

TRANSCRIPT—KATHY RUDY
(Compiled March 6, 2007)

Interviewee: KATHY RUDY
Interviewer: Molly Chadbourne
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Location: Durham, NC
Length: One CD; approximately 72 minutes

I have transcribed several sections from my interview with Kathy Rudy. The following are some of my favorite parts of the interview. The start time and end time of each transcribed section are in brackets at the beginning and end of each part.

[3 minutes, 31 seconds]

Molly Chadbourne: So what were you doing in Detroit?

Kathy Rudy: I joined this program called Jesuit Volunteer Corps in which I was placed with the United Farm Workers—and I guess, students today—would have kind of a similar experience to Teach For America. It was a volunteer position where they gave me room and board and a small stipend and I kind of gained a lot of life experience. I'd never lived in a big city, I'd never encountered real poverty and although I considered myself progressive lefty I think in a very sort of sheltered Catholic atmosphere you couldn't really know what that was; so Detroit was really important for me in part because it connected me up with lots of different lefty movements. So that's where I kind of was introduced to women's music and joined various lefty political groups and also sort of first got involved with gay and lesbian stuff.

MC: So you had information—sorry not information—sort of an attraction to leftist politics prior to moving to Detroit though?

KR: Absolutely—but you know—in the Catholic sense. So, you know, in high-school I did volunteer work at the Catholic worker house and soup kitchens and sort of—you know—progressive politics in the Catholic frame is very, is kind, of different, you know, especially around questions of sex and gender. When it comes to sort of race and poverty, the Catholic left is really good and strong, but when it comes to feminism, gay and lesbian, queer stuff, it's not on the same map. So, being in the United Farm Workers was really important because it got me sort of to break out of the Catholic framework and get more progressive access—or more access to progressive politics around sex and gender as well.

MC: So, you would say that you didn't have access to anything outside of the Catholic framework prior to--.

KR: Before then? Before, no not really. I mean, you know there's a certain kind of feminism that circulates within Catholicism that's about strong women and nuns and the Virgin Mary but I don't think I had any positive gay and lesbian role models before Detroit. Not even, you know nothing even on the screen.

MC: And was that something you were actively seeking prior to moving to Detroit?

KR: Not mentally, but you know, clearly sort of emotionally yes. You know, I think, when I started working in Detroit I did not at all identify myself as lesbian, but by the time—well certainly by the time I moved back to Syracuse for a few months, I was starting to think about it—and then moving to Ladyslipper obviously was about claiming that identity.

MC: But you said you were involved with gay and lesbian organizations in Detroit--

KR: Only in the sense that—I mean I wasn't 'yeah yeah here I am!'—you know, but I got to meet them and they were normal and it was sort of, oh this is really interesting. I was in this one group, it was called NAM—New American Movement—and it eventually changed its name or unified or something with DSOC—which was Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee—and became, I think they became DSA. Essentially they were—all of those things—were sort of 70s lefty groups kind of like SDS or you know, it was the North so race politics weren't quite the same, but you know, CORE and others kinds of things, but they weren't necessarily associated with religion. So I came to NAM through the UFW and there was a real strong contingent in Detroit NAM of gays and lesbians. So it's not like I ever went to any of their meetings or joined in, in the two-and-a-half—two years—I was there, but the fact that they were there and visible and saying something changed my mentality about the issue.

MC: Right, and was this around the same time that you started listening to women's music?

KR: Yes, and I met Holly Near for the first time through the UFW because you know, back then her issues were much broad—not that they were ever narrowed—but back then she was involved with anti-war demonstration stuff and United Farm Workers. So that was sort of my first—. Here she was singing about organizing and you know against the war--. Oh the other thing that's important in here that connects these things is the struggle in El Salvador and Nicaragua [coughs]—excuse me. The folks I was living with in UFW were very involved in that movement but that movement also had a real strong anti-religious component to it as well. So Holly Near was involved with that and

UFW and here she was singing all these lesbian songs and it was kind of mind blowing, so yeah.

MC: So did you at any point sort of have trouble rectifying these different parts of your life—the religious side with this new sort of leftist outside of religion side?

KR: No, they flowed, because inside Catholicism, I think if I had been a good Catholic and not a lefty Catholic and wanted to come out as a lesbian there would have been a huge conflict. First I was sort of a Catholic who was involved with Dorothy Day and peace movement, you know, peace stuff and Nicaragua and sort of that kind of Catholic. Then I became you know, a Catholic involved in farm worker issues and then I moved over here and became involved in this. You know eventually—little by little—I just kind of let small increments of Catholicism go and became more and more involved with lesbian stuff and with women's music and women's culture. Now, that came back to bite me in the ass because I left Ladyslipper in 1986 to go to divinity school. So you know, I never really completely let that religion go—or if I did—it was a mistake because it was sort of welling up inside as something I really needed, but by that point I had left Catholicism and had become Methodist so--

MC: So you sort of didn't take a direct dive from Catholicism into lesbianism but you took the dive out of lesbianism back into the divinity school?

KR: And that was a much bigger jump! Yeah, exactly. That was sort of, you know, I lost a lot of friends in the lesbian community because even in 1986 religion of any sort was seen to be the enemy of women's culture.

MC: Well, I want to get back to that in a second. So, you went from Detroit back to Syracuse?

KR: Back to Syracuse for a little while. I think I was there, I'm thinking either six or nine months, somewhere in there. Got an apartment, got a job, was miserable, and the only thing that made me happy in the world was listening to women's music. I just used every—I mean went into debt on credit cards—to buy these record albums, like a lot of it. Started to try to come out as a lesbian but did the bar scene--

MC: In Syracuse?

KR: In Syracuse. And in 1982, 1983 in that period the bar scene was not at all feminist, it was still very much butch-femme and I could not write myself into it, I just couldn't find a way into it. It was this music that was calling me; it was not hanging out in bars with women who looked like men. You know, I wasn't there. So you know, after a couple of miserable—really miserable—months realizing I couldn't settle in, wrote off to Olivia Records, Redwood Records, Ladyslipper, any address that I had found on any album and just said I will come work for you for almost nothing. Can I come interview? Can I come talk to you? I want to break into this. And Laurie called within weeks of getting the letter and I came down here, interviewed, went back home packed my car and moved down here. **[12 minutes, 26 seconds]**

[13 minutes, 40 seconds]

MC: So moving to Durham, was that a welcome change in the scene? Did you find other women here that you thought were identifying the same way as you?

KR: Absolutely. There's strong community here. That were, that was picked up in the same way that I could just never find in Syracuse. I mean maybe they were just there, maybe not. It was a much more industrial town, and working class. But down here, it was

sort of, the revolution was right around the corner and we were it man. **[14 minutes, 15 seconds]**

[23 minutes, 8 seconds]

MC: Did this sort of community, and it sort of seems like there's lots of spaces, meet any resistance in Durham in any way?

KR: The first time I--, the first, this is the summer of '83, and it might even have been the spring of '83, and the first major concert that I was involved in when I got here—from Ladyslipper—was actually in Memorial Hall and it was Holly Near. And the Klan picketed. I'm not sure now if they were picketing her lesbianism or, you know, some other aspect of her politics—I don't know—but I was very freaked out. And I still have photographs of that. You know, with my little camera, this is my first big thing and I am here to take a Holly Near picture and in fact I get a picture of the Klan.

MC: I would love to see those.

KR: Okay, I'm sure I can dig them out. They're in the trunk in the attic with the catalogues. **[24 minutes, 21 seconds]**

[35 minutes, 33 seconds]

KR: I think part of one of the things that they often found out—and I am struggling to think of the--, Deadly Nightshade was the name of the group—is that, you know, these women who were in mainstream music were actually lesbians—and another one is Alicia Bridges—once they sort of got picked up by Ladyslipper and saw their things in Ladyslipper catalogue, then they'd come out and could actually switch over to WILD [Women's Independent Label Distributor] distributing and sometimes and in some cases have greater success. Terry Garthway—is that her name, or Terry something—who was

the lead singer of Deadly Nightshade was case in point. She had more success in this underground than being a small fish in a really big ocean of rock music. **[36 minutes, 24 seconds]**

[39 minutes, 45 seconds]

MC: I have sort of a general question. With your interest in music, do you think it was appealing to you both as a lesbian and as a feminist or were these like separate?

KR: You know, whatever movement I am in, or whatever thing I am dealing with, I narrate it through music. I don't know how to explain that but you know Catholicism, there are always certain songs that always bring me back to that. And I'm not sure feminism had a soundtrack, you know. The kind of stuff I guess you'd think of would be "I am Woman" but it wasn't very good. So I guess this stuff, I don't know how you'd pick that part, this stuff signified both lesbianism and feminism to me for sure, and it was a lot better, and there was more of it, even though it was very folky, and a lot of times you didn't know it was lesbian, you know, it was rich in the sense that it produced a soundtrack for an identity and I think that it really helped a lot of women make those first moves in a way that--. How I would narrate it is that you know—gay men—in today's world, homosexuality, I mean look at the Oscars the other night, with you know, Ellen hosting it and Melissa Etheridge thanking her wife and the whole thing, I think that homosexuality has become, in a very brief time, very socially accepted. I know there's tons of places that's not true, but, you know, it's like being gay today is not a big deal, at least that's how I read it. In 1983 that was not the case. There were only small places in the country that you could go to and have that, New York City and the West Coast, and Durham was one of those. So in twenty years, something radical happened. And how I

would narrate this is that that radicalness happened because gay men had money which got them legitimacy. Women never had that kind of money so something else prompted them to sort of come out, be visible, not be ashamed, et cetera. And I think women's music had a big part of that, that's where I was going with it. **[42 minutes, 26 seconds]**

[42 minutes, 51 seconds]

MC: I guess sort of other than organizing social events in the lesbian community were the women involved in the community sort of doing anything else? Was that, was just being in a lesbian community, was that a form of activism in itself?

KR: Yeah we thought so, absolutely. Not only did we think so, we used to talk about it like that. We would have dinner parties or we'd all go out to dinner and pick out our post-revolution names.

MC: Did you have a post-revolution name?

KR: [Laughs] I'm sure I did, but I can't remember it. I can remember a friend of mine, her name was Laurie Silverman, and her post-revolution name was going to be Silverstreak. I don't know why I remember that.

MC: Not Silverwoman or anything?

KR: No, no, no, no, but you're on the right track. That was kind of what they were like, if I had one I don't remember it. We thought we were developing a utopia that was going to stand as a model for everything else, so the idea that there were different like, other social movements, we thought we were curing them all by the way we were living. Let me just give you some examples of the kind of thing, you know, people would come through—get off a Greyhound bus—come to Ladyslipper and say, you know, I am traveling the

country, I need a place to stay for a couple of weeks. And you know, we'd find it. And you can't even imagine.

MC: You've got the book of lesbian places to stay on the desk?

KR: Oh no, no, no no. It would just be like, oh so and so has a spare bedroom, or, you can just stay on my living room floor. No, it was not like enterprise, it was all off the grid of money exchange, nobody had money. We understood that. We were just—anyone who called themselves a lesbian was like part of a counter culture that, you know, we all shared everything. That's a little bit of an exaggeration, but, you know, I do remember, I mean, think about me moving here and Laurie being able to find someone to say 'yeah, I'll put her up for a month.' I don't know that that would happen today. You know, you would stay in a hotel, right? But back then none of us had money; it's very hard to express the gender differential here in terms of money, because this is probably one of the first generation of working class women striking out on their own, some with college, most without college, and we just didn't have money, we didn't have it. There weren't jobs that would give it to us, we could be waitresses, and that was it, so you kind of shared what you had. You lived very frugally and ate a lot of beans and tofu. **[45 minutes, 55 seconds]**

[52 minutes, 16 seconds]

MC: So, I guess back to sort of your split from the community then. Other than sort, of not wanting to drink menstrual blood in the woods, do you have kind of a distinct moment when you realized that you didn't really want to be part of the community or didn't feel like--

KR: No, it worked the other way. I had a distinct moment when I thought, oh maybe I have a chance at something else. It was sort of like, oh god, I can be a minister, I could have legitimacy, I could affect change, I could reach people's lives. You know, one of the things that happened as we, you know, were so separate—separatist feminism—was kind of like, you know, we would have these huge meetings and kind of focus on whether or not you could use tampons, or you know, sort of so inward that there was no bigger picture. No Guatemala, Nicaragua, no sense of an outside world or how to change it. No sense of electoral politics or anything. I mean, there was no connection to other worlds. It was whether or not we could purify ourselves. We got the meat out, how are we going to have goddess worship—you know, it was just all very removed. The idea that I could be a minister, was like—oh my god—this is really cool because I could reach other people, I could connect with the outside world, I could bring some of this stuff—these thoughts—to them, rather than just keeping them in this little subculture.

MC: So then you decided to apply to divinity school?

KR: I did.

MC: And so was that a decision that was met with resistance from--.

KR: Oh yeah, totally, totally. They just thought it was ridiculous, and, you know, the more vocal they were about thinking it was ridiculous--. One of the things, and this is bad, and I don't want to be thought of as criticizing, you know, but you have to. One of the things that circulated in Ladyslipper, and other former workers will tell you the same thing I'm sure, is this kind of rhetoric that we can't really make it in the real world.

We've created this utopia and we can now never go back. People used to tell me I was really brave because I was the one who would go to the post office. One of my co-

workers—I can remember this day very clearly—came back from the post office and said ‘I can never do that again. I picked up a pen and put it in my mouth and it had aftershave lotion on it, and it made me sick to my stomach and I have to go home from work for the day.’ So it was this rhetoric of purity that not only can’t we go--, we’ve made such a utopia we can’t go back, we wouldn’t want to go back, and so we kind of created a ghetto for ourselves, right? So, part of--, and no one had ever left Ladyslipper. All of the women that you just had on your little list were now full time workers, and so--, it was Liz, Laurie, Sue and then I came. And then a woman named Barbara Lewis and a woman named Reggae were there by the time I left in 1986. I was the first one to leave, and so it made it like scary, because if one person can leave maybe others can as well. So Sue, and Barbara, and Liz all left within several years after me. I think that it was kind of like the breakdown of that really exciting moment--or the beginning of it—maybe it was a little bit before it, but you know, there was a lot of resistance, yes. **[56 minutes, 23 seconds]**