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

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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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 Lamm's.

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 Posse 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.

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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 frame-
work 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
cuisine 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
dfriend, 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 wheel-
chair accessible and signing is
available with advance notice.