

Reclaiming the past

Folksinger finds women's history in traditional songs

By **AMY BALLESTAD**
of the Journal

Sometimes women get lost in history, according to a folksinger who performed in Stevens Point Tuesday.

The colonial women who built a new world or the women who dressed as men to fight for independence in the Revolutionary War are largely forgotten in the chronicles of history.

But she wants to reclaim their life stories, said Gerri Gribi of Green Bay.

"Just because women don't seem to be present, doesn't mean they weren't there. It means we lost them somehow," she said to the more than 100 people attending her performance at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Her program, "Womenfolk: Celebrating Our Heritage," was an informal presentation of folksongs that tell of women's roles in history and modern society.

Gribi (raised in Kentucky and Ohio) has been singing folksongs since she was a child but it wasn't until recently that she realized women were almost completely absent from the traditional songs she knew.

"I realized all the songs I knew about women were from a negative point of view. 'Oh woe is me. My life is miserable. I wish I were dead,'" she said.

"But I've found there are many songs that show women as something more than a doormat waiting for a man to come along."

When an expert told her there weren't any folksongs with a positive image of women, she set out on her own to find some. After 10 years of research, she's found enough woman-positive folksongs to fill two albums.

"A lot of what I had to do to find these songs is figure out why we lost them in the first place," said Gribi, whose research took her to the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

"Part of reclaiming these songs for women was having faith that they existed and being willing to do the search for them."

Folksongs have gone in and out of the mainstream of popular music, but they remain a strong part of tradition, she said. A song survives as long as someone, somewhere sings it.

Folkmusic carries the history of the everyday people who built our country, Gribi said.

"These are our diaries of people who didn't have the education or leisure to write down their history," she said. "Ordinary people had history too and often it's through our oral tradition and folksongs that we learn their history."

Since women were not allowed into positions of power, their contributions are usually not recorded in history books, she said. It is in the stories of everyday people that one learns about the lives of women.

"I used to be a history teacher and one of the things that used to bother me is that our history books are categorized by wars," she said. "For example, after you cover every battle and battle of WWI, there's one paragraph or one line that says, 'In 1920 women got the right to vote.' As if one day everyone woke up and said, 'Women haven't been voting! Let's pass an amendment to let them!'"

"But the truth is there was a battle. Women went to the streets by the thousands and were clubbed by police...They would sing songs together, use the music as a shield."

She found the songs written by the suffragettes, documenting their struggle to get the vote. If modern women take their right to vote for granted, they're doing a disservice to their foremothers, she said.

Other songs she found talk about women's daily work on a farm, or women outsmarting men who planned to murder them. Several are modern folksongs about daily concerns such as women in the workforce.

"What's so fascinating to me is that (these songs) speak to all people," she said. "There's this universal subconscious for women. The music cuts through any class level. It's a common experience. These songs are a hundred years old and we're still discussing the same things today."

Gribi's performance was the second in a series of three programs about women's achievements, sponsored by UW-SP and a grant from the Wisconsin Humanities Committee.

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