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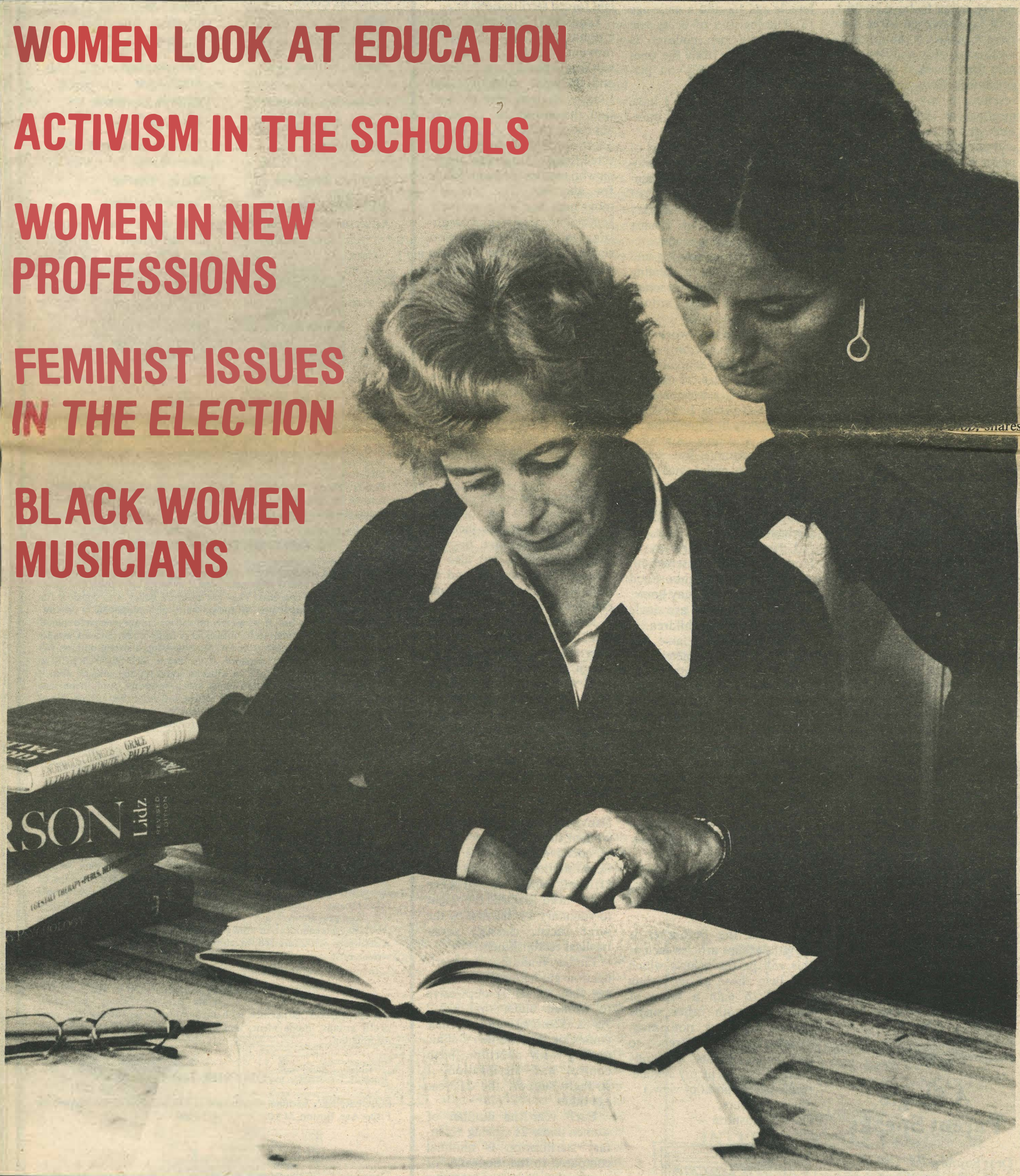
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**BLACK WOMEN
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—Vaughn Sills

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The Varied Voices of Black Women

by Barbara Smith
and Beverly Smith

What is Black Women's Music? There are centuries filled with answers, both old and new. Music has been our pre-eminent art form since our forced arrival on these shores. This gift that Black people brought from Africa to America has made at least 98% of all "American" music possible. Necessarily, the tradition of Black music has always been in the Black tradition of struggle. We sang for survival and for our lives, not to mention for our suppers. As Alice Walker explains, music was one of the few artistic forms through which Black women could express themselves. She writes: "How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action, did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life." (Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," *Ms.*, May, 1974, pp. 66-67.)

Because of our Black-female oppression, so much of our artistic and cultural energy was concentrated in music, particularly singing, it both appeared and was in fact the form in which we excelled. Just the names which Alice Walker lists evoke the amazing breadth and depth of music by Black women.

Now, with the development of the feminist movement and Black feminism, there is some-

thing new and totally dynamic arising, something that is consciously Black Women's Music. There are several things that distinguish it from previous music made by Black women—most significantly the fact that it is self-defined, feminist, and woman-identified. The women are not singing put-down songs about themselves, neither do their images as performers support sexually exploitative stereotypes. Black Women's Music has an explicitly feminist awareness of sexual politics, unlike "older" music by Black women that also clearly broke down issues of sexual politics, but without the framework of feminism. The most radical aspect of the music is that it affirms Black Lesbian experience.

None of these elements that makes Black Women's Music unique is easy to achieve, yet more and more women are taking the risks to make the concept of Black Women's Music real. Gwen Avery, Linda (Tui) Tillery and Mary Watkins are three of these. They have recently-released or soon-to-be-released albums, all on the Olivia label, and will be appearing in Boston on October 20 and 21 with the Black Lesbian poet, Pat Parker. This will be the first stop on their East Coast tour, "The Varied Voices of Black Women."

A spirit of collectivity is apparent in the way each of these artists contributes to each other's music. Gwen Avery, for example, hasn't yet recorded her own album, but she sings on Mary Watkins' *Something Moving*. Tui plays drums for Gwen's "Sugar Mama" on *Lesbian Concentrate*. Pat Parker wrote the lyrics for Mary's "Brick Hut." The women not only play and sing with each other but undoubtedly influence and inspire each other as well through this collaborative process.

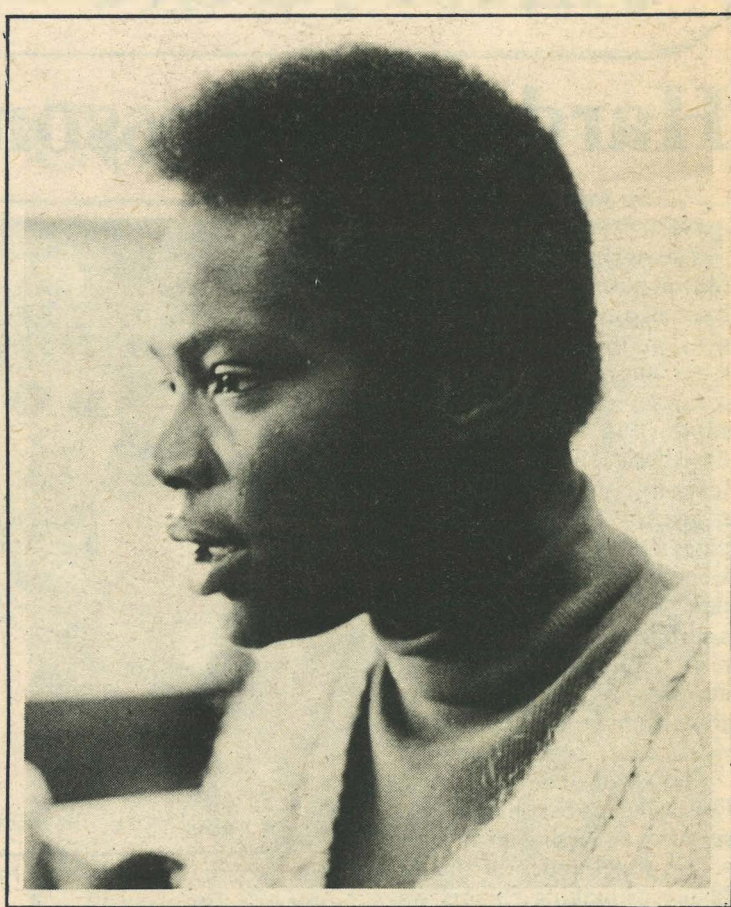
Gwen says of her work, "blues and gospel run neck and neck in my music"—a modest understatement. Her piano playing and singing are incredibly resonant with these traditional Black musical forms. On "Change" (*Any Woman's Blues*) it sounds like she took her piano right out of a church. The title of her other song on this album, "On My Way," is a classic Black phrase and concept, as is her gospel exclamation in the same song, "Can't you see my starry crown?" Anyone who's ever seen Gwen perform live would of course shout, "Yes!"

Her magnetic presence as a performer is most apparent on "Sugar Mama" (*Lesbian Concentrate*). This love song begins as a sensuous ballad in which Gwen displays the richness and strength of her voice. Suddenly the rhythm changes and she moves into the rocking heart of the song: "I want to be your sugar mama / I want to be your sugar mama, be your sugar mama everyday . . . I want you to see how sweet a woman's love can be / It's gotta be you and me, endlessly / Just gettin' sugar, sugar . . . sugar, sugar." (Copyright 1977 Gwen Avery, Averbos Music ASCAP. Used by permission. All rights reserved.) Even those of us who've sworn off the stuff might have to reconsider.

Linda Tillery is the first Black woman to have her album produced by a women's recording company. Her music developed in the Black church and also with popular rock groups in the Bay Area (including the Loading Zone, Santana, and Boz Scaggs) in the late sixties and seventies. Linda sings, plays drums (sometimes the two simultaneously!) and composes. "Wonderful" is a sweet evocation of love between women. Somehow the words and lovely melody blend perfectly to capture a very positive relationship.

"Freedom Time" is truly innovative because it is a Black Lesbian feminist song which deals with our oppression in a popular danceable mode. "No more prayin' / No more cryin' / Look all around us / People are starvin' and dyin' / Time for livin' / If you're willin' / It's freedom time, yeah. // We've been given / Empty answers / The pain of oppression / Grows inside like a cancer / There's no saviour / Oh, in the struggle / For freedom time." (Copyright 1977 Mary Watkins, Linda Tillery—Tuizer Music ASCAP. Used by permission. All rights reserved.) It's good to hear and dance to a song which counters the inherently fascist style and message of disco.

Linda and all of these performers continue the work that Michele Russell says Black women have always done: "They cut a record, in continuous performance, expressing the restless movement of a captive people, for whom home is far away and heaven is out of sight. It is an old song with many verses, but just one refrain: freedom." (Michele



Pat Parker

Russell, "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," *Radical Teacher*, 4, March, 1977, p. 2.) Who but Black women would sing about freedom with the same passion that others sing about "love"?

Mary Watkins' *Something Moving*, to be released in October is simply one of the most exciting albums to come out of the women's music movement. It is an eclectic experience with moods ranging from soul to classical to jazz. Pianist Watkins' wide-ranging skill enables her to compose and execute works reminiscent of sixties Motown hits ("Yesterday's Children") as well as contemporary jazz ("A Chording to the People" and "Witches' Revenge"). She also wrote and sings a sensitive ballad to a sister who fears coming out ("No Hiding Place" on *Lesbian Concentrate*).

"Yesterday's Children," sung in Gwen Avery's inimitable fashion, is truly progressive. Like "Freedom Time" it gets across a political message, in this case the narrowness of homophobia and fear of any difference, without sacrificing its musical appeal. You can't not dance to it.

"Witches' Revenge" resonates on several levels. First, its name seems an obvious retort to Miles Davis' much acclaimed, misogynistically titled *Bitches Brew*. It then goes further to create an affecting atmosphere which is often missing from avant-garde music. Not only has this type of improvisational jazz been the province of male performers, but it has practically been a cult subject for many Black men who use their knowledge as a means of male-bonding to exclude Black women.

"A Chording to the People" is more lyrical jazz. It is beautifully erotic in the way that Audre Lorde has recently defined it: "When I speak of the erotic . . . I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge

and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." (Audre Lorde, "The Erotic as Power," ms. of speech delivered at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, August 25, 1978.) Watkins' song without words has an exquisitely clear message of deep female feeling.

Pat Parker, author of *Child of Myself* and *Pit Stop*, shares much with the other performers with whom she'll appear. While the musicians are the inheritors of the Black musical legacy, Parker carries on the rich tradition of Black rhetoric and speech. Also like the musicians, she is carving out through her writing Black Lesbian feminist culture. Finally, she has the ability to hold an audience with her righteous delivery. The humorous irony and cool understatement of her reading of "For Straight Folks Who Don't Mind Gays But Wish They Weren't So Blatant" doubles the poem's impact. The power of her language and politics culminates in "Womanslaughter," an elegy for her sister, murdered by her "quiet" ex-husband. "Hear me now / it is almost three years / and i am again strong / i have gained many sisters / and if one is beaten or raped or killed / i will not come in mourning black / i will not pick the right flowers / i will not celebrate her death / and it will matter not if she is Black or white / if she loves women or men / i will come with my many sisters / and decorate the streets / with the innards of those brothers in / womanslaughter / no more can i dull my rage / in alcohol and deference to men's courts / i will come to my sisters not dutiful / i will come strong." (Transcribed from the recording *Where Would I Be Without You*.)

Although we feel tremendously positive about these artists we know that women will have various reactions to their work. We also are not



Mary Watkins

—Diana Davies

Strangers in a Promised Land

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On the other hand, even the suspicion of tokenism is an added burden that makes life difficult for women scientists. When I informed my professors that I had been hired for my present teaching job, no less than three of them (all over forty, I believe) explicitly commented on the "pressure that even small colleges were under to reach their quota." This despite the fact that my present department assures me that such was not the case—although they thought it was a happy fringe benefit that I was female, since they felt it would help encourage women students to go into physics. (Actually, they *really* needed someone to teach electronics while Sam was on sabbatical—which I could!) I should also mention that more than a dozen of my other professors were quite happy about my success and made no such insinuations (no matter what they thought in their heart of hearts).

Among graduate students and professors, I noticed that generally the younger the man, the more willing he was to accept women as equals (no news, I'm sure). Foreign students (non-Americans) were an exception—they were often uneducable in this regard. Usually even the most incorrigible sexists were polite—blatant prejudice wasn't in

fashion—although one Italian told me frankly that I had no business in physics, women belonged in the home (a man's home, of course). The worst experiences I had were with the master machinist. He was difficult for everyone to deal with, but he was downright obnoxious with women (particularly me and the secretaries). I remember how angry I was that I couldn't do anything about his behavior; if I wanted work essential to my research done properly (and he was an excellent machinist), then I had to be "polite."

Stereotypes die hard, however. My brother once advised me, "Never tell anyone you can type." I was reminded of this when I went to my chairman and asked for a part-time assistantship to supplement my non-service fellowship. He immediately suggested that they needed help in the office—typing and filing. I managed to give him the impression that I was a lousy typist and had trouble with the alphabet. So he had me teach the upper level electricity and electronics labs instead. An interesting pair of alternatives, to say the least.

In my present position, I have seen no evidence for male prejudice among my colleagues (even the ones over forty!). However, the students sometimes present problems. Certain types of young men espe-

cially find it difficult to accept criticism from me and do not trust my judgment on scientific or other matters. I feel I must prove that I am really a physicist every time I walk into a classroom. The fact that, like many of my female colleagues, I look like a college student myself doesn't help much (and I can't grow a beard to look older). At a teaching college like Earlham, student perceptions of teaching ability are very important; it has been noticed that students tend to rate women professors lower than men. Even many women students pay more "attention" when a man is in front of the classroom. To balance this, there is also a certain type of woman student who is greatly encouraged to see a real live female physicist who is a relatively normal person. Although I'm not particularly comfortable being regarded as a "role model," I realize this can be important to them.

I haven't seen any tremendous upsurge in women physics majors as a result of my presence. I think we get them too late to do much about changing the general attitude that science is a "man's game." It may seem trivial, but I was always acutely embarrassed as a child when taking out from the library such works as *The Boy's Book of Electricity*. Women are convinced at an

early age that quantitative reasoning is not "proper" for them—so it is not surprising that so few go into physics, which is just applied logic. (The other side of the coin, of course, is that some men with no real talent for the sciences feel obligated to major in them because it's expected. When I was a graduate teaching assistant, it took me twice as long to teach a man how to wire a

circuit correctly as it took to teach a woman—first I had to convince the man that he *didn't* know how to do it.) However, perhaps there is hope for the future. At least chemistry sets now have pictures of both boys and girls doing the experiments rather than as in my day, when the girl was looking on admiringly if she was lucky enough to be there at all.

Varied Voices

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qualified to analyze the technical aspects of the albums, although their fine musicianship is clear. What we're most excited about is the phenomenon it represents, the building of Black Lesbian feminist culture. The fact that Black, other Third World, and white women worked together to produce these albums is in itself exciting, the kind of coalition that Black feminism requires. We feel that this integration of tradition and change, spirituality, politics and culture provides the necessary sustenance for our lives.

Authors Note: We would like to thank Jeannette Muzima and Jane Picard for assisting us with the writing of this piece. The following is a list of the albums mentioned in this article.

Any Woman's Blues. (Gwen, Avery, Pat Parker and Linda Tillery). The Women's Prison Concert Collective. AWB-415. Any Woman's Blues, UUSC, 78 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108.

Lesbian Concentrate: A Lesbian Anthology of Songs and Poems. Olivia Records, LF915.

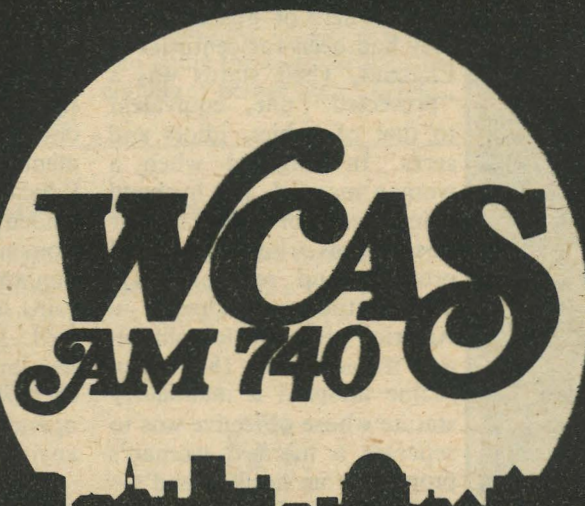
Linda Tillery. Olivia Records, BLF917.

Something Moving: Mary Watkins. Olivia Records, BLF919.

Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker & Judy Grahn. Olivia Records, LF909

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