

Woman Rock Musician

Interview

Fifth Estate Collective

1971

An interview with Lorraine, of the women's band GOLDFLOWER, which has played for many enthusiastic women, including Erika Huggins and the other inmates at Niantic State Prison in Connecticut.

Lorraine grew up in a Long Island suburb. At 14, she was playing bluegrass guitar and hanging out with Washington Square folk musicians. At 16 she met a guy named Bobby and married him just before her 17th birthday. They moved to the lower East side where their daughter Magdalena was born. Lorraine left, taking Maggie with her after about a year of marriage. She went through a lot of heavy stuff: unsatisfying relationships, trying to bring her daughter up herself, no money, a brush with hard drugs. A good psychiatrist really helped her a lot. After a while, she felt good enough to start playing guitar again. Singing and playing with Bev and Laura in Goldflower has given her confidence that she lacked even when she was already quite good. But she's still learning and struggling, doesn't think of herself as having "made it." I thought some of the changes she's gone through in the past couple of years would be meaningful to other women, whether you're trying to be musicians, or just starting to find out what you've always wanted to be.

Marge: How did you get into playing electric guitar?

Lorraine: I wanted to play blues and I was taking lessons from this guy who was a really fine blues guitarist. I was playing acoustic then. He didn't pressure me into playing electric guitar, but I wanted to. Blues just doesn't sound right on an acoustic.

Marge: What was it like taking lessons from him?

Lorraine: Very exciting but very difficult. He was just so good, so impressive that it was hard to feel comfortable with him. He's also very good looking, and that's often the problem with guitar teachers. It comes up because they relate to you in two ways, and unless you're willing to deal with it, it's a problem.

Marge: What two ways?

Lorraine: Well they relate to you as a student and they relate to you sexually. Unless you know what you're there for, and you're real dedicated, it's hard for you to relate. Also, my teacher was into a trip of working 12 hours a day. He never told me I had to, but I felt I wouldn't make it if I didn't.

Marge: Do you think it's good to put yourself into one thing the way men do?

Lorraine: I think it's necessary to be a really great artist or a good musician. It takes discipline. You really have to take yourself seriously. I was driven to practice and learn everything my teacher taught me, even though sometimes he taught in such a way that I couldn't learn.

Marge: Was he intimidating?

Lorraine: Yeah, in a way. But traditionally, that's the way it's always been with blues guitar teachers. You just sit around with their greatness, and hope eventually some of it rubs off. I used to feel bad that I couldn't remember everything, but I practiced to please him.

Marge: Did it please you?

Lorraine: It pleased me, but it didn't please me from where I was coming from, what I thought I should be doing. I didn't like the idea of needing him, to meet his Standards. All the time I took lessons from him he said I had this great potential, but I don't know how he ever saw it. Not only did I not play, except to painfully copy the things he did, but he never heard me sing. And I took lessons from him for about a year!

Marge: Your voice teacher's a woman, right? is that different? Or is it just a different kind of lesson?

Lorraine: It's a different kind of lesson, but I couldn't imagine taking voice lessons from a man—making all those faces. Also, it isn't only that: its that she's completely not on an ego trip with me. The whole lesson, 45 minutes, is geared toward me. She'll show me something and I'll do it until I get it right. That's not true of guys. Since the first guy I've had three different male teachers and except for one, they spend the whole time doing what they do and hoping you'll catch on. Basically the lesson is sitting there listening to them play, saying "oh how great, could I ever possibly be so great? With my singing teacher she's just an ordinary person who knows how to sing properly and she's teaching me that, and constantly helping me to gain self-confidence. It's completely different. Too bad there aren't any women to take guitar lessons from.

Marge: What about jamming? I remember when you started to jam you talked about self-conscious feelings.

Lorraine: My teacher said that taking lessons would never get me any place unless I went out and jammed. While I took lessons from him and even afterwards, I made a conscious effort to jam with every guy I could who wasn't a professional musician or something like that. There was always an uptightness jamming with guys. Cause they always wanted to sleep with me. We'd be playing and I'd notice something was really uncomfortable. The thing was women just didn't go over to men's houses to do something like that, I mean, I think this was before women's Liberation and standards were really different.

The only way I handled it was to develop some strength in myself. I didn't always handle it so well though, For a while I ended up sleeping with a lot of the guys I played with. They never developed into romantic things, but then the air was cleared. I finally won some of their respect as a musician.

Marge: It seems pretty strange that they should have to fuck you to be able to relate to you as a musician and they didn't have to fuck each other to do that.

Lorraine: I don't know what it would be like for a guy to jam with other guys. Men are really competitive with each other in music.

Marge: Women can be competitive too. I remember a woman I used to sing with a lot. We had songs that were literally territories. Women are like any other oppressed group. If you're into "making it" you realize there's very little room for a woman. There may be 200 places and one of those is for a woman. So we're competitive in a different way.

Lorraine: That's really scary. We didn't think that would happen with our band. I've been fucked over so much by men musicians and so had the other women. For six months we denied it was happening, We had these competitive awful fights. It was especially bad between me and the other guitar player. It wasn't so bad with Bev, who was doing most of the singing. But Laura and I were sort of equals, we both played as well as any women we know. Blues was my field, where I have the feeling, and she's really great in other ways, like working out melodies and harmonies. But she thought she should be able to do everything I could do, and although I never said it to her, I felt the same way. It got so bad that any time she did something I couldn't do I got all fucked up inside. But we never talked about it—we'd just end up bitching at each other for something else. We went through some really heavy stuff, much heavier, in a way, than anything I could imagine going through with men.

Marge: You went to some auditions. What was that like?

Lorraine: I went to lots of them when I first realized I might be good enough. I really wanted to make it. I'd always wanted to play and sing, all my life, and never thought I could. I never got anywhere with auditions, cause I was so scared I just performed horribly. No soul could possibly shine through my nervousness. As soon as I started playing with Bev and Laura, things started to change. For example, I never thought I could go on stage. But the first gig we played at Randalls Island was in front of thousands of people. I was terrified. But once we did that I knew I could do anything.

Marge: Does it make a difference having other people to play with you?

Lorraine: It sure does. It did for me anyway. Because what I did by myself was folksongs, but I wasn't satisfied with it. I wanted a band sound. Working with a band gave me what I wanted. I didn't have to carry the show by

myself. I could depend on these two women. I could tell them I was scared and they'd say "So are we, let's do it anyway. You perform better when you get feedback from other people. When I was playing with another player and feeling free more would come out than if I did a blues song by myself. That all comes together now. There are times when I want nothing more than to play lead on a song, want to switch off, and be really flexible. sing harmony and learn different styles. It took a long time before I felt like an integral part of the band without having the most out-front part, or writing my own songs. You really have to learn to give.

Now being away from Bev and Laura, I think differently about them. It seems like working with them has been the most positive experience of my life. There are two women I can respect on a working level and we've developed as a result of our work together. At one point I would almost have rather worked with men, the competitiveness was too heavy with women. Wanting to cry when someone criticized me. But it's all working out now.

Marge: Did you feel like you said, about playing electric guitar, that you just had to know you could do it?

Lorraine: Yeah. Women always say, "Wow, you play an electric guitar." It just doesn't seem like such a big thing anymore. Men get real freaked out and I just say "forget it."



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