive wit, the Slits revolutionised music and inspired two generations. In a new formation, they performed at Ladyfest, New York, led by founding member, ARI-UP. Here, Tessa Pollitt, original bass player from the classic line-up, joins ARI in the dressing room after a Slits' gig in London last June. ARI's based in Jamaica and Tessa lives in England. More UK gigs are scheduled for November. **DEBBIE SMITH** and **SOPHIE MOORCOCK** took it all in



RIDING

ARI-UP ARI's drawing a horse, a sort of spliff-smoking, happy horse that shits at the same time as smoking a spliff. And has his long wood hanging out because he's letting it all out, relaxing. I had a horse when I was little, one that was already a little fucked-up and couldn't race anymore. So I used to train him and exercise him – me and Tessa are both experts at riding horses.

TESSA I am no expert, believe me, I'm an eternal beginner; there's always something more to learn, like when I got chased through a field by a gang of horses. I didn't know the horse-whispering language. Look, it's smoking a spliff through its willy.

ARI-UP The spliff's here but the dick always is really long when it hangs out. It always used to shock me how long a donkey or a horse's wood is. You know, I had a boyfriend whose wood was as big as a donkey's – it went down to his knees. You can't put all of that in. We were able to fuck, but he wouldn't put all of it in, because if he put all of it in, it'd go right through the womb. He was a freak anyway; I left him real quick.

TESSA He would have murdered you in the act of love.

ARI-UP Death by pum-pum. I love that word, pum-pum. The other stuff's too grown up for me.

FEMALE

ARI-UP We were put into exile in Siberia for a while; we were very sabotaged, and felt like you go to Russia, in the cold snow of Siberia, and that's how it was back then when you're born ahead of time. So, all through the years I've been playing music, and I'm not going to just do my own stuff alone; obviously, I'm going to do some Slits. The mixture of the creation of the Slits and the revelation – that means the continuation of the Slits, which is my new material, which is a lot of the stuff that I think we would have made on the third album... Tessa, help me.

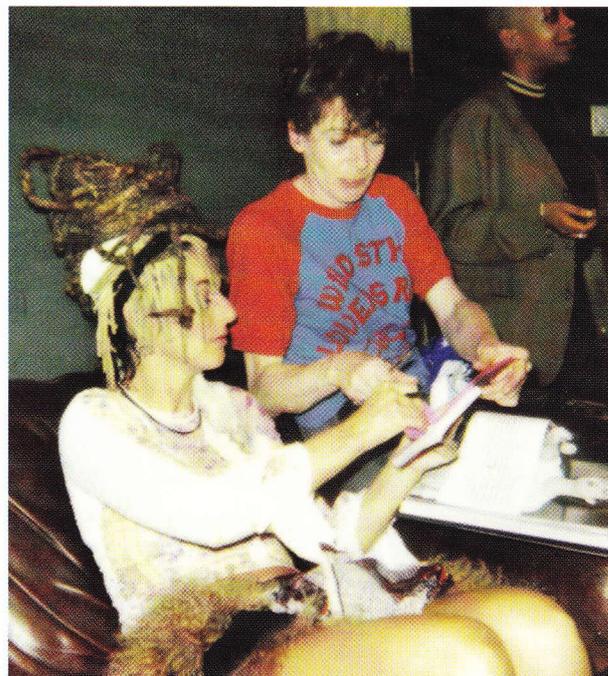
TESSA No, I'm thinking of other things. I'm thinking about tomorrow.

ARI-UP I think it was a really male-chauvinistic dominated world. We were on our own, we made it on our own; we weren't like the Runaways or playing like cocky guys – rock the guitar on your dick. We were different, we were really female.

TESSA There's a female music as opposed to men's music; we're opposite, but we each have a piece of the other in us. I wish we could respect our differences.

ARI-UP In our day it was, "what, that doesn't work from A-Z, no, you can't play that chord there, or bridge like that, it's unheard of". And that was in the punks, it was in the hippies, it was in the rock 'n' roll and it was in the reggae, even reggae artists – Jamaican guys as well. So we are more like, wherever the flow goes that's the way it's got to go – wherever the emotion of that song goes. It's funny you mention that female thing – I said today it's more like an ocean of emotion.

TESSA Playing out of feeling, instead of logic.



REGGAE (& RASTA)

TESSA I love reggae; I love the bass in reggae. I love the space and the way it gets inside your bones.

ARI-UP I'm not committed religious; I'm into Rasta at first – even now – but I cannot worship another person, Haile Selassie. Really, I think the essential is the African roots and vegetarianism – not in a hippy way, in an African way.

TESSA The music side for me is what attracts me to it, particularly Jamaica.

ARI-UP The music is really only so great because it is, at some point, inspired by Rasta. Otherwise, they got no form of identity. I didn't think that was only important for black people, I thought that was important for all people – to really acknowledge that African power. Malcolm X and black power.

SPIRIT

TESSA We were never into the commercial side of it. It was about the liberation of being able to express yourself.

ARI-UP We had to fight everyday for artistic control. An important part of the Slits breaking up was because record companies were fucking us left and right – "oh, let's make it a gimmick".

TESSA It was never right.

ARI-UP We wanted it the way we wanted it. In the end, it broke us up because it brought us down too much. No man can stand alone like an island, and we were really an island. We put a strong front up and we were strong.

TESSA Even though we're not together, on our separate paths we've continued with the same spirit.