



ORAL HISTORY AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

**BUILDING MULTI-RACIAL COALITIONS
THROUGH WOMEN'S CULTURE**

THE ROADWORK ORAL HISTORY AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

**IF YOU FEEL SOMETHING MISSING,
IT IS PROBABLY THE SOUND OF YOUR OWN VOICE.**

The roots of contemporary social justice movements in the United States are deeply intertwined. **THE ROADWORK ORAL HISTORY AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT** illuminates and documents these roots by telling the story of a multi-racial, cultural-political collaboration among musicians, artists, poets and organizers that existed from the late 1970s to the 1990s. Roadwork was a unique cultural organization founded by women with extensive leadership experience in black civil rights, progressive, women's, global justice, anti-war, and lesbian-feminist movements. It was led by women of color, and aimed at nothing less than the transformation of consciousness and the creation of a global social justice movement.

Founded in 1978 by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Amy Horowitz, Roadwork was created to "put women's culture on the road" through tours, festivals, concerts and leadership. **ROADWORK** was born in a context of profound sexism. Misogyny in music and entertainment industries severely limited women promoters, recording engineers and independent artists. Despite these obstacles, an underground women's culture (poets, visual artists, filmmakers and musicians) flourished in the 1970s-90s, finding voice in coffeehouses, independently produced concerts, festivals, and protest rallies.

Women and feminist men formed record labels, organizations, and networks like Olivia Records, Redwood Records, the Women's Music Distribution Network, the Seattle's Riot Grrl movement and grunge scene, and Boston's Rock Against Sexism. Underground festivals were born (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, West Coast Women's Music and Comedy Festival, New England Women's

Musical Retreat, and Roadwork's own Sisterfire festival). Independent producers and distributors built alternative economic models that challenged the mainstream music business.

ROADWORK emerged at a time when the US was engaged in widespread covert intelligence operations both domestically (against civil rights and anti-war movements) and globally (in places like El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Chile and the middle east). Anita Bryant was campaigning against lesbian and gay rights across the country (1977-1980s); Jerry Falwell and the so-called Moral Majority attacked women's rights, abortion and gay rights, California voters were facing a ballot initiative that would have banned openly gay people from teaching in schools (1978); a conservative Supreme Court rolled back civil rights gains; and a conservative reaction led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The idea that culture could be a strategy of resistance

GRASSROOTS, MULTI-CULTURAL ACTIVISM, CREATED TO INSPIRE FUTURE GENERATIONS OF ACTIVISTS AND TO REVEAL THE TRUTH OF WHAT CAME BEFORE



Photo by Susan Wilson

Varied Voices of Black Women Tour Backstage in Boston, 1978



Photo by Sharon Farmer

Sisterfire Festival Staff and Volunteers 1985

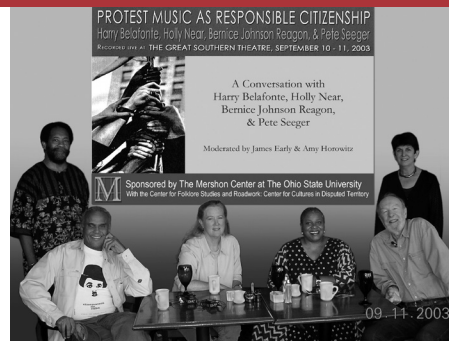


Photo by Sharon Farmer

Protest Music as Responsible Citizenship (Harry Belafonte, Holly Near, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Pete Seeger with James Early and Amy Horowitz) 2003

lay at the heart of **ROADWORK'S** mission. Through concerts that brought activists and artists into collaboration, Roadwork inspired tens of thousands of people to generate social change in reactionary times. **ROADWORK** trained a generation of organizers, producers and women leaders, to recognize that domestic politics in the US are integrally tied to struggles for justice in other countries. Roadwork mobilized diverse audiences and built lasting coalitions across the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation and economic class.

Despite its bold vision and wide reach, the story of **ROADWORK**, and indeed of the broader cultural movement led by women, has not been fully documented. Pioneering films like *Gotta Make This Journey: Sweet Honey In The Rock* (1983); *A Litany for Survival* (1995); *Radical Harmonies* (2001); and *The Punk Singer* (2013); and books like *Eden Built* by Eves (1999); and *Dear Sisters: Dispatches From The Women's Liberation Movement* (2000); remain exceptions—groundbreaking efforts to capture diverse movements whose imprints on contemporary social justice movements has yet to be acknowledged.

Amy Horowitz and Urvashi Vaid—Roadwork's co-founder and former **ROADWORK** board member are launching this Roadwork Oral History and Documentary Project and a subsequent documentary film, to add to the historical record of cultural organizing and contemporary social change movements. As Bernice Johnson Reagon once said, "If you feel something missing, it is probably the sound of your own voice." The project will document the stories of artists, activists, volunteers and architects of the women's cultural political movement that flourished and

influenced thousands of people for more than 20 years. With financial support, we aim to conduct more than 50 interviews during 2017-2018.

ROADWORK'S MANY PROJECTS INCLUDED:

- Producing the *Varied Voices of Black Women* tour (1978)—the first, national tour of black lesbian musicians and poets featuring Olivia Records artists Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins, Gwen Avery, and Pat Parker, with Vicky Randall, Barbara Cobb, Colleen Stewart and others. Tour stops included Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Wilmington, and Vassar College.
- Creating **Sisterfire**, an inclusive, multi-racial urban women's cultural festival, featuring music, dance, spoken-word, and theater on a women-only stage (1982-1988). The festival, open to all, was largely volunteer-run.
- Producing Holly Near's **Tour for a Nuclear-Free Future** in 1979. The tour was motivated by the 1977 International Conference Against the A & H Bombs in Hiroshima and the Three Mile Island nuclear catastrophe in Pennsylvania.
- Developing a local, national, and global performance network for *Sweet Honey In The Rock* (1977-1995), now an internationally renowned African American a cappella ensemble.
- Activating tens of thousands who attended **ROADWORK**-produced events, tours, and cultural arts productions.

At the heart of
ROADWORK'S
mission is the
idea that
CULTURE
can be a strategy of
RESISTANCE.



SISTERFIRE THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

(clockwise) Tracy Chapman, Elizabeth Cotten, Toshi Reagon, Alice Walker, Sweet Honey In the Rock, Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert, Phyllis Bethel, Buffy St. Marie

PHASE ONE will be a virtual resource for grassroots, multi-cultural activism, created to inspire future generations of activists and to reveal the truth of what came before. The project will document the **ROADWORK** story through interviews featuring artists, volunteers, producers, sign-language interpreters, event participants, and the multiracial coalition that served as **ROADWORK** staff and board. **THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT** will feature interviews or footage featuring artists who worked with Roadwork including: Bernice Johnson Reagon, Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Holly Near, Toshi Reagon, Laura Nyro, Margie Adam, Kate Clinton, June Jordan, Adrienne Torf, Sweet Honey In The Rock, Tracy Chapman, Wallflower Order Dance Collective, Urban Bush Women, Alexis DeVeaux, In Process, Cris Williamson, Alice Walker, Ronnie Gilbert, Ampara Ochoa, Alicia Partnoy, Elizabeth Cotten, the Moving Hall Star Singers, Flora Molten, among many others. We will also digitize memorabilia for our website. This phase of the project is a multi-year effort that will require ongoing fundraising efforts.

PHASE TWO Sisterfire@Smithsonian: Roadwork 40th Anniversary Celebration, July 7-8, 2018! Stay tuned for more details.

PHASE THREE will involve the production of a documentary film drawing on interviews conducted that show how **ROADWORK** created connections and communities that continue to this day across race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and culture.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. BECOME AN ASSOCIATE PRODUCER:

We are seeking Associate Producers to help us realize **THE ROADWORK ORAL HISTORY AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT**. If you are interested, please contact Tracy Gary at tracygary1@gmail.com or 415-377-9447.

2. DONATE TO THE PROJECT: We have raised \$50,000 to produce the Sisterfire@Smithsonian Celebration and over \$30,000 to start work on the oral history projects. Help us raise \$30,000 to record the summer events. Tax-deductible donations can be made to **Roadwork: Center for Cultures in Disputed Territory** and mailed to: **Roadwork Center, 69 Murray Street Suite 6, New York, New York 10007** or via PayPal at roadworkcenter.org. EIN number 52-1166949.

3. CONTRIBUTE TO THE ARCHIVE: If you are in possession of memorabilia, see the inventory page at roadworkcenter.org under the “archives” tab (<http://roadworkarchives.com/inventory.html>). See a list of some of the artifacts we hope to gather. We invite you to share short video clips of your Roadwork memories. Contact admin@roadworkcenter.org for details.

Once you contact us, we will invite you to share your digitized offerings on our Dropbox.

If you prefer to send a material artifact, please do so to the Murray Street Productions address above.

WE WELCOME YOU AS A PARTNER TO THE ROADWORK ORAL HISTORY AND DOCUMENTARY PROJECT.

Together we can ensure that the legacy of this critical work is preserved and accessible to future generations of activists. These women have paved our way; the journey to stay on the path together is up to each of our commitments to shape the world we want.



JOIN US! MEET OUR TEAM

Oral History Project Team

Amy Horowitz
Co-Producer and Senior Consultant

Yvonne Welbon
Producer/Director

Nadia Hallgren
Director of Photography

Sabrina Gordon
Editor

Toshi Reagon
Sisterfire@Smithsonian Curator

Netsanet Negussie
Production and Development Associate

Tracy Gary
Fundraising Consultant

Board Members

Urvashi Vaid
Alexis DeVeaux
Susan Allee
Toshi Reagon
Michelle Lanchester

WE CAN BE CONTACTED VIA:

admin@roadworkcenter.org

VISIT ROADWORK

(now Roadwork Center for Cultures in Disputed Territory) at
roadworkcenter.org

to donate, meet our project team and board members,
and hear about our other projects.