The Grassroots Leadership & the Arts for Social Change Corner

Wasn't That A Time Episode 107: Celebr...
by Wasn't That A Time

"There and Back Again" An Audiovisual Journey Into Roadwork, 1978-2018

By Amy Horowitz, Introduction by Susan J. Erenrich



Susan (Susie) J. Erenrich is a social movement history documentarian. She uses the arts for social change to tell stories about transformational leadership, resilience, and societal shifts as a result of mobilization efforts by ordinary citizens. Her career in nonprofit/arts management, civic engagement, community organizing and community service spans more than four decades. She has diverse teaching experience at universities, public schools, and community-based programs for at risk, low-income populations; has edited and produced historical audio recordings and anthologies; and has extensive performance, choreography, and production experience. Susie holds a Ph.D. in Leadership and Change from Antioch University. She is the editor of *The Cost of Freedom: Voicing a Movement After Kent State 1970; Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement; Kent & Jackson State 1970-1990;* co-editor of *Grassroots Leadership & the Arts for Social Change* (a volume in ILA's BLB series); and co-editor of *A*

Grassroots Leadership & Arts for Social Change Primer for Educators, Organizers, Activists & Rabble-Rousers. She was the producer/host of *Wasn't That A Time: Stories & Songs That Moved The Nation*, a live community radio broadcast that ran on WERA.FM for five years and is now available on-demand.



Amy Horowitz is interested in disputed territories in music cultures and everyday lives. Horowitz moves between academic, music industry, and social justice arts networks. Her research and courses include global indigenous studies, music in/as disputed territory, Arab Jewish popular music, arts and human rights, and Living Jerusalems. She participates in coalitions across differences, and against racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and misogyny. She co-founded Roadwork and the Sisterfire Festival and was artist representative for Sweet Honey In The Rock for nineteen years. Horowitz was executive producer for the reissue of Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966 and received a Grammy Award as reissue co-producer of Anthology of American Folk Music while acting director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Her book Mediterranean Israeli Music and the Politics of the Aesthetic received a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award. She created "Protest Music as Responsible Citizenship" a project featuring Pete Seeger, Harry Belafonte, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Holly Near. She is senior fellow in Israel Studies at Indiana University and co-director of GALACTIC (Global Arts Language Arts Culture Tradition Indigenous Communities) with Navajo Technical University (Learn More about Global Indigenous Studies at: https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2018/summer/thomas). She holds an MA in Jewish Studies from New York University and a PhD in folklore from University of Pennsylvania. For more information, please visit: https://amyhorowitz.org/

Dear Friends,

Welcome! This issue of the *Grassroots Leadership & the Arts for Social Change Corner* features a column penned by Amy Horowitz. I formally met Amy on July 7, 2018 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts' Millennium Stage in Washington, D.C. She was at the venue to kick off the fortieth anniversary celebration of Roadwork and Sisterfire, which you'll learn about below. The event was part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The purpose of the commemoration was to shine a light on the group that literally helped put women artists on the map in 1978.

For readers not familiar with Roadwork, the D.C.-based multiracial coalition was a groundbreaking enterprise. Women leaders, involved in social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, came together through the arts to work for a more diverse, inclusive, and tolerant society. Their intersectional activism across gender, race, class, and sexual orientation galvanized thousands, helped break down barriers, and created lasting transformational change.

Amy's column is accompanied by an episode of *Wasn't That A Time* that aired on March 8, 2019. The episode, that marked International Women's Day, featured some of the troubadours of conscience on the Roadwork roster. "International Women's Day is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of their countries and communities" (http://www.un.org/en/events/womensday/). This month's column celebrates the courageous leadership and coalition building of Sisterfire and Roadwork organizers. They were exemplary trailblazers, so we are dedicating this space to them.

I hope readers and listeners are moved by Amy's piece and the companion *Wasn't That A Time* Tribute. It is an important glance into a moment in time that transposed history from the bottom up.

Susie

"There and Back Again" An Audiovisual Journey Into Roadwork, 1978-2018

By Amy Horowitz, PhD

I have been asked to join you in virtual community to write about the Sisterfire celebration marking Roadwork's 40th anniversary that took place in July 2018 as part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Since many may be new to Roadwork and Sisterfire, I see this audio/visual essay as a journey "There and Back Again," to quote the title of a song composed by the 2018 Sisterfire curator, Toshi Reagon. In our real lives, time does not exist in chronologies — that is, we live simultaneously in past/present/future. So, I'll move between historical narratives, future aspirations, and the actual goings-on at the National Mall on July 8th at … whatever you want to call it: Sisterfire reunion, celebration, ritual of passage, revival, to be determined.

In 1977, Roadwork was an idea brewing on the back porch of a Washington, D.C., row house. Many late nights were filled with heated discussion about what the organization would be. Was it possible to launch an organization based on the concept of coalition, of women working together, sharing power and responsibility across racial, cultural, and class lines to produce, promote, and discover women's culture as it exists on a global level? The concept of coalition was not new; however, most coalitions were formed by a coming together of various organizations working around issues where a common thread could be found. There were very few models for an organization that was in itself a coalition. The name "Roadwork" expressed the vision that was developing: the work of building roads for women artists and the search for our historical links to women's cultural contributions missing from history books and from White feminist herstories.



In this "There and Back Again" (above) 1982 Sistersparks hang the banner on snow fencing in Takoma Park, Maryland, and (below) artists and Sistersparks join in the finale of Sisterfire 2018 on the National Mall.

1982 Photo Credit Sharon Farmer
2018 Photo Credit Ryan Whittermore

The Spark of an Idea: Sisterfire 1982

SISTERFIRE was one of the clearest manifestations of the principles of Roadwork. The festival grew to be a concentrated celebration of the booking, production, and coalition work that we carried out year-round. I can remember the spring of 1982: The Roadwork house at 1475 Harvard Street NW was buzzing with activity. The phones were ringing off the hook with producers checking in on national tour dates for Sweet Honey In The Rock, Cris Williamson, June Jordan, June Millington. Our high school intern (also drummer, bass player, songwriter, singer), Toshi Reagon, ran across the street to the All Souls Church copying machine. The weary wheatpasting crew had

worked late, hit The Florida Avenue Grill for breakfast, and was still at work plastering the city with posters — in the 1980s we publicized events by pasting posters on actual walls instead of posting virtually on social media.

The Roadwork house was especially teeming with folks as we were about to produce a one-day fundraising event to offset the traumatic cuts to grassroots arts that were crushing us as Ronald Reagan's policies took hold. "Sisterfire" was the name that emerged as board members and staff sat around the dining room table at Bernice Johnson Reagon's Kennedy Street home. In addition to the Roadwork staff, Sistersparks — volunteers and tenants who traded hours for low rent while attending law school or working at progressive local organizations — filled the house. The backbone and heart of the forthcoming fundraiser, Sistersparks were people who resonated with the inclusive, urban, multiracial mission of the Festival. Sweet Honey In The Rock, Holly Near, Cris Williamson, Alexis De Veaux, Michelle Parkerson, Women of the Calabash, and The Harp Band had volunteered to perform.



Sisterfire - 1982

Roadwork, Inc.

56:07

Listen to the words and sounds of Sisterfire 1982

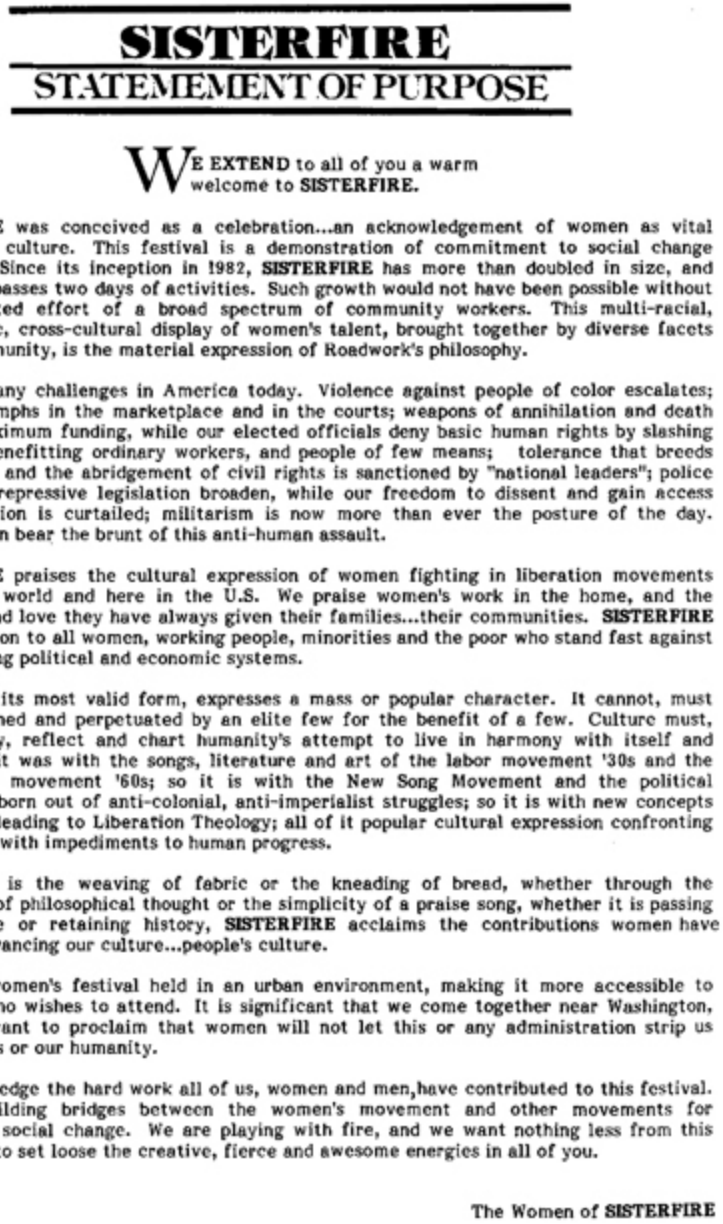
Genesis of Roadwork

Founded in 1978 by Bernice Johnson Reagon and me, Roadwork, Inc. was created to "put women's culture on the road" through tours, festivals, concerts, and workshops. This was a time, not unlike today, when activist-artists engaged in urgent responses to violations of human rights in Latin America and in Wilmington, North Carolina, the AIDS epidemic, nuclear madness, racism, and the ongoing war against women.

In the cauldron of local, national, international, multi-racial, cross-cultural issues, Roadwork wove together a coalition effort based on artistic collaboration among diverse communities. We saw ourselves as the children of the Black southern civil rights and the labor movements, and we were determined to be a visible force in the emerging women's and lesbian/gay rights movements, both of which were too often dismissed as irrelevant to larger social justice concerns.

Roadwork was born in a context of profound sexism. Misogyny in the music and entertainment industries severely limited women, especially women of color promoters, recording engineers, and independent artists. Despite these obstacles, an underground women's culture of poets, visual artists, filmmakers, and musicians flourished from the 1970s into the 1990s, finding voice in coffeehouses, independently produced concerts, festivals, and protest rallies.

Women and feminist men formed record labels, organizations, and networks like Olivia Records, Redwood Records, the Women's Music Distribution Network, Seattle's Riot Grrl movement and grunge scene, and Boston's Rock Against Sexism. Underground festivals were born such as the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, the New England Women's Musical Retreat, and Roadwork's own Sisterfire Festival. Independent producers and distributors built alternative economic models that challenged the mainstream music business.



SISTERFIRE

STATEMEMENT OF PURPOSE

WE EXTEND to all of you a warm welcome to **SISTERFIRE.**

SISTERFIRE was conceived as a celebration...an acknowledgement of women as vital carriers of culture. This festival is a demonstration of commitment to social change and hope. Since its inception in 1982, **SISTERFIRE** has more than doubled in size, and now encompasses two days of activities. Such growth would not have been possible without the concerted effort of a broad spectrum of community workers. This multi-racial, multi-ethnic, cross-cultural display of women's talent, brought together by diverse facets of our community, is the material expression of Roadwork's philosophy.

We face many challenges in America today. Violence against people of color escalates; racism triumphs in the marketplace and in the courts; weapons of annihilation and death receive maximum funding, while our elected officials deny basic human rights by slashing programs benefitting ordinary workers, and people of few means; tolerance that breeds homophobia and the abridgement of civil rights is sanctioned by "national leaders"; police power and repressive legislation broaden, while our freedom to dissent and gain access to information is curtailed; militarism is now more than ever the posture of the day. Women often bear the brunt of this anti-human assault.

SISTERFIRE praises the cultural expression of women fighting in liberation movements around the world and here in the U.S. We praise women's work in the home, and the nurturing and love they have always given their families...their communities. **SISTERFIRE** is a salutation to all women, working people, minorities and the poor who stand fast against dehumanizing political and economic systems.

Culture, in its most valid form, expresses a mass or popular character. It cannot, must not be defined and perpetuated by an elite few for the benefit of a few. Culture must, of necessity, reflect and chart humanity's attempt to live in harmony with itself and nature. So it was with the songs, literature and art of the labor movement '30s and the civil rights movement '60s; so it is with the New Song Movement and the political formations born out of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggles; so it is with new concepts of religion leading to Liberation Theology; all of it popular cultural expression confronting and dealing with impediments to human progress.

Whether it is the weaving of fabric or the kneading of bread, whether through the intricacies of philosophical thought or the simplicity of a praise song, whether it is passing on language or retaining history, **SISTERFIRE** acclaims the contributions women have made to advancing our culture...people's culture.

This is a women's festival held in an urban environment, making it more accessible to everyone who wishes to attend. It is significant that we come together near Washington, D.C. We want to proclaim that women will not let this or any administration strip us of our rights or our humanity.

We acknowledge the hard work all of us, women and men,have contributed to this festival. We are building bridges between the women's movement and other movements for progressive social change. We are playing with fire, and we want nothing less from this event than to set loose the creative, fierce and awesome energies in all of you.

The Women of **SISTERFIRE**

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Roadwork emerged at a time when the United States was engaged in widespread covert intelligence operations both domestically (in opposition to civil rights and anti-war movements) and globally (in places like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Chile, and countries in the Middle East). Anita Bryant was campaigning against lesbian and gay rights across the country (1977-1980s); Jerry Falwell and the self-proclaimed Moral Majority were attacking women's rights, abortion access, and gay rights; California voters were facing a ballot initiative that would have banned openly gay people from teaching in schools (1978); and a conservative Supreme Court was rolling back civil rights gains.



Bernice Johnson Reagon, Amy Horowitz, and Toshi Seeger at the Clearwater Hudson River Revival 1970s.

The idea that culture could be a strategy of resistance lay at the heart of Roadwork's mission. Through concerts that brought activists and artists into collaboration, Roadwork inspired tens of thousands of people to generate social change in reactionary times. Roadwork trained a generation of organizers, producers, and women leaders to recognize that domestic politics in the United States are integrally tied to struggles for justice globally. Roadwork mobilized diverse audiences and built lasting coalitions across the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic class.

Roadwork's guiding principles, articles of incorporation, and by-laws derived from a Coalition Statement that Dr. Reagon and I wrote in 1977 to serve as the principles of engagement for a recording project between Holly Near's White-women-run company, Redwood Records, and the Black women singers of Sweet Honey In The Rock. The

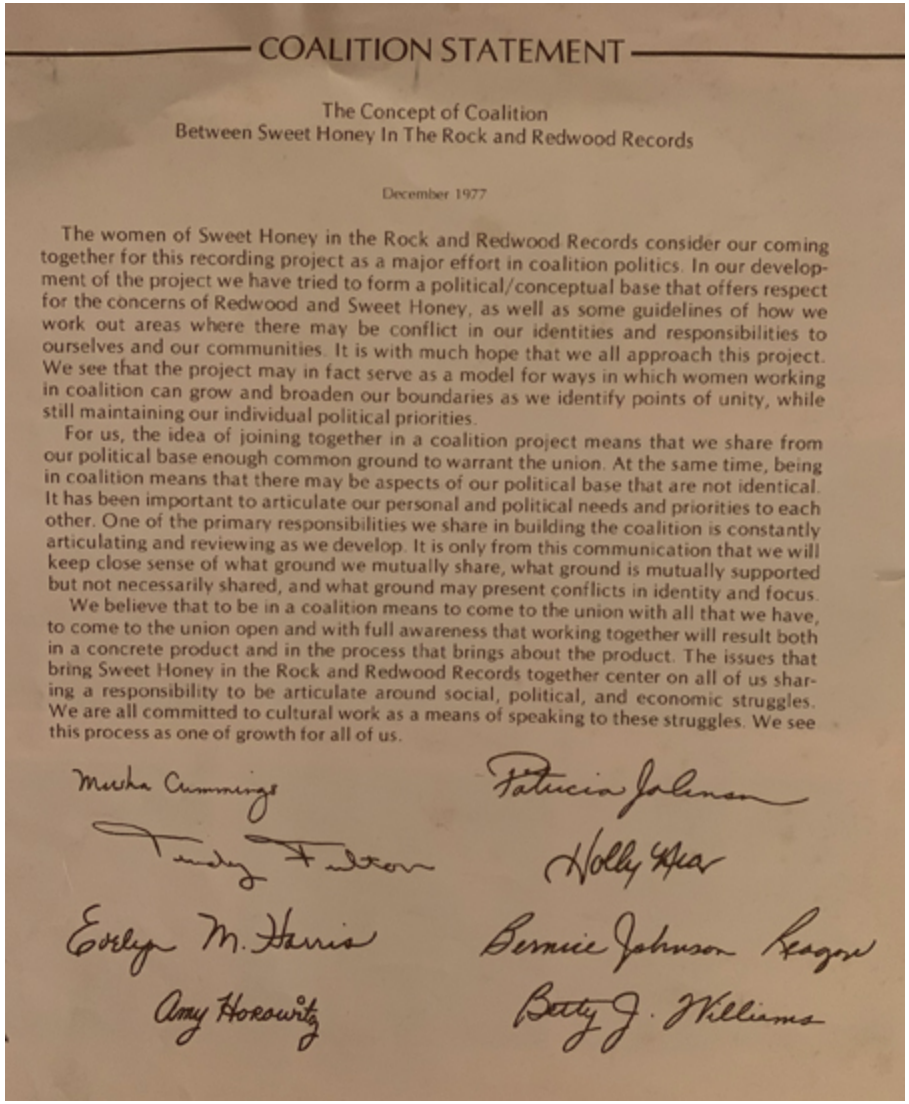
recording project and a West Coast tour that I booked with Holly's support laid the groundwork, or Roadwork, for the organizational principles that we developed in D.C.

By August 1978, Konda Mason had joined me on the back porch and together we booked Sweet Honey In The Rock, The Varied Voices of Black Women, June Jordan, Holly Near, Alive, and the Wallflower Order Dance Collective in addition to producing concerts, including the first annual Sweet Honey In The Rock anniversary concert (their sixth anniversary). Over the next twenty years, we produced a dizzying number of local concerts and national/global tours for over thirty women artists and groups.

Improvising New Leadership Alternatives

We were activists in our twenties and early thirties, and we were making the organization up as we went along. On the one hand was our concrete work of booking tours and producing concerts, while on the other hand was our work with organizations throughout the United States and globally in how to work across difference — even as we tried to do so ourselves — and providing support for organizers of D.C.-based marches. We were trying to build a multiracial coalition structure. For a leadership model, we sought guidance from Roadwork co-founder Bernice Johnson Reagon's work in the southern Black civil rights movement as singer, activist, and organizer and we sought lessons from our own work in anti-war collectives, women's health centers, and women's and gay rights movements.

We were aligned with the developing network of mainly White, lesbian women's music producers, distributors, bookstores, and festivals. We were also aligned with Black



COALITION STATEMENT

The Concept of Coalition
Between Sweet Honey In The Rock and Redwood Records

December 1977

The women of Sweet Honey in the Rock and Redwood Records consider our coming together for this recording project as a major effort in coalition politics. In our development of the project we have tried to form a political/conceptual base that offers respect for the concerns of Redwood and Sweet Honey, as well as some guidelines of how we work out areas where there may be conflict in our identities and responsibilities to ourselves and our communities. It is with much hope that we all approach this project. We see that the project may in fact serve as a model for ways in which women working in coalition can grow and broaden our boundaries as we identify points of unity, while still maintaining our individual political priorities.

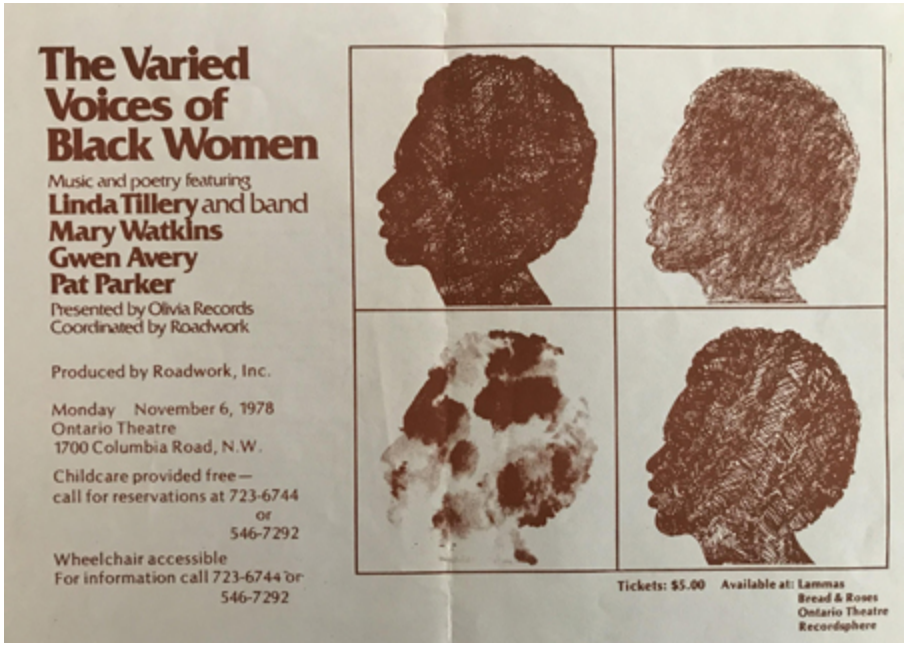
For us, the idea of joining together in a coalition project means that we share from our political base enough common ground to warrant the union. At the same time, being in coalition means that there may be aspects of our political base that are not identical. It has been important to articulate our personal and political needs and priorities to each other. One of the primary responsibilities we share in building the coalition is constantly articulating and reviewing as we develop. It is only from this communication that we will keep close sense of what ground we mutually share, what ground is mutually supported but not necessarily shared, and what ground may present conflicts in identity and focus.

We believe that to be in a coalition means to come to the union with all that we have, to come to the union open and with full awareness that working together will result both in a concrete product and in the process that brings about the product. The issues that bring Sweet Honey in the Rock and Redwood Records together center on all of us sharing a responsibility to be articulate around social, political, and economic struggles. We are all committed to cultural work as a means of speaking to these struggles. We see this process as one of growth for all of us.

Mirha Cummings
Patricia Johnson
Trudy Fulton
Holly Near
Evelyn M. Harris
Bernice Johnson Reagon
Amy Horowitz
Betty J. Williams

Click to Enlarge

church, festival and feminist groups and together we were building an alternative music network. At the same time, we were also intent on overturning the music industry, invading it, and taking it over. We saw ourselves as grassroots movement builders, infiltrators and rabble rousers. In fact, we were allergic to the idea of leadership. The leadership models we observed in corporate, government, and progressive left circles fell short. In policies and practices, sexism, classism, homophobia, and racism were rampant. This allergy to leadership was a point of pride at the time; now it prompts critical reflection. We also resisted the (mis)leading notion that building an organization is the work of one person or a small handful of people. This is rarely the case. The story that often remains untold is of the many people and the hundreds of thousands of hours that go into creating and sustaining a vision.



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Signposts

We chose the name Roadwork because we felt that in order to put radical, and primarily women of color artists on the road we would have to build the roads. We liberated an orange and black Roadwork sign from a nearby construction site and placed it on the front porch, a defiant symbol of the Roadwork ahead.

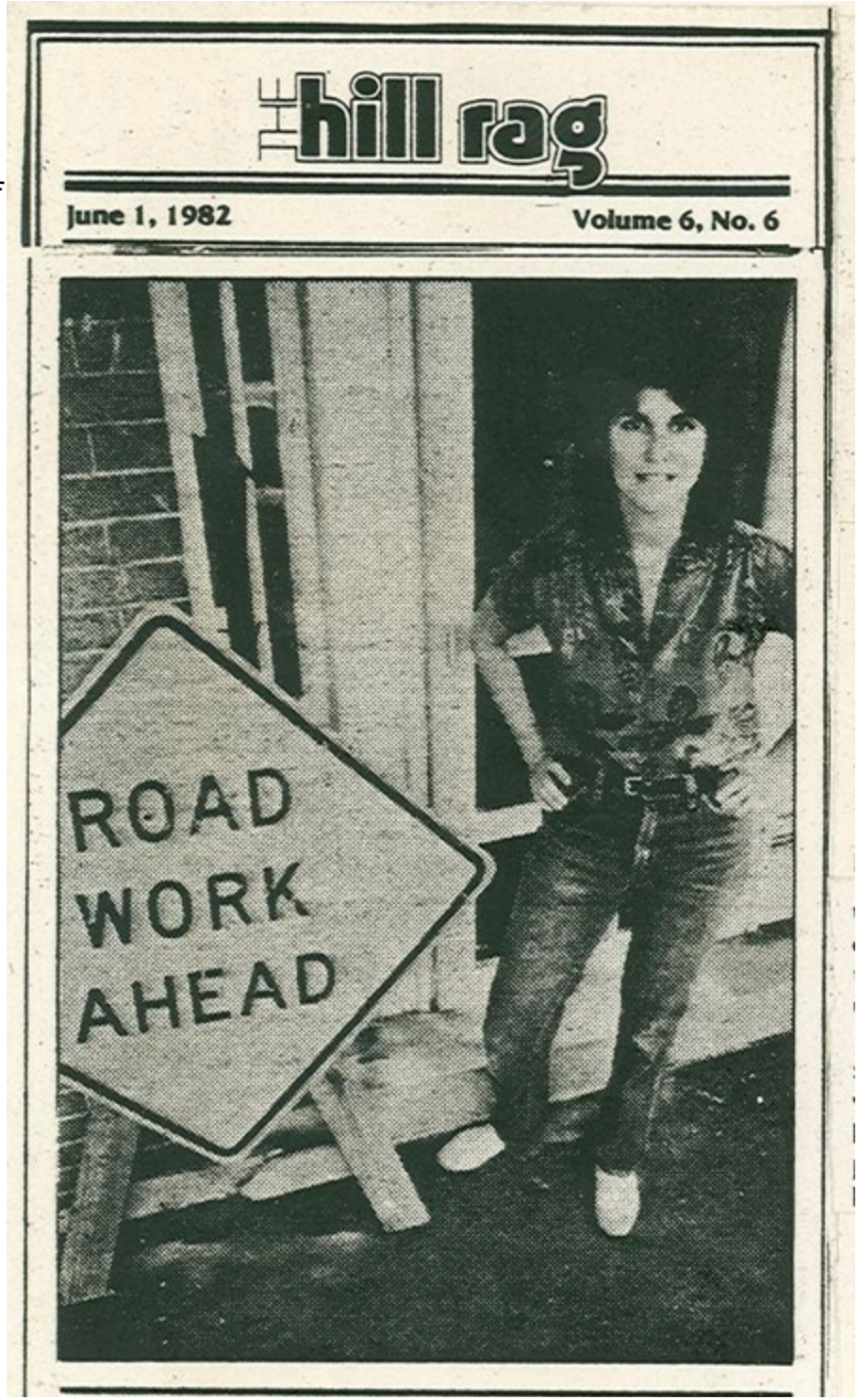
Other signposts were developing. The Black Lesbian Combahee River Collective's pioneering work on race, gender, and sexual orientation was deeply instructive. Their challenge to the White feminist movement and their "open to all" position resonated with our evolving direction. Their stance about inclusion informed what we were hoping to build at Roadwork:

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

The Power and Perils of Coalition

Conservative reaction to the gains of the civil rights movement and the women's movement led to the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980. Four days later on November 8th, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon called out the need to build coalition when she introduced *Echo* at Roadwork's Sweet Honey In The Rock 7th Anniversary concert at All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. One of Roadwork's volunteers, a young Black woman housing activist named Yulanda Ward, had just been murdered and the election weighed heavy. Dr. Reagon's call, digitized and transcribed from that concert, reverberates today like an echo:

This next song, the words, were written by Assata Shakur. She says, "Everything we see, we have seen before." I mean, you can go around and be shocked about being in Washington, D.C., and be shocked about Yulanda Ward being killed, about sixteen children killed in Atlanta, and be shocked about the Klan gunning people down …. But this poem says, we know about this, and there's something we have to



do, because we do know what it means for us. First, we've got to take what we know very seriously. It can get you killed, as we have seen. And the things we sing about, some of them are building things so that we stay together as human beings, other things are really about what we see happening to ourselves and to our community, and Black people in this country, and human beings in this country, and you know Reagan's been here before to Washington. You don't just live through it! You don't just coast through this decade! You don't get to sleep through! (Applause). If you are still here in 1990 and in the year 2000, it is going to be because you have been visible…. It is very important that all of us find some place to be and to organize with people who sort of have the same issues you have, so one day, if you disappear, someone will miss you if you're gone. (Applause). It is very much open season for Black people in this country. We can't just read about it, and about the FBI sent down to Atlanta to look for those children. There was a time when they lynched Black men in this country, and when you get them sort of young it does something to you, or it should. So, we hope that this gathering tonight is some kind of coming together. We sing about a lot of things because we feel a lot of things.



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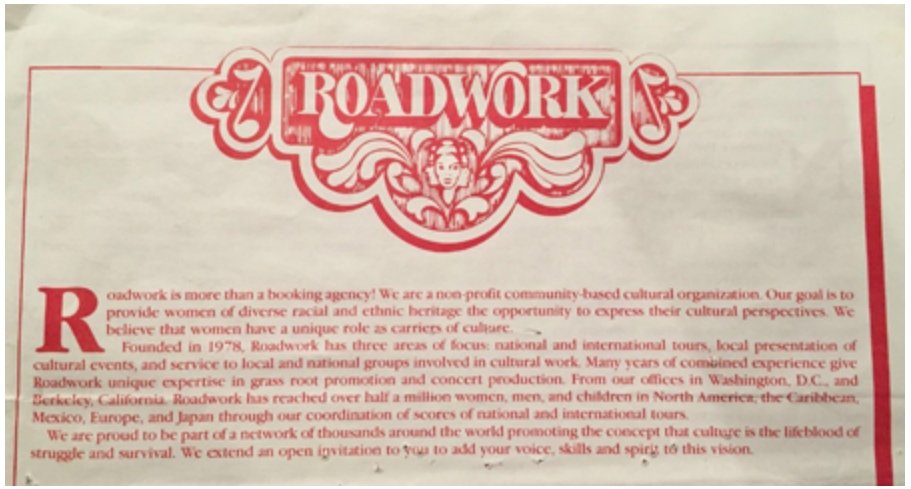
Dr. Reagon laid out coalition principles rooted in the historical institution building of southern Black organizers, in this case, Sojourner Truth, taking us beyond the moment to a fuller genesis history of movement building in this country:

> *It's like the tradition of Sojourner Truth, who could talk against slavery and for women's rights in the same breath without choking. And we must be on our case about our inability to stretch across issues — [about how we may] be correct in one position and [unconsciously] oppressive and bigoted in another. (Applause)*

And there we were at Roadwork … a small cohort of primarily women-loving-women learning how to work together even as we built the physical concert and festival stages, came together across difference, gathered across asymmetrical relationship to one another. There we were moving against homophobia in the left and in communities of faith, fighting racism in the White women's movement, challenging women's exclusion in the music industry, fighting the AIDS epidemic, and standing against the massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. On the one hand, we assumed that our shared sexual orientation made it all okay. But it was not okay. Issues of racism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia threatened to drown out the applause in All Souls Church. We hurt each other constantly; we did not know everything we needed to know either about ourselves or about each other, and racism was not just "out there" but in the White women in Roadwork. We were a coalition of learners.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon later went on to write, coalition is by definition uncomfortable because it presupposes meeting across difference. That's why it is called coalition and not home. It is not easy to build a coalition because although we "share" experiences of hurt, pain, anger,





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disappointment, and transgression, we often do not recognize the hurt in others. Forming coalition with others implies seeking common ground while identifying issues of divergence and disagreement. These are what I have described in previous writings as "disputed territories" in both geopolitical and internal locations, that coexist within each of us. We each bring multiple identities and disputed inner territories to the coalition table. Being in coalition means that we need tools to survive the hurt we cause each other and ourselves. Dr. Reagon keenly observed that coalition means getting comfortable with the discomfort of disagreement and fighting against being surprised and disappointed in one another when the thorny stuff pricks us, whether it is the racism of White women, divergent political positions on Palestine, asymmetries of class, education gaps and class, and generational divides.



Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon speaks about the importance of coalition at the West Coast Women's Festival. With Dr. Shirley Childress Johnson (Of Blessed Memory)

In summer of 1981, Dr. Reagon arrived at the West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival and took the stage shortly after an explosive incident. She delivered a stirring, improvised oratory on coalition that formed the basis of her canonical essay, *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*, originally published by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which was founded by Barbara Smith (who also co-founded the Combahee River Collective).

As Bernice often said: "If you are feeling comfortable, you are not in coalition." Her essay drew upon the West Coast Women's Festival incident, but in broader strokes, her understanding of coalition came from growing up Black in Albany, Georgia; organizing in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; demonstrating at Albany State and studying at Spelman; negotiating across difference at the Smithsonian; and working in The DC Black Repertory Theatre, Sweet Honey In The Rock, and Roadwork.

For the fledgling group at Roadwork, Reagon's thinking on coalition provided a backbone and a cautionary tale. Being in coalition didn't mean becoming best friends. On the one hand, Roadwork tried to operate as a tight-knit family — a brigade of wheatpasting freedom fighters that sought nothing less than the transformation of society. But what about self-transformation? The Roadwork coalition became an unsafe environment when we placed

ourselves and our institutional structure above and outside the issues we were fighting externally. In this way the "personal is political" became a lip-service phrase rather than a clarion call and created a collision of intention and unrealistic expectation. Coalition is best approached as a place to do some good work with others with whom you may not completely agree. It is not a place to find an intimate friend circle where the expectation is deep resonance. It's complex. We argue with our friends and we argue in coalition — but the terms of engagement are different.

These realizations would later inform my academic work on disputed territory, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the asymmetries between European and Mizrahi Jews. What I began to see through Roadwork was that coming together and sharing music across difference did not erase difference or create symmetry out of asymmetry. In fact, the expectation that a shared moment on stage, or in an all-night wheatpasting foray, would erase difference is romantic and problematic. In fact, shared experience can mask issues of racism, homophobia, sexism, and class — creating an illusion that in the euphoria of communal harmony the issues are resolved. I began to ask whether collective encounters across difference are a dress rehearsal for overcoming asymmetry or something that masks the asymmetry? This is not to say that shared moments are illegitimate, but there should be no illusion that a song will bring peace. Looking back, I see how we stumbled over the asymmetries of our diversity: race, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, urban/rural, north/south, east/west.

Back to That Day in May 1982

We were busy trying to create a suitable location in the house for a reporter from none other than *The Washington Post* to interview us about Sisterfire. Furniture was sparse, though more plentiful than in 1979 when Smithsonian Festival co-founder Ralph Rinzler visited and sat on a floor pillow in his suit and tie. Fortunately, the reporter was Richard Harrington, who had previously written for the underground papers.

Roadwork During 1982-1994

Seeing ourselves in print in *The Washington Post* and, more importantly, the success of our first Sisterfire were organization-shifters for Roadwork. We created a Board of Directors — not just names for the IRS, but people who met and figured out a way forward. We gained more visibility, DC Arts Commission and Humanities Council awarded us grants, and Mayor Marion Barry proclaimed June 26, 1982 Sisterfire Day. Volunteers offered legal, graphic, and accounting expertise. We created committees for fundraising, artist friends, and direct mail. Grants came in from the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Information Agency. Sisterfire grew, from a one-day event in a Takoma Park field to two days with three stages at the Upper Marlboro Equestrian Center. Sisterfire presented Alice Walker, Tracy Chapman, Hazel Dickens, Elizabeth Cotten, and Ronnie Gilbert. Alicia

Partnoy, Moving Star Hall Singers, Hala Deeb Jabour, and Sara Alexander shared stages with Sweet Honey, Holly Near, Cris Williamson and Alix Dobkin. And the audiences, marketplace vendors, and volunteers reflected this diversity.

And then in 1987, a controversial incident changed everything. It is not surprising that the explosion that put Sisterfire into a twenty-year hibernation was a conflict in the marketplace between two White lesbian separatist vendors and two Black gay male Sisterspark volunteers. Much has been written about the volatility of gender and race in the marketplace. Still it was difficult to remain academic during the explosion. When gay Black men/Sisterspark volunteers saw that a White woman-only space had been created in the marketplace, they reiterated the Festival policy, that all spaces were open to all people. A confrontation ensued and we asked all four to leave the festival, but the outcry from White lesbian separatists (see their opinion piece and our response in the October, 1987 issue of *off our backs*) resulted in reduced attendance in 1988 and 1989.

In 1989, Dr. Reagon invited me to write a chapter about my work with Sweet Honey and Roadwork for her edited book, *We Who Believe in Freedom, Sweet Honey in the Rock...Still on the Journey*. When I turned it in, she noted that I had left out Sisterfire and helped me craft a way to write about the end of the festival. We came up with the idea that Sisterfire was hibernating. "I like to think that Sisterfire is sleeping, in hibernation, gathering new strength and insights from the efforts of the first years. I like to think that she will wake up renewed again … soon" (p. 194).

And hibernate Sisterfire did. Or so we thought!

Turns out that Sisterfire showed up at the Apollo Theater in 2015 when Toshi Reagon connected the young women producers of the *Women of the World Festival* with our work in D.C. In a story about the festival, *Newsweek* described Toshi as "a veteran of several female-focused festivals, including Sisterfire in the 1980s." And at Spelman College in Atlanta, it turned out, "SisterFire" is an open mic that encourages expression of all kinds, catering to women-identified, gender-nonconforming, and queer people. Roadwork's newest board member, Nicole Barden, attended the 2018 reunion at the Smithsonian thinking that it was in some way connected to her alma mater, and that was when she discovered the ancestry of Spelman's SisterFire.

I share these stories of other Sisterfire sightings because they are evidence of how important it is to "leave a trail" as Dr. Reagon encouraged us to. Leaving a trail is not for nostalgia but because there is something of value to pass on in the work that we did, in the successes that we celebrated, and in the mistakes that we made.

Disputed Territory - Asymmetry

As Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it" (p. 91). Writing the Sisterfire section in the Sweet Honey anthology was a way of working against flight and denial. I took these lessons into my doctoral studies, where I put them to work in writing about Arab Jews in Israel and the discrimination *Mizrahim* experience. In the course of my studies, my Roadwork experience in building multiracial coalitions led to my understanding that disputed territories are more than geographical locations. Looking back on the idealism of our coalition statement, I questioned the simplified premise of an equal playing field, what Freire called "a horizontal relationship in which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence" (p. 91). In what way could we have more directly articulated the unequal experiences that we embodied? As I researched Arab and European Israeli Jewish music, the unequal playing field became obvious. I wondered how it must have felt for women of color to enter into an idealistic paradigm that did not account for the White racist foundations of the society embedded in our own alternative experiment.

In most communication across difference, the dialoguers are asymmetrical partners. Looking at music in the asymmetrical context of Israel and Palestine, or back to the Roadwork days, are only two of many examples of how the aesthetics of art and culture are by definition political. For example, The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra founded by Israeli conductor/pianist Daniel Barenboim and Palestinian literary critic/pianist Edward Said comprises musicians from Israel and Islamic countries. Critics have asked whether, despite Barenboim's outspoken opposition



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Laying the Roadwork For Sisterfire

By Richard Harrington

Amy Horowitz of the Washington-based production company Roadwork has been booking, presenting, showcasing, pushing and promoting women's culture for so long that she can be excused for the emotional high she's getting from today's day-long, open-air festival at Takoma Park Junior High. Sisterfire brings together several of the vanguard performers in women's music—Cris Williamson, Holly Near, Washington's Sweet Honey in the Rock—as well as featuring jazz and Caribbean music and dance, crafts and issue-oriented workshops.

"It's the first such festival in an urban situation expressly open to all people," Horowitz says. "What makes it real different is that it's designed to invite women *and* men to come and celebrate women's culture for a day."

Sisterfire is both the culmination of several years of planning by Roadwork and a thank-you from the artists involved, all of whom have donated their services to the 4-year-old nonprofit company, which describes itself as a community-based, multiracial cultural organization dedicated to social change through the promotion and production of women in the arts.

Washington, in the early '70s, was the birthplace of Olivia Records and a breeding ground for such singer-songwriters as Williamson, Meg Christian and Willie Tyson. That energy shifted to the West Coast in the mid-'70s, partly because of the involved with political movements "do not have a respect for the culture."

And though women's social and political activism has been quite evident over the last 15 years, the parallel cultural expansion has been less noted. Many performers who directed their energies to women's issues and women's organizations were pigeonholed—and often dismissed in the general marketplace—as feminists, or lesbians. "The women's movement was a backbone for giving voice to this expression, but it's also much broader," Horowitz insists. "We embrace so many issues by virtue of the range of artists we represent and the range of *their* issues that we'll never neatly fit into any one movement. What we're embracing is the concept of *coalition*, in a very spiritual and political sense, the coalescing of people.

"Roadwork's view of women and culture does not place it necessarily within the women's movement," she adds. "We feel that women have always been the carriers of culture, that *we* come in a moment in a historical stream that's always been true but never acknowledged."

Horowitz, a Washington native, has proven to be an indefatigable worker for change in the status quo. She became politically active while still in high school (after getting initial training as an organizer as international president of B'Nai B'Rith Girls, the world's largest Jewish youth organization). At 20, she

Amy Horowitz; by Lucian Perkins

center in the small town of Ashland. That's where she started producing concerts, and though her cabin had neither electricity or plumbing, it did feature one incongruous bow to technology—a bright red phone ("the laugh of the town"). It was installed by friends at the local phone company, a lesson in who-you-knowism essential to grass-roots organizing and production.

While still in Oregon, Horowitz became a distributor for a small women's label, and eventually started booking some national tours, including one for Sweet Honey in the Rock. She came back to Washington to work on the group's second album and started Roadwork. This year, with representatives in California and Kentucky, Roadwork concerts (including some at Constitution Hall, the Bayou and Blues Alley) will attract 200,000 people.

Sisterfire capsulizes the Roadwork system and ethic, according to Horowitz. "It's grounded in the community," with 30 volunteers supporting the in-house crew. "It's our grandest, most extensive program of women's

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to the Israeli occupation, the orchestra promotes coexistence rather than co-resistance, allowing musical dialogue to subvert solidarity aimed at ending occupation. In "Music as Social Medicine: Two Perspectives on the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra," David M. Washington and Devon G. Beecher note: "Watching the harmonious way the orchestra performs and interacts, one expects that the members would be more than musicians: perhaps an army of politically enlightened citizens bound to positively influence the future of the Middle East….They are not this; instead, they are fantastic musicians who are able to make fantastic music with people who otherwise and elsewhere would be their enemies. Their unity of musical feeling should not be seen as a metaphor for unity in the Middle East."



West-Eastern Divan Orchestra Short Introduction

West-Eastern Divan Orchestra

04:20

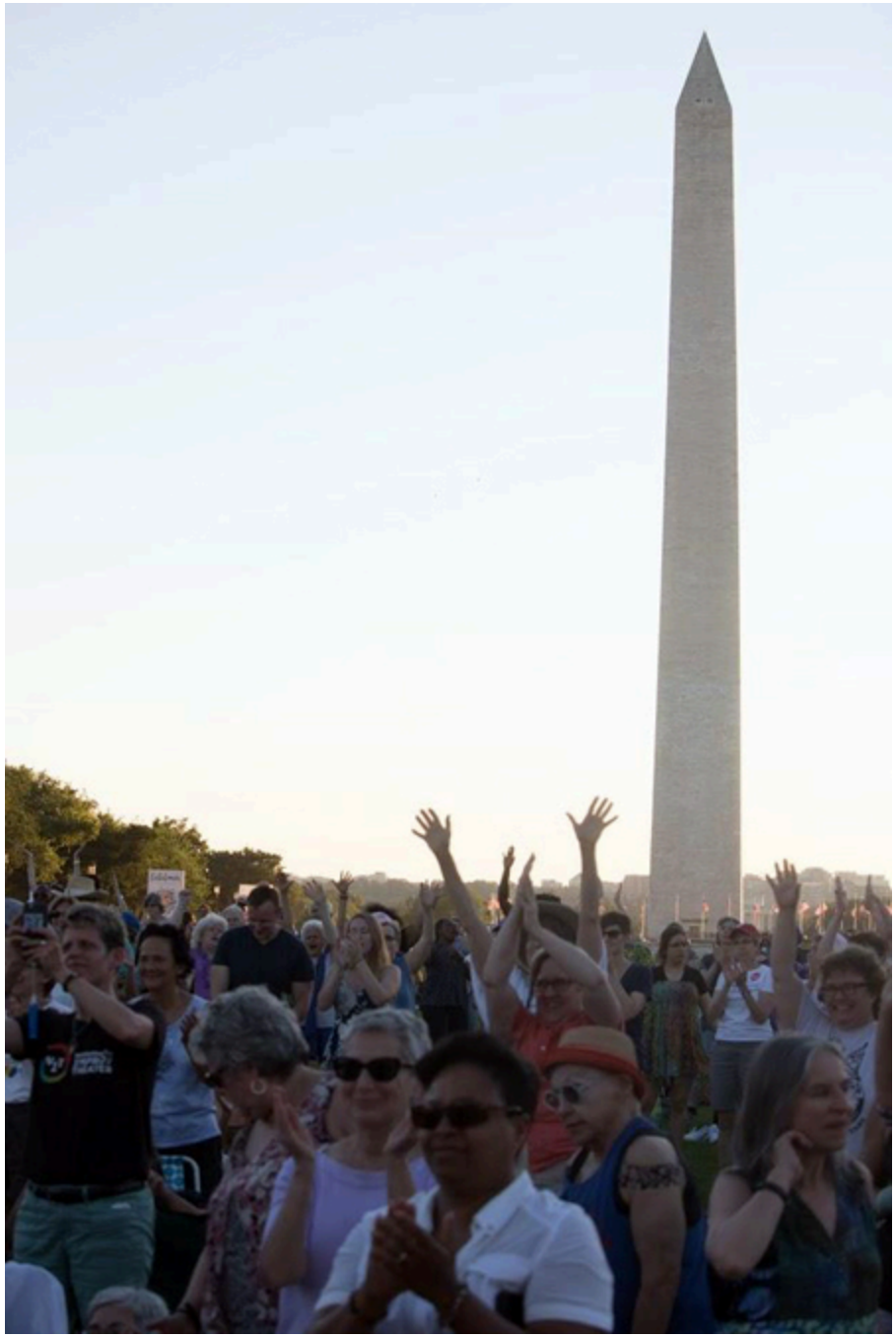
Are the lessons learned from this courageous orchestra or during our multiracial coalition of the 1970s-1990s instructive in light of current attempts at coalition, say, in understanding the explosive issues that rocked the Women's March as women of color and Jewish women with white-skin privilege wrestled across race, White supremacy, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism? What will it take to build and sustain coalitions that can overtake the "deep history" of racial and economic injustice, greed, and hurt? Truthsayers like Nancy MacLean, who wrote *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, remind us of the enormity of our task and the insidiousness of the 1% that rules and divides us.



How did "Leaving a Trail" Lead Us to the National Mall?

How is it that Sisterfire, a festival initiated as a fundraiser in 1982 to offset Ronald Reagan's devastating cuts to grassroots arts, was transported from a modest field at Takoma Park Middle School to the National Mall in 2018?

Dr. Reagon first posed the challenge that led to the reunion a decade ago. She said, "You've got to leave a trail about what Roadwork did — what we did, so that people can stumble across it." I think she meant a short essay! Five years later Urvashi Vaid posed a similar challenge and "the trail" evolved into an oral history and documentary project. When our documentary director, Dr. Yvonne Welbon, considered joining the effort, her first thought was: "What about producing a reunion concert?" So we gathered, wondering if the story of a multiracial coalition that put women's culture on the road in the 20th century might have lessons for the 21st.



Performing at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival seemed like a long shot, though it was historically fitting. In 1973, festival co-founder Ralph Rinzler invited Dr. Reagon to co-curate the festival's African Diaspora Program (1974-76). She went on to become the creator and director of the Smithsonian's Program in Black American Culture (1977-1994). In 1979, Rinzler had saved Roadwork from eviction by purchasing our rented row house on Harvard Street, in 1983 he funded a live recording of Sisterfire performers that was released by Redwood Records. In the 1990s I served as a festival curator and Acting and Assistant Director of Smithsonian Folkways. And before all this, in 1965, a twenty-three-year-old Bernice Reagon had recorded on Folkways.

Toshi Reagon, curator of this artistic Sisterfire reunion vision, embraced the Roadwork legacy and its potential resonance for younger artist-activists who may have never heard of the organization before. Their introduction to Sisterfire would be the rebirth of the experience itself. She wove a narrative that moved us beyond the traditional concert or festival format to an arts-based call to action — a round robin of intentionality. Fierce volunteers showed up like they always had, lawyers, activists, producers, and artist hospitality folks. Some were elders and had trained at Roadwork, and some were experiencing Roadwork for the first time.



Building New Roads, Leaving New Trails

The sun is setting behind the Washington Monument as the two-day reunion draws to a close. All the artists, organizers, and participants are standing in congregation. Tonight, full-voiced, we sing together across race, generation, issue, ability, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. The songs fill our bodies, fill the National Mall and give us a beacon to a land that does not yet exist. The closing song at the festival is *Come and Go With Me to This Land. Listen to it here from Reagon's 1965 Folkways LP.*



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Photo Credit: Ryan Whittermore

I imagine where the 20-40-something artist-activists will take this experience as they join together with artists in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. Together they co-create and share a 2018 Sisterfire stage much as Toshi did with Elizabeth Cotten in 1983, like Moving Star Hall Singers co-created with Casselberry and Dupree in 1984, like June Jordan co-created with Tracy Chapman in 1987. I am

thinking of the Sisterfire ancestors, Odetta, Ronnie Gilbert, Ampara Ochoa, June Jordan, Shirley Childress Johnson, Flora Molton, Elizabeth Cotten. It is not nostalgia — it is radical reverie.

What we saw as an ephemeral reunion to capture some footage for the oral history project has become, instead, a rebirth, and in this way Sisterfire lived up to her name and sparked herself out of hibernation and into service going forward. Roadwork has established a new and younger board leadership conjoined with elders from back in the day to rekindle aspects of Roadwork's mission that are relevant for these times. We realize that a multiracial coalition that centers women's culture in the service of justice is still relevant. Through the new leadership, Sisterfire Roadwork@40 and future projects do more than "leave a trail" for future generations of activists and artists — they are continuing the work of building new roads.

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