

They sing for the union label

By David Armstrong
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

WHEN THE ROCK group Lifeline sang out recently on its first video, with clouds of dry ice and pouting models striking suggestive poses. It was a United Steelworkers video aimed at union organizers, who heard Lifeline's can-do songs along with tips on how to mobilize the millworkers.

After all, this was no standard music video, with clouds of dry ice and pouting models striking suggestive poses. It was a United Steelworkers video aimed at union organizers, who heard Lifeline's can-do songs along with tips on how to mobilize the millworkers.

That unusual effort was all in a day's work for Lifeline. An energetic trio of women from Washington, D.C., who just wound up a three-concert stay in the Bay Area, Lifeline is among a still-small but growing number of performers who hope to revive America's once-thriving labor culture.

"We play union conferences, on picket lines, in schools and clubs," explains guitarist-singer Jeanne Mackey. "A lot of working people never heard songs about their lives, and it means a lot to them."

Guitarist-singer Mary Trevor and bass player Kris Koth joined Mackey four years ago to form Lifeline. Since then, the trio has toured the country with songs about truck-driving women, organizing drives and boycotts.

Their songs are didactic but surprisingly entertaining, due, the group's members say, to eclectic musical influences that range from old standbys like Leadbelly to New Wave rockers like Nina Hagen.

As a result, Lifeline is far from your traditional, if-I-had-a-hammer folkie group. "When we get a permanent drummer,"

vows Trevor, "we'll be out of folk music forever."

"For the younger generation," adds Mackey, "you must have a beat, some musical complexity, maybe synthesizers."

"A lot of traditional labor songs are great for the committed," says Trevor. "But we wanted our music to stand on its own, whether or not people liked the message."

Several months ago, the group released a three-song extended play record, "Never Stop," to showcase its music and messages. The record has been a slow seller so far, but it has a bright, burnished sound with crossover potential.

A cover version of the Motels' "Monday Shutdown," complete with an edgy, urgent guitar solo, is paired with a sorrowful, country-flavored love song. About the only explicitly political material on the record is a freely adapted version of reggae star Jimmy Cliff's "You Can Get It If You Really Want," which Lifeline changed to "We Can Get It If We Organize."

Lifeline's message is feminist, anti-nuclear, and above all, pro-labor. Their songs focus on low wages for women, sub-standard working conditions, organizing non-union shops, and catalyzing union shops. While those causes seem far re-

moved from the musical mainstream these days, such was not always the case.

Before the McCarthy blacklist of the 1950s, activist artists such as Woody Guthrie, The Weavers, and Leadbelly appeared on network television and radio and cut hit records.

"We made a conscious decision to do labor stuff," she continues. "The labor movement has some resources, and a new generation of union leaders is coming to power that grew up with rock songs and understands popular culture."

In addition to its work with unions, Lifeline travels the folk and rock club circuit.

And, like many politically inclined performers, Lifeline stays in touch with loosely structured organizations such as the Labor Heritage Foundation, the People's Music Network, and the Freedom Song Network. The organizations sponsor workshops, publish newsletters, hold musical/political gatherings and share pointers on how to pay the rent while playing pointed political music.

"For years," says Jeanne Mackey, "my family said, 'This is very nice, but when are you going to get a real job?' Now they say, 'We don't agree with everything you say, but you put on a terrific show.' Even my Uncle Chuck, who voted for Reagan."

Lifeline's EP "Never Stop" is available by mail order for \$7.50 from 722 Ritchie Ave., Silver Spring, Md. 20910.