

# WOMAN'S

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## Jeanne Mackey to Leave D.C. One Last Chance to See Her



Photo by Pattie Postel

Jeanne Mackey (far right) with members of *Harmony Bones*: (left to right) Kris Koth, Rosi Gowdey, Julie Parsons. Not pictured is percussionist Barbara Lewis.

by Constance Spheris

Newcomers to the DC area may not realize that DC has long been home to a vital and exciting music scene that helped give birth to the women's music industry. Some local women's-music celebrities such as Meg Christian, Betty and Sweet Honey in the Rock have gone on to build national and even international careers; others, like the woman who is the subject of this article (and who may be known to many longtime DC residents as part of the '80s bands Heresy and Lifeline), have developed devoted local audiences and have returned their fans' devotion by continuing to grow and deepen as performers.

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## Jeanne Mackey

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This article is based on a recent interview with Jeanne Mackey and the writer's own experience of Jeanne's musical history. The quotes are Jeanne's from that interview.

Tracing Jeanne Mackey's political life and musical career in Washington, D.C. is like laying the mosaic of the "left" and progressive women's cultural and political communities here. Soon, we will lose this woman rich in the heritage of that tradition—she and her partner Pattie Postel are moving to Ann Arbor this summer—so this article is a tribute to her: It is a history of Jeanne's life and community in D.C., in honor of her farewell concert this June with her band, Harmony Bones.

For nearly 20 years, we have counted on Jeanne to make music for the struggle, to bring people together. At demonstrations, rallies, fundraisers, Jeanne has given away her music while most

people built their professional lives monetarily. It was always assumed Jeanne would be there to inspire us - and she was. If you do not know Jeanne or her music, her essence as a performing artist is eclectic, idiosyncratic, soulful, political; deeply steeped in rhythm and harmony. She is the quintessential performer who throughout her 20 years of performance has brought together everything from classical to blues to funk guitar, to mandolin, to tap dance, to that emotive, evocative soprano that always engages her audience. Her voice has an emotional pull that at once stirs and soothes you; makes you dreamy at times; makes you feel connected.

Jeanne—A.K.A. "Wacky-Mackey"—moved to D.C. in 1974, part of the wave of people who came in the wake of Vietnam for national political reasons but stayed because they also found a dynamic, progressive local community. She moved into the political working/living

collective in Mount Pleasant known as Source, and spent the next couple years working on organizing manuals. These were the days of worker collectives like Fields of Plenty, Stone Soup and Bread & Roses; D.C. Home Rule, Earth Onion and the fight for Marie Reed—very exciting times to be an activist in D.C.

In 1976, Jeanne moved into the women's collective house around the corner—Self Reliance (rumored to have been the longest standing women's collective house in D.C.). The house had its own rich history of political activism—meetings, benefits, political visitors—everyone from the Weather Underground to Palestinian and African nationalists passed through...plus all the dykes. And then there was the bookstore that operated out of the living room—"First Things First—A FeMail Order House"—later absorbed by Lammas.

Jeanne started performing publicly in 1975 with her first musical partner, Mary Trevor. They quickly built a reputation as political musicians and often played at rallies, benefits, potlucks. Labor songs, women's music, songs of international solidarity. This was also the time that women's music was building nationally and Olivia Records was moving from D.C. to California.

"As my political work developed, my music grew out of it," Jeanne told me. "I was encouraged to perform because of the political work I was doing. I had places to play because I knew the people doing the benefits."

It was at Self Reliance that Jeanne really had a chance to let her music lead her, with other politically-inspired musicians like Diane de Graffenreid and others

who performed with "Lucha" and sang songs of solidarity about international women's struggles. Like Lucha, Jeanne and Mary bridged leftist, progressive and feminist politics. Among their first gigs were the 2nd National Women's Music Festival and the first Socialist Feminist Conference.

The basement of Self Reliance quickly became the rehearsal room for a host of incredibly talented women, including Penny Rosenwasser, Jeanne's next singing partner; and a few years later, in 1980, Jeanne's next band incarnation, Heresy. 1977 was also the time of the *Post* pressmen's strike and the nurses strike at the Washington Hospital Center—actions that threatened D.C.'s largest corporate bastions. Jeanne and Penny were regulars on the lines, leading strikers in song.

By 1978, women's music was flourishing—it was being recorded and, importantly, it was touring. Jeanne and Penny played together for a couple of years, including 2 tours.

Jeanne's next band, Heresy, shifted the music's message away from class politics and more toward sexual and racial politics and women's healing. The band included then-16 year old Toshi Reagon on bass, and Terrie Bjorklund on percussion and vocals.

Jeanne supported herself with part-time office work so she could do her "real work"—music. She spent hours in training—voice, acoustic and electric guitar—and discovered that it was not technical excellence that was so vital for her in music. Playing with technical proficiency wasn't enough.

"The juice for me, what I love about music, is its power

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# Jeanne Mackey

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to communicate. At some time I realized that my life experience was as essential to my performance as any technical skill I might have developed. It helps bring people together and feel connected.”

After singing on her own for a couple years, in 1982, Jeanne reunited with Mary Trevor to form a new band, Lifeline, along with bassist, Kris Koth. They concentrated on labor women’s events and also played at women’s festivals, community events and clubs. Jeanne left the band in 1990, as they were moving more toward rock and she was veering in another direction.

That same year, Jeanne decided she wanted to work as a psychotherapist, so gave up music as her primary focus and started a masters program in social work.

That decision coincided with another announcement: Her friend Diane de Graffenreid was diagnosed with cancer. For the next year and a half, as Jeanne went through her masters program, she was also integral to the healing practice Diane had created for herself with her community, even into her death.

“I was profoundly affected by Diane’s illness and death. It blew apart my world view: I had a framework for saying things would be OK if we could figure out how to deal with power responsibly, consciously. Then I was face-to-face with the suffering that just seems to be part of being human—nothing to do with a particular class system.”

Harmony Bones came together after Jeanne finished her masters program. “It’s low key—we work together

easily and we have a great time.” The name reflects Jeanne’s growing interest in the healing qualities of music, which lead her to band member Rosi Gowdey, Director of the Potomac Massage Training Institute, who is also a feminist and peace activist with a musical career. Also in the band is long time Mackey cohort Kris Koth; clinical social worker Julie Parsons (who left behind a pop musical career in Austria); and D.C.’s own legendary different drummer, Barbara Lewis, who also works in the healing arts as a physician’s assistant in AIDS clinical research and Whitman-Walker volunteer.

Jeanne’s repertoire has something for everyone. In addition to the songs from the political tradition, there are the deeply soulful ones; the women’s (all those rocks and waterfalls); the goofy ones (eggplants that eat cities); the dog and sloth songs, with Pattie often making cameo appearances as one of the aforementioned beings.

Now that Jeanne is moving, you have one last chance to see and hear her and Harmony Bones perform. The concert is a benefit for the Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer, and Jeanne will be dedicating her performance to her late friend, Diane.

The concert will be on June 17 at 8:00 pm at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring. Tickets are \$12 in advance, available at Lammas, the House of Musical Traditions and the Mautner Project, and \$15 at the door. Or you can charge them by calling 202/332-5536 (v/tty). The event is wheelchair accessible and signing is available with advance notice.