

Live from the 'Chives

The 1974 Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival



On my first visit to the CLAGS office, I was drawn in by a framed poster on the wall reading “In Celebration of Amazons...Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival.” The poster depicts two women riding a black horse across a night sky dotted with stars that grow into labryses and advertises an event in East Lansing, Michigan on the weekend of May 17-19th, 1974. A bit of digging revealed that this poster was designed by the socialist [Chicago Women's Graphics Collective](#), a subgroup of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, who would create

posters as a collaborative process, intentionally almost never leaving individual names of designers. In an interview with [Lavender Women](#) One of the Midwest Lesbian Conference organizers said, “The Graphics posters saved us from going into debt. We cleared \$4. They volunteered to do it for us.”

In contrast to the legendary Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, the information surrounding the Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival is more limited, and the Midwest Conference seems to only have taken place once, in 1974, with some discussion of a 1975 reprise, followed by the mostly unrelated birth of MichFest in 1976. The Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival was inspired by the larger West Coast Lesbian Conference in Los Angeles the previous year, and the publication [Lesbian Connection](#) and associated organization Ambitious Amazons grew out of discussions that were first had at the Midwest Conference. In October of 1974, Joan E. Nixon wrote a column in [Lavender Woman](#) reflecting on lesbian conferences of the past year and invoking the controversy surrounding Beth Elliot’s performance at the West Coast Lesbian Conference, “Unlike L.A., East Lansing’s conference had fewer difficulties with childcare and transsexuals, but in East Lansing the organizers were in the closet, calling it a women’s conference.” However, the readiness with which the conference organizers spoke with lesbian publications and centered lesbian speakers and workshops paints a different picture, as does the Chicago Women’s Graphic Collective poster that loudly declares its lesbianism.

A July 1974 report by Judy Whitaker in [Lavender Women](#) collected experiences from attendees and organizers of the Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival, indicating that 326 women registered in advance for the festival and even more women showed up, traveling from as far as Tennessee and Colorado. Jam sessions were held throughout the weekend, and lesbian separatist singer-songwriter Linda Shear of the independent record label Old Lady Blue Jeans made an appearance. When asked what she would do differently if she were to redo the conference, one organizer said “We wouldn’t have straight women in the workshops. We would have no big names.” While the conference proclaimed a lesbian title, it operated out of a women’s union space, straight women were also welcome to participate in some of the events, and there was much debate throughout the weekend over the issues of separatism and bisexuality, which most likely led to Nixon’s labeling it a women’s conference.

In June of 1975, the Ambitious Amazons, the collective that initially produced [Lesbian Connection](#), released a statement explaining the paper’s roots at the Midwest Lesbian Conference: “Over a year ago some of us working on East Lansing’s Midwest Lesbian Conference realized that no effective means of lesbian communication existed. We had an idea, a dream, of starting a publication which could become a national communications network for all lesbians.” Although the Midwest Lesbian Conference and Music Festival only spanned three days, its legacy has continued through [Lesbian Connection](#), which became a staple of the lesbian periodicals and continues to be published today.