

TALK FOR THE LESBIAN HISTORY GROUP, 3 JUNE 2017 , London, England.

Jana Runnalls and I worked together from 1976 to 1989, thirteen years. We started out calling ourselves The Dykier than Sky High Forever Band, then The Lupin Sisters, and then Ova. As the Lupin Sisters, we decided in 1977 to expand and play with other women musicians. This period lasted less than a year. I think we numbered six at one point, and it was one of these musicians, Sally Beautista, who came up with the name 'Ova'. Musical differences and managing such a large number of women led to numbers reducing more or less one by one. Jana, Sally and I continued as a trio for a few more months, keeping the name Ova. The three of us set off in a Morris Traveller and played gigs in France and Italy. After that Jana and I continued as a duo focussing on writing songs which could incorporate some improvisation. So from 1978 Ova comprised Jana and me.

With hindsight I think Ova's achievements were phenomenal. I'm not on an ego trip. I say this as someone who is looking back at the past which in some ways was very problematic for me personally. When Ova finally folded, I was burnt out and walked away from Ova, the Ova Music Studio, and my life in the London lesbian scene, not looking back. I burned bridges and Jana and I have not spoken or seen each other since 1992, and I have nothing to do with what once was the Ova Music Studio. Twenty years after Ova finished, when Frankie Green, who set up the WLMA, approached me to contribute material, I was initially very wary. I was not sure I wanted to revisit this part of my life. For me the ending with Jana and with the Ova Music Studio we had co-founded had been traumatic and I was afraid it would rekindle difficult

emotions I had relegated to the past. I pulled out our old vinyl with trepidation and when I read the song titles I didn't recognise half of them and didn't have a clue anymore what they sounded like. I had to really psyche myself up to listen to them again. And when I did I thought, "Wow, we were pretty darned good". I was relieved to realise we were actually very good.

It was by chance I ended up with the bulk of the Ova archive material. It was Jana who collected and kept things. I'd ended up with all the stuff at some point because I had the storage space and she didn't. Several times over the years I considered chucking the whole lot out. So, when I say we were phenomenal, it comes from a place of looking back and seeing two young radical lesbian musicians surviving for thirteen years, touring internationally, writing and producing four full length albums, and setting up a women's recording studio and music resource in London. In this way we were phenomenal. No other group or individual in the lesbian music scene lasted as long or achieved as much. That is not to say we were more important, just that we somehow managed to produce more than anyone else. This was due to a variety and mixture of elements.

One was our absolute obsession with, devotion to and passion for music. We lived, ate, slept, it. The squatting and short life housing culture in the 1970s made this possible, as we could rehearse in our own homes. We signed on initially, and sometimes did office temping work. We could devote nearly all our time to making music. We didn't have to worry about rent, and often not paying bills either due to some creative engineering. It was a magic time in many ways. Another and major factor was securing a grant from the GLC (Greater London Council) in 1983 to set up our women's recording studio and music resource, which we named The Ova Music Studio. We were lucky with

the timing. The GLC had decided to fund more music projects and fewer theatre projects. After a year of looking for suitable premises, we based the studio at the Highgate Newton Community Centre in Archway. We were able to employ four women: Me, Jana, an administrator, Jenny Gibbs, and a sound engineer, Livvy Elliott. Before the funding, our sound engineers had been Chess Black, and then Viv Acious who had toured Germany with us. Viv stopped working with us because she wanted to focus more on her own music and performances. Livvy was the sister of a friend of mine who came to see us play and said she'd be interested in learning sound engineering. When she finally left the Ova Music Studio a few years later, it was to set up her own recording studio in Brixton: Studio 9. She recorded our last album there in 1988, *Who Gave Birth to the Universe*, free, as a thank you for starting her on her sound engineering path. Our salaries were abysmal, but it was a salary. I don't know whether we would have been able to continue without this. We had produced two full length albums already, toured Germany and the US, but I doubt we could have kept up the momentum without the financial support the GLC gave us. Thatcher abolished the GLC a couple of years later, and Greater London Arts and Camden Council took over the funding for the studio.

So, how did it all begin? In 1976 Jana, (then called Jane, she changed her name to Jana in 1977) was living and working in Paris as a bilingual secretary for a literary agent. She was also a serious busker and had had a recording contract¹ in France. I was squatting in London and picking up the pieces after a nervous breakdown for which I had received excellent Radical Psychiatric treatment. I was fronting a four piece folk-rock band called 'Rockwood'. The

¹ Jana never actually recorded anything in France. She cancelled the contract because they had wanted her to sing her songs and the blues in French, and although she is fluent in French, did not think her music was suited to this.

others were all men. Prior to this I had spent two years travelling around the world after leaving Canada, working in and travelling around New Zealand, Australia and South East Asia. In 1976 Jana was visiting a friend in a hippie community who lived in a row of terraced squats not far from my squat in Kentish Town. We were introduced to each other by a friend of mine living there who thought I'd like to meet another woman singer songwriter. I had spent a number of years struggling with my sexuality and had at last reached the point where I could admit to myself I might be bisexual. Jana was openly calling herself a bisexual at that time, and we fell in love. We started playing music together, and we loved harmonising, mostly other people's songs. As well as guitars, Jana also played the flute, and I played a little violin. We were not political in the slightest, and wouldn't even have called ourselves feminists. Jana moved back to England. We took the offer of a flat in a house in the row of the hippy commune squats where we had met.

Jana and I lived on the first floor of this squat, the end house in the terraced row. Above us was Mike, an American gay man, and below us was an Irishman called Danny. Jana and I were just going along playing music, signing on, being in love. We had nothing to do with Danny, but we all co-existed happily enough. One evening, Danny and three of his friends beat Jana and me up badly. Grudgingly, the hippies agreed to let Jana and me stay in one of their houses for the night, after verbally laying in to us. This was when the English Left felt hugely guilty about Ireland and they said we'd got what we deserved because we were English. (that was pretty rich given I'd grown up in Canada). Jana and I had nowhere to go. Jamie Hall, a gay violin player we had befriended, invited us to stay in his gay male community in Brixton, which we did for the next three months, the summer of 1976.

They were wonderful to us, and I feel forever grateful for their kindness. After all, just like many of us lesbians back then who wanted to live men free, they had created a safe community for themselves. This is when Jana and I got politicised. We learned and understood words such as sexism, misogyny, homophobia. We didn't know any other lesbians. Jamie and a few other of the gay men belonged to an organisation called GRAIN: Gay Rural Aid and Information Network. He had visited a member of this group, a lesbian named Alice Bondi, still a good friend of mine, who was living in Scotland as a shepherdess. She visited Brixton, and took Jana and me along to our first ever women's bar: The Festival Inn in Vauxhall. This gradually led to us meeting and getting to know more lesbians. Jana and I eventually split up as lovers, but were able to get over this upset and carry on with the music.

We started writing songs about our experiences and playing them for lesbian audiences. At first we called ourselves the Dykier Than Sky High Forever Band, and then The Lupin Sisters, because Alice, Jamie and a few others in that gay community had all decided to give their surnames as 'Lupin', based on a Monty Python sketch. The Lupin Sisters began to take off as we realised there was a real hunger for political songs written and performed by lesbians. We never really felt we fit in with the other bands of the time, many of which had come via politics of the Left. We'd sort of come from nowhere. I had only been in the country a few years and Jana had spent several years out of the country in Paris. I have to say we generally felt more at home politically on the Continent, where lesbian politics were more anti-fascism than anti-capitalism, although of course we were opposed to that too. But all of us at that time shared one thing: the burning desire to play, create and develop our music in a safe environment. At that time, women were still not allowed the freedom of forming and leading bands. It was a fight to be allowed to be

anything other than the eye-candy singer fronting a load of men, or you could play the flute. Terry Quaye, the percussionist, told the story of a drummer threatening to break her wrists. Women were frozen out. And of course, in terms of the music industry, our open lesbianism was absolutely forbidden. People might find it hard to remember that the word 'lesbian' was not uttered on the radio until well into the 1990s.

There was a thriving alternative music scene at that time. It was much more open than now, when the music industry has a stranglehold on venues, and many operate a 'pay to play' policy. We played anywhere and everywhere: women's events in pubs, community centres, arts centres, halls, theatres, anywhere that would give us a gig. Most but not all our gigs were women only. This was a time in history where women only space was essential for all of us to discover who we were, what we wanted, our strengths, our weaknesses, without the pressures of heterosexual normality and male judgement. As musicians, all of us at the time needed this kind of relatively safe space to develop our playing. As the Lupin Sisters, Jana and I recorded a full length cassette on a two track reel-to-reel tape recorder owned by one of the gay men living in the Railton Road squats. He kindly lent it to us. We recorded nearly everything live on one track, but used the second track to add instrumental solos. At this point Jana played flute, not yet having taken up the clarinet again. We mixed down the two tracks onto Jana's brother's cassette deck, one by one, in real time. We got friends to design the cassette inlays, again, one by one, hand painted different designs. We sold these at gigs.

In 1978, after the brief period of playing with other women musicians, firmly re-established as a duo, we recorded our first full length album: Ova, on

cassette. We raised money in different ways: we received a £500 grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation, my brother 'loaned' us £100, and some friends anonymously clubbed together and put £50 through our letterbox. We had somehow befriended a musician couple named Mike Trim and Sally Hurden. Mike had experience recording and helped us through the whole process, teaching us as much as he could. He was great. He helped us learn, and I remember one hilarious learning curve moment. Mike was in the recording booth with the studio's owner and engineer. We were not yet au fait with studio etiquette and Jana had not realised that although we could not hear what was being said in the mixing booth, everything we said could be heard by them. Jana sounded off about the studio owner being a wanker, and suddenly his voice came through the speakers in the recording room with his response. The whole thing, as always, was done on a shoe string. All our recordings were. We couldn't afford much studio time. All our albums were recorded and mastered in the space of two to three weeks at most. We had three women musicians play with us on our first album 'OVA': Sally Hurden (keyboards), Benny Lees (bass), and Linda Malone, congas.

Ova was invited to play at the Milkweg festival in Amsterdam, a women only music and theatre festival. An album was made of some of the music, and Ova's performances of 'Early in the Evening' and a song written by Jamie Hall entitled 'Woman Behind Bars', which was about Astrid Proll, a member of the Baader Meinhof group, are on it. We were seen at the Milkweg by a German woman called Agnes Lewe, who ran Troubadour, a business which distributed women's music across West Germany and other European countries. She had a large range of American lesbian music, but also supplied a lot of women's world music, old blues singers, women classical

musicians, and more. She had a large international catalogue. Agnes offered to organise a German tour for us.

So off we went. Moira Stewart, who lived in the same squat as me, Castle Road, Kentish Town, where Ova rehearsed pretty well night and day, liaised with Agnes and also travelled with us as roady for part of the tour. We hired a VW combi bus from the brother of a member of Clapperclaw, a women's cabaret group. We basically covered costs. Any sales of albums went straight back into the pot to fund the next one, or buy equipment, or whatever. Our budgets were so tight that I remember returning from our first US tour, which lasted three months, landing at Heathrow with 5p in my pocket, enough for a phone call. How did we get to the States?

Susan Allee, who is still a very good friend, is an American who was spending a year in London as part of her university degree studying English literature. She came to hear us at the Women's Arts Alliance near Regents Park. She loved us, and had done some work in the past for the US women's touring company Roadworks, who organised tours for many current women/feminist/lesbian musicians like Chris Williamson, Meg Christian, and Sweet Honey in the Rock. The US women's music scene was a closed shop. They were not interested in women's music outside their own country. But Susan was determined and struck a deal with Roadwork that she would work for them for six months unpaid in exchange for being able to use their resources to organise a tour for Ova. This included playing at the Michigan Women's Music Festival in 1980, and the Women's One World Festival in New York. (We actually played at Michigan three times, the last being in 1989.) We fundraised creatively. We arrived in New York, drove across the States to the West Coast with our roadie, an American woman called Hollis Fay, and back

again to the East Coast, finishing in New York at the WOW (Women's One World) Festival. Hollis knew how to economise on petrol by driving behind juggernauts, putting the van in neutral and getting sucked along in their wake. Naturally the van broke down² once, and whatever contingency money we had allowed in the budget was used up for plane tickets to the next gig while the van was repaired. But everywhere we toured, in Europe, Scandinavia, and the US, women were absolutely wonderful to us. We never stayed in hotels. Women always put us up and fed us. We met some wonderful women, and made some lasting friendships. And of course, we had quite a few adventures.

We toured West Germany every year. This really kept us afloat. I think with our first tour we managed to buy our own PA with the money. In fact I think our German tours financed most of our albums. And we loved it. I felt politically more at home there than I did in England. Our last ever tour was in Germany, in 1989. The affluence in Germany was a real contrast to a relatively poor Britain, and I did sometimes think it ironic that the country who lost the war was so much richer than the country who won. We played to audiences of up to 2000. And I'd like to share a comment by a German friend recently who saw us many times when we played there. She pointed out that there was no trickery, no special lighting effects, we just came on and were like an electric jolt. We had a chemistry which was electric, and the audiences loved this. The stage was lit, and that was it. The rest was just us and our music, our sound. Jana and I both played acoustic and electric six and twelve string guitars. Jana played flute and clarinet, and I played a little violin. At some point Jana bought a Djembe drum in Covent Garden. These were not

² All our German tours happened before the fall of Communism, and to play in Berlin we always had to drive through the DDR. Our van broke down once in the DDR, which turned out to be quite an adventure.

commonplace as they are now. We had no idea of its history and cultural significance, but we were like musical magpies in a way, picking up anything that came our way and if we liked it, incorporating it into our music, both live and recorded. In the early 1980s we started using a drum machine, and on a few songs, backing tracks we had pre-recorded, such as on The Granny Song, for which the main instrument was a synthesiser.

Jana and I were very committed to the feminist beliefs of autonomy and empowerment. Many of us who were performing were having to learn about sound technology while somehow providing our own PA equipment. Jam Today were one of the first bands to get their own PA. We saved up to buy our own, and were keen to enable more women to get to grips with sound technology so they could control their sound. As well as this, we were aware of how much music was being made by lesbian feminists, and that there were very few recordings. No British lesbian band/musician apart from us had made an album. We saved up to finance our second album, our first full length recording on vinyl, 'Out of Bounds'. For this we enlisted Josefina Copido on drums, Alison Rayner on bass, and Helen Hurden again on keyboards. We managed to find a studio with a woman sound engineer, Val Whitehead. Mike Trim was the remix engineer. We used various friends and/or lovers as backing singers. As much as possible we used women's enterprises to complete our recording projects: photography and typography by women, typesetting by Dark Moon, insert printing by Women in Print. Alison Rayner asked whether we would like to use the Stropky Cow Recording 'label', which Jam Today had started. I say 'label', but it was not a business label. It was more a statement of solidarity, to try and raise the profile of women musicians by having a common monicker. They had chosen that name because a woman sound engineer they had used had been called

a 'stroppy cow' by a male recording engineer. Jana and I then labelled this and our future recordings with the 'Stroppy Cow' symbol. We got distribution for Out of Bounds and all our recordings in the UK with WRPM, Women's Revolutions Per Minute, the distributor of women's music, owned and run by Caroline Hutton. Agnes Lewe with Troubadour distributed us in Germany, and Ladyslipper distributed us in the US. We sold several thousand copies of each album, and all sales money went back into the pot, to fund future recordings. We kept our recordings separate from the Ova Music Studio.

The Ova Music Studio. So, with the vision of helping more women record their music and learn sound technology, we applied successfully to the GLC for funding to set up the Ova Music Studio. To fulfil the requirements of the grant, we had to offer more variety, and Jana and I worked out what other skills we could use. Jana, with her extraordinary vocal abilities, started running singing workshops. I had always liked and played percussion, so offered percussion workshops. Livvy Eliot, our sound engineer by then, offered sound engineering workshops, using the eight track mixing desk we used for our gigs. Jana and I started providing Tea Dances in community centres and homes for older people. We had what seemed like an impossible target to fulfil in the first six months. I can't remember how many workshops we were supposed to provide to fulfil our funding requirements, but it was dozens if not over one hundred. We were very fortunate initially to get Jenny Gibbs as our administrator who organised all these workshops at very short notice. We did not have premises then, and had to hire spaces. The workshops were very well attended, and we kept building on them. Jana ran many vocal groups over the years. I have always been fascinated by rhythm, and wanted to encourage and empower women not only to learn how to play

percussion, but also how to create their own rhythms. I did not adhere to the Western principle of co-opting music from other cultures. I devised a process and eventually a teaching package called Drumatrix which explains the fundamentals of rhythm and teaches how to construct, create and develop your own rhythms, especially using time signatures which are not standard in Western music, such as 5/4, 7/8/ 13/8. Out of my drumming workshops came a regular group who started performing themselves, and called themselves the 'Drumbelles'. We went away for drumming weekends sometimes. We performed once in the piazza at Covent Garden where one bystander exclaimed, according to a friend in the audience standing next to him, "But they're all women!" We had congas, djembes, bongos, marimbas, log drums, and hand held percussion. This performance led to us being interviewed on the BBC Home Service Africa programme. Even the BBC Africa programme presenter did not know what Jana's drum was called - Djembe. She had been using it for several months before we learned its name. We became sensitive to the 'cultural appropriation' of instruments, and took pains to explain the origin and musical/cultural role of each percussion instrument. OVA did this on our album inserts as well. These days there is nothing particularly unusual in a woman only drumming group, but in the 1980s it was unique. I was delighted when they continued after I left London. This really was one of the fundamental beliefs of Ova: to empower women so that they did not depend on leaders.

From 1983 to 1989 we performed, toured, recorded, and ran the studio and workshops. We still played anywhere and everywhere, but some of our more high profile performances were at the Purcell Rooms at the South Bank, The Shaw Theatre, and the Donmar Warehouse. At one point we were the live music backing at the Tricycle Theatre for the women's theatre group 'The

Cunning Stunts'. We wrote the music for a short animated film called 'Circus', created by Ann Barefoot. We worked extremely hard. But I would say that in 1988 Jana was losing interest. She had started to record more New Age style music and our musical directions were beginning to diverge. As I mentioned before, I was eventually burned out. My personal life was also a mess. I decided to move on and do something which nourished me: undertake a music degree majoring in composition, at Dartington College of Arts in Devon. Out of a sense of responsibility, I stayed on the management committee for the Studio. Other members included an original Drumbelle, former workshop users and Livvy Elliot, our former sound engineer. However, the two women who were now at the helm made it clear they did not want me or anyone else involved. They became hostile and among other things, accused me of 'imposing my ego'. They basically wanted it to themselves. The last straw for me was when they decided to have an official 'launch' for the Studio, totally ignoring it's hitherto five year existence. Others on the management committee had had enough abuse, and decided to resign, and so I followed suit. I think this shocked the two women who had taken over, as I think they believed because it was my baby, I'd never let go. I still think their behaviour was out of order, but I did let go. I'd had enough of the terrible way lesbian feminists could treat each other, and I removed myself from the London lesbian scene. What grated however, was that as soon as they took control, they told the funders the salaries were too low, and promptly got a raise. This unpleasant ending to my relationship with the Studio, my unhappy ending with Jana, and my desire to heal and move on is why I refused to associate with anything Ova for twenty years. I am very grateful to Frankie Green for starting the WLMA. This for me has been a positive experience and has enabled me to validate Ova's history.

This brings me to now, and our history, and by that I mean all of us who were active as lesbian feminists throughout the 1970s and 1980s. How do we deal with our history, and how do we look after it and ourselves in relation to it. I recommend anyone who is interested in this period, either as someone who was there, or as someone who has an interest now, to read Frankie Green's article published in *Trouble and Strife* in 2016, 'Whose Story is it Anyway?' This addresses and explains the need for an ethical approach and for adopting certain codes of behaviour when working with our histories. I, Frankie and the WLMA had a nightmarish experience with someone who was abusive, deceitful, dishonest, exploitative, and indeed who threatened me personally³. We have evidence for all these claims. This young woman had approached Frankie to say she would help her set up the on-line WLMA. She was good at getting Lottery funding, involved herself with us and secured some funding to do an exhibition based on our work, and once the money was forthcoming treated us appallingly. For example, we wanted the intellectual copyrights and music rights of the women's work to be protected, and were told we were being greedy. We ended up having to draw up a contract ourselves, using a former member of the Stepney Sisters' band who is now a solicitor. In one dialogue with this utterly vindictive individual, when I was explaining why we must ensure the copyright and protection of women's intellectual and music rights, she said to me, 'The problem with all of you is that you are still alive'. After giving notice she was leaving the project, she even tried to get Frankie to sign an agreement that if Frankie were to die, the

³ I had given a two hour interview to Debi Withers, who was acting on behalf of the WLMA. The interview was intended to be in the public domain, i.e., uploaded to the WLMA. Unbeknownst to me, DW held on to the interview for four years, for her own personal use, in effect stealing it. This involved a direct conflict of interest which flouts the professional principles of the Codes of Conduct which govern national and international archiving bodies. When I discovered this and asked her to put it on the WLMA, for where it was always intended, she threatened me, wrongly claiming joint copyright, and falsely claiming there was personal information in the interview which I would not want made public.

sarchive would be passed to her⁴. We had one hell of a battle severing our connection with this person, and managed only after much abuse. It was only because the steering committee of the WLMA really pulled together that we were able to stop this woman's exploitation and disassociate ourselves from her. In fact, we created the Steering Committee specifically to deal with the problem. I hate to think what would have happened if she had targeted just one individual. We are concerned that this could happen again to someone else, perhaps not as strong as we all are. I will read the comment posted on Frankie's article in *Trouble and Strife*, which clearly shows we are not the only ones who have experienced such a problem: "*I hope that this fascinating (and personally touching) piece is used to teach aspiring archivists. As some involved in Women in Libraries at an early stage I very much sympathise with the message. It is our own story.*"

The woman who was so rude, abusive and exploitative to us, is herself a trustee of the Feminist Archives South and North, and could easily approach another unwitting relic from the past with flattery and a professed interest, seem perfectly credible and plausible, only to do the same again. This is why I really recommend reading Frankie's article. We must have an ethical approach and adopt certain codes of behaviour when dealing with our histories. No one else will defend us. As the WLMA, we put our work in the public domain. We encourage research. For example, we have been included in this book (*Breaking Down the Walls of Heartache*). But in the instance I've described, we really felt we had to fight to protect our own history.

Unfortunately for some people who would wish to exploit us and our history, we are very much alive and kicking, and although people may draw on our work for research, perhaps even analyse it, we can still speak for ourselves

and should at least be consulted, unlike in this instance where the woman drew heavily on the WLMA for a book she wrote, without asking us, consulting us, or even letting us know about it. A little like the exhibition she staged, where only Frankie was invited to the opening. So, do read Frankie's article. This woman's behaviour was outrageous, disgraceful, and we in our 'autumn' years, should never have had to experience anything like this, and we sincerely hope we can help raise awareness so no one else has to go through what we did.

But to end on a positive note. I feel extremely fortunate to have had those years with OVA. We managed, as young lesbian musicians, to define ourselves, our music, our appearance. We wrote, played and performed in complete control of ourselves and our music. Not many musicians even now can say that. We were vehemently opposed to the music industry, which meant we were constantly broke, but it also meant we were 100% independent. It enabled me to pursue a life as a professional musician, and although some of the memories are bitter sweet, I am now, many years later, when I try to make sense of it all, very proud of the achievements of what I sometimes feel were two unstable, extraordinarily creative misfits whom the Fates conspired to keep together for thirteen years.

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