

## ‘Neither pure love nor imitating capitalism’: Euro WILD and the invention of women’s music distribution in Europe, 1980-1982

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## **‘Neither pure love nor imitating capitalism’: Euro WILD and the Invention of Women’s Music Distribution in Europe, 1980-1982.**

Euro Women’s Independent Label Distribution (WILD) was a pan-European network of feminist music distributors active in the early 1980s. They were affiliated to WILD, the US-based women’s music distribution network founded in 1979 to disseminate the growing corpus of Women’s Music emerging from the US Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). This article presents an interpretation of archive materials that document Euro WILD’s activities from the Women’s Revolution Per Minute archive, housed at Women’s Art Library, London. Constrained and enabled by the archive materials on offer, I re-visit some of the practical and political problems the network faced as European distributors of US Women’s Music. Key issues explored include the perception of US cultural imperialism by women based in Europe and the affective politics that circulated trans-nationally between distributors. Finally this article explores how the concept and practice of the Women’s Music Industry changed when women beyond the borders of the US engaged with it.

**Keywords:** Women’s Music, Women’s Music Industry, Archive Methodologies, Euro WILD, Distribution, Cultural Imperialism

The first meeting of the Euro Women’s Independent Label Distribution (WILD) network took place on July 25, 1980 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The meeting spread over three days amid an exuberant Danish women’s movement that, in April 1980, had secured permanent occupancy of Danner House, a venue that would soon become a vibrant Women’s Centre. Within this feminist space that would provide refuge for ‘battered women’ and a host of other feminist cultural and political projects, distributors of Women’s Music from Denmark (Face the Music), England (Women’s Revolutions Per Minute), Netherlands (Carol V. Bloom), Sweden (Liliths Öronfröjd) and West Germany (Troubadisc) met and discussed the complex issues they faced. Women’s Music, affiliated with the wider concept of ‘Women’s Culture’ (Kimball, 1981) emerged within the US Women’s Liberation (WLM). From its humble beginnings in 1972 (Scovill, 1981), where women engaged with the rudiments of music making, record and concert production, Women’s Music had grown significantly by 1980 to become a ‘Women’s Music Industry.’ The industrial production of US Women’s Music relied upon a complex and sprawling infrastructure of distributors, technicians and concert and festival producers. For Boden Sandstrom, the extensive community networks created through Women’s Music, whose cultural landmark was the annual Michigan Women’s Music Festival, was key to its endurance and success (2005, 102-103).

By 1980 this network, the musical products and cultural/ economic practices attached to the U.S. Women’s Music Industry, had reached ‘Europe.’ Within Europe Women’s Music was predominantly an imported phenomenon, a product that could be distributed through material objects (mainly the LP record, but also audio cassettes). Distributing US Women’s Music was an act of ‘hope’ that aimed ‘to stimulate more women into making their own music’ (WRPM, Jan 1980) within women’s political communities across the continent. Although music making was certainly prevalent in Women’s Movements outside the US during the 1970s, there was not equivalent organisational infrastructure to facilitate the production of LPs, concerts and festivals

on the industrial scale that had been developed in the US. The US Women's Music Industry was 'grounded in the discourse of radical feminism and lesbian separatism' (Sandstrom, 2005, 103) and its influence on feminist music makers beyond its borders cannot be denied. Many women involved in feminist music making networks in the UK (including, crucially, Caroline Hutton from the Women's Revolutions Per Minute [WRPM] who is a key figure in this article) had visited the US in the 1970s. Attending women's music concerts and festivals, as well as meeting women involved in the emergent music industry, was a source of inspiration that influenced the evolution of music making as a political, feminist activity in the UK.

Listening to Women's Music, for women living outside the US, could also be a transformative experience. Indeed, the industrial products of US Women's Music acted as both proxy for and extension of women-identified community. As portable objects LPs could be moved across vast spatial distances, furnishing the very possibility of what Kathy Davis calls an 'imagined feminist community' (2007, 76). In an interview I conducted with Hutton in 2009 she explains the profound impact hearing Women's Music records had on her personal and political identity.

An American friend of mine had the Alix Dobkin album, and Meg Christian and for someone who was in the process of thinking about coming out as a lesbian, which was all part of 'doing things new and transgressions' and all this kind of stuff, it was like: *Oh my God, this is just amazing*. It was like, phwoah [gasps emphatically] I didn't know people could sing about things like this, it was just astonishing. It was all new and wonderful and exciting and terrific.

This passionate and affirmative response to US Women's Music led Hutton to become the sole proprietor of the WRPM in 1979, a non-commercial feminist record distribution business she had acquired from Tierl Thompson and Nicole Freni. In 1980, the year after she obtained the WRPM, she met with other European women distributing US Women's Music to discuss the possibility of forming a network that would help 'keep one another informed and help one another with problems which are specific to European distribution' ('Dear Wild Label Members,' July 25, 1980). Euro WILD was imagined as a node within the larger US Women's Music distribution network organised under the moniker WILD. WILD formed in 1979 and effectively functioned as an umbrella 'organisation' for the numerous Women's Music distributors spread across the US including Dandelion, Ladyslipper, Loose Ends, Women's Music Express and many others. WILD organised women's music distribution into regional territories: the West, Middle and the East. When Euro WILD joined they were part of the Eastern territory. Until the late 1970s Women's Music distribution within the US had predominantly been done by volunteers, record engineers or by word of mouth (Petersen, 1987, 208). WILD's objective was to 'act as a unified collective, making their tenets known to labels manufacturing women-identified music and to collectively and cooperatively work with each other to insure a financial future for women-identified music' (Petersen, 1987, 208).

To date the most extensive research on Women's Music has focused on the role of Women's music festivals and how they function as a 'context for the enactment of lesbian feminist politics and notions of community' (Hayes, 2010, 1; Sandstrom, 2005, Cvetkovich, 2003, 83-118). When the role of distribution networks has been

discussed, it tends to be presented in romanticised terms that obfuscate the difficult personal politics that abounded at critical points in the evolution of the Women's Music Industry (Lont, 1992; Kuehl, 1999). Much of this research has focused on the dynamics of the Women's Music Industry within the U.S. and rarely, if ever, acknowledges the life of Women's Music outside this context. The Euro WILD papers, housed within the Women's Revolution Per Minute (WRPM) archive at the Women's Art Library in London,<sup>1</sup> widen understanding of how and where Women's Music travelled, and the ways feminist communities outside the U.S. adopted the practices of the Women's Music Industry. The years covered in the Euro WILD folder, 1980-1982, create insight into a time of significant change for the industrial organisation and expansion of the US Women's Music Industry. At this time labels and distributors struggled with the practical yet political question of how best to organise the expansive industrial production of Women's Music, while still retaining a commitment to alternative political and economic practices which informed Women's Music at its inception.

### **Archival constraints and methodology**

The activities of Euro WILD are documented in a slim, A4 folder ('Folder 12') in the WRPM collection. Its contents locate the archive reader within a circumscribed vantage point, spatially located outside the territories of the US. We perceive the US Women's Music Industry, in other words, through the eyes of activists based in Europe. Moreover, this 'looking' occurs within a very specific slice of historical time. It cannot therefore reveal everything that we might want to 'know' about the activities of the network, and the wider Women's Music Industry during the 1980s, even if these sources trace the transnational 're-contextualisation' of feminist culture as it moved across spatial borders within the women's liberation movement (Bracke 2014). As such, this article is an attempt to inscribe such constraints because 'we cannot possibly separate material and intellectual processes in configuring and mapping archival worlds' (Tomboukou, 2017: 80). As with any archival encounter the reader is required to piece together a paper trail, whose absences resound as much as their presences. Maria Tomboukou calls this 'the narrative fabric of archival work', whereby 'narrativity becomes a way of assembling disparate and sometimes disconnected pieces and fragments into a design that has a meaning' (Tomboukou, 2017: 86). Furthermore, this article constructs such a narrative fabric without ceding to the narrative conventions of the scholarly essay—concluding, summing up and telling 'the whole story' because the materials simply do not allow me to.

Folder 12 contains minutes from meetings, financial reports, draft documents for evaluation standards and correspondences between members of Euro WILD and WILD. Significantly, the folder does not include any letters from WILD written directly to Euro WILD, aside from a number of short notes that discuss financial issues about international exchange rates. A significant part of the collection, discussed in detail in the final section of the article, is a series of letters that stage a dispute between the main Women's Records Labels—Olivia, Redwood and Pleiades—and members of WILD. These items combine to produce an extraordinary collection within a collection, a *mise-en-abîme* in the feminist archive of women's musical culture, that enables connection with the feelings and perspectives of a relatively small group of feminists living in Europe as they negotiated their cultural and political relationship with US feminism via the practice of music distribution.

The Euro WILD women were deeply committed to International feminism and perceived ‘American and European women’s culture/ music as a dynamic part of the movement, giving energy and inspiration to the body of feminism as a whole’ (‘Fundamentals of European Distribution’). Their aim was to distribute LPs to feminist communities across Europe, a role they adopted with critical self-reflection and at times ambivalence towards the US as a ‘parent’ (matriarch), imperialist culture. The Euro WILD network, it must be acknowledged, was composed from a little Europe, with members coming from a small number of Northern European countries: UK, West Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. This may have been because of a greater familiarity with the English language made it easier to form connections. Even so, the limited geographical coverage of a self-identified European network appears to have received little attention in the four meetings of Euro WILD: nothing is noted in minutes on this issue, nor is there evidence of sustained or even attempted communication with feminist music distributors in other European countries. The only mention of a Europe beyond UK, West Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark is a line of correspondence from Hutton to Carol V. Bloom, written shortly after the first meeting, asking if she had been in contact with Italy yet. The archive materials contain no reply to the question, although it may have been answered. Here the presence of absence in the archive record is suggestive of what may have been the geographical flow of ‘Women’s Music’ culture in the early 1980s. Yet without recourse to substantial research funding (which I, as an independent scholar largely do not have), reconstructing such networks through further archival research and oral interviews is very difficult. As a consequence, this article remains both constrained *and* enabled by the archival frame offered by the Euro WILD folder. Indeed, for the vast majority of Euro WILD’s short life the main figures were Hutton (UK), Bloom (Amsterdam) and Lewe from Troubadisc (West Germany). By the fourth, and final meeting of Euro WILD held on Feb 13-14, 1982 in Cologne, West Germany, Face the Music had fallen foul of extortionate customs tax on imported LPs specific to Denmark (30% compared to 7% for other countries) and the minutes include this revealing statement: ‘(We didn’t even mention the fact that Swedish distribution disappeared from the face of the earth without any communication with us!)’

This article, then, presents an interpretation that fashions a ‘narrative fabric’ (Tomboukou, 2017: 86) from materials contained within the Euro WILD folder. I revisit some of the practical and political issues the network faced as European distributors of US Women’s Music. Key issues explored include the perception of US cultural imperialism as expressed by the industrial production of Women’s Music, the affective politics that circulated trans-nationally between distributors and the evolution of both the concept and practice of the Women’s Music Industry as it extended its reach beyond the borders of the US.

### **US Cultural Imperialism**

It has perhaps become cliché to talk about feminist, and specifically Lesbian archives, as ‘archives of feelings’ (Cvetkovich, 2003). Yet the Euro WILD folder teems with feelings about the politics of Women’s Music Distribution viewed from the vantage point of ‘Europe’. Indeed, within the folder one encounters a range of very strong emotions about the political business of Women’s Music Distribution, one important

issue being how to resist US (Cultural) Imperialism. As the minutes from the first meeting clearly state, the women outlined a number of political problems particular to Women's Music Distribution within Europe.

1. LANGUAGE: for each of us (England, for the most part excluded) we face language barriers. This is true not only of the record texts themselves, but also of all promotional materials sent from the states. We discussed the problems and expense of translations and to what extent we found the language an obstacle to record sales.
2. US IMPERIALISM: The problem of language barriers cannot be separated from the issue of imperialism, experienced in Europe through *the overabundance of American music*; and specifically, *in the women's movement, in what sometimes feels like a bombardment of materials (records, books, clothes, posters, etc) as well as ideas from the US Movement*. There is growing resistance to turning to the states for the products of our movement. European feminists share a growing desire to produce our own music, records, books, etc. Thus we, as distributors here, face the difficult dilemma of trying to promote/ sell the records from the U.S., while remaining sensitive to the political/ cultural attitudes and needs of European women ('First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980', my italics).

The first obstacle European Women's Music Distributors faced was translation (as we have already heard, the lingua franca of the Euro WILD network being English). Once the time-consuming and costly activity of translating promotional materials into Dutch, Danish or German was completed, distributors experienced acute discomfort with their role as promoters of U.S. feminist culture. Such discomfort is clearly articulated in terms of *resistance* to the 'bombardment' of records, books, clothes, posters and ideas from the US Movement, a statement that indicates the disproportionate manner in which 'products' from the US feminist movement travelled and influenced feminist cultures in other geopolitical regions. The many products from the US movement positioned 'European women' as consumers rather than producers of feminist culture. Given that Women's Music aimed to blur the lines between producers and consumers and, in the most ideal circumstances, fundamentally transform the conditions of cultural production, this is perhaps ironic. As Ruth Scovill argued, 'the performer, technician, and producer combine with the Women's Music audience to create a truly equal and healthy event' (1981, 157).

Yet such an idea could not be easily applied in geopolitical contexts where not only differences of language and culture came to the fore, but also differences of resources, specifically the infrastructure to create 'products' on an industrial scale. The 'growing desire to produce our own music, records, books' is documented in the meetings of Euro WILD. By the fourth meeting the Holland sales report lists the 'top five best sell[ing bands as] Lavender Jane, Flying Lesbians, Changer, Amore e Poetere and XX Alix (percentage per label e.g., Olivia – 23.5%, European labels – 20%, Ladyslipper – 21 %, etc)' [...] this reflects the rising importance of European products' ('Minutes Feb 13-14, 1982). Even so, within the UK translation of 'Women's Music' it was common to confront dis-ease with the effects of industrial processes that estranged music making as an everyday activity. Antipathy toward the 'star-system' was common, with 'Women's Music' imagined as a women-identified folk culture whose non-commercial values, social practices and rituals offered a means to express 'the

new values and relationships the movement is creating', with music used in a 'collective and supporting way' because we don't want to manipulate our audience but build the common ground between us' (Northern Women's Liberation Rock Band, 1974). This configuration of 'Women's Music' jarred somewhat with the Women's Music Industry that was evolving in the US that although feminist in name, appeared to mimic many of the practices of mainstream, capitalist Music Industry. This friction is played out, we will discuss later, in Euro WILD's struggle to establish feminist business practices that did not wholly capitulate to capitalist logics.

As distributors of Women's Music affiliated to the WILD network, the role of the Euro WILD network was to disseminate and sell US feminist culture. This was a contradictory position to negotiate in relation to US cultural imperialism. Distributors were caught between resisting the parent feminist culture, expressed as US feminism's domination of feminism's *cultural* language, and promoting the culture of a marginalised, trans-nationally connected woman-identified community to which they belonged and felt intimately responsible to. These tensions remained a constant discussion point amid members of Euro WILD, as they continually sought to assert their differences from US feminism, and between each other.

Because we are distributing for and to European women, we are, and must be aware of both the similarities and the differences between the women's movements in our respective countries. The importation and distribution of women's records from the United States must always take these similarities/differences into consideration ('Fundamentals of European Distribution').

The practical business of record distribution in Europe was a key site for considering these differences. In many ways the US Women's Music Industry offered the blueprint on how the industrial production of Women's Music could be realised, but such ideas did not translate seamlessly across borders of culture, language and location. To manage transnational distribution required understanding of the vastly different time scales feminists in Europe, reliant on the postal service for communication, and trains rather than cars for transportation, worked within: 'shipments by parcel post take from six weeks to three months to reach us. We therefore wish to stress the importance of labels sending our shipments immediately upon receipt of orders, as we are having to estimate our needs two to three months in advance' ('First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980'). Cash flow, which was according to Hutton 'always a problem' throughout her time running WRPM (2009), needed to be aided by more generous invoice terms, 90 days rather than 60, 'to avoid having to pay for records before we've even received them' ('First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980'). Customs tax, the rates of which varied even between European countries, also needed to be carefully negotiated, as was the decision to use fake invoices (or not) to lower tax burdens although 'none of us feel secure about this' ('First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980')

In her study of how the feminist health book *Our Bodies, Our Selves* travelled beyond the US to become a 'global feminist project of knowledge,' Kathy Davis argues that the multiple translations of the book 'were mutually beneficial, thereby illustrating the interdependency between U.S. and other feminisms' (2007, 79-80). Such collaborative practices of cultural translation are not however as evident from the

Euro WILD papers. Indeed, communication with U.S. feminists was often articulated as a struggle that straddled the political and practical divide.

Being so far away, [Euro WILD] all feel that we suffer from a lack of information from the labels and artists in the states, concerning the politics of the women's music industry [...] We need more translated materials in this area. Communication is also a problem for us in practical areas as well, because we don't have the benefit of informal communications between distributors, rumours, or timely mail. We therefore wish to request that both labels and WILD give special attention to letting us know what's going on ('Minutes from First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980').

Media theorist Sybille Krämer has argued that 'the goal of technical communication is emission or dissemination, *not dialogue*' (2015, 22, my italics). For Krämer, the 'one-sided sending of signals' (2015, 24) is most apparent in the practice of sending letters. In several letters from 'Europe' to the U.S. in the Euro WILD folder, frustration is expressed at the insufficient—and postal-mediated—quality of the communication. Euro WILD members often voiced their feelings of isolation from the U.S. Women's Music Industry. Their spatial distance meant they could not capture the 'whispers' from the U.S. Women's Music 'grapevine,' that would help them manage the fraught ethical task of 'honestly informing our communities about the quality (technical, musical, political) of the records' they were charged with distributing ('First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980').

This sense of the European distributors being outsiders is compounded by Agnes Lewe's report from her visit to the U.S. in the summer of 1980. Lewe is the kind of vivaciously intense personality one can sometimes encounter in archives of the women's liberation movement. She operates in the next section as a 'narrative persona [...] a conceptual figure, who acts and whose story we can follow in the pursuit of meaning and understanding' (Tamboukou, 2017: 90). In her letter dated 14 November 1980, sent to fellow Euro WILD organisers, we follow her marauding movement through several iconic sites of the woman-identified music community: the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, Olivia Records in Los Angeles, Redwood Records' 'farm' and a visit to Betsy Rodgers (of Wild Women, another distributor working within WILD). The letter offers us a snapshot of the status of the U.S. Women's Music Industry in the summer of 1980. We 'quickly encounter the question of whether the writer is being *fair*. Is she dealing plainly with her correspondent? Or is she out to charm, to trick, to negotiate?' (Jolly, 2008: 85, italics in original), yet Lewe's letter is informative and knowingly partial; she gives the reader plenty of opportunities to question her authority as both witness and activist. At several points she admits her failure to take practical advantage of her visit to the U.S., including 'forgetting' to take paperwork to meetings of the WILD network. Most strikingly, her prose teems with political passion and paranoid intimations about the status of the distributors within the mechanics of a rapidly changing Women's Music Industry.

Lewe's reflections on the WILD meeting that took place during the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival are a good example of how she reveals herself to the reader:

In general I found most of the women interested in European women's music [...] and aware of the imperialistic attitude of the past. That does not mean that



everything has changed now. When it comes to the point, there is still prejudice and ignorance. What affected me most was that even our W.I.L.D sisters were not interested in what was going on in Europe ('Letter, 14 Nov 1980').

Lewe goes on to recount that the Euro WILD summary of activities, sent following the first meeting of the network, had not been reproduced in the WILD newsletter. Her conclusion is: 'WILD's information policy towards us is terrible!' ('Letter, 14 Nov 1980'). We encounter her undeniable feelings of frustration, which corroborates with other discussions of the insularity of U.S. feminist social movements (Cooper, 2016). Importantly Lewe's critiques of U.S. cultural imperialism, articulated within the letter as 'the imperialistic attitude of the past,' circulates as an affectively infused discourse that was distributed to members of the Euro WILD network, thus extending their political resonance. This extension of feminist affect—distrust, disappointment and rage—is then stretched further across historical time, embodied in the letter's enduring status as archival object that I confront in the archive and re-circulate within this re-telling of the Euro WILD story.

### **Business and politics**

When Lewe visited the U.S. in the summer of 1980 she already had a critical perspective on the current state the Women's Music Industry. During the WILD meeting held in Michigan, she reports:

The discussion (on chain stores) was very interesting. *It showed that some of the distributors do not want to sell out women's music like I got the impression from some labels.* It showed also the difference between the distributors, the ones who try to make a living from it (eight or so!) and the others, who don't live from the record business. It is sure more difficult to stay 'clean' when you depend on the money! ('Letter 14 November, 1980, italics mine)

The question of 'selling out' Women's Music was a key and emerging point of tension within the Women's Music Industry in 1980. Seen through Lewe's eyes, this is played out as a stand off between politicised music making, distribution and capitalist appropriation. Following her visit to Olivia Records, for example, Lewe commented: 'Olivia is in a very bad condition at the time. Again they are trying to reach the top 40 and again they will fail, which they know. (There is a bumper sticker "Tired with Top 40 – Try Women's Music"). *I cannot see the political concept of their project.*' ('Letter 14 November, 1980, italics mine)

The political concept of the Women's Music Industry, understood from the point of view of distributors in Europe, was envisioned as a way to explore different ways of doing business. As we have fleetingly seen, the transnational Women's Music Industry flirted with illegal practices such as the use of fake invoices in order to enable its products to move across borders without financial loss. Such activity was the exception rather than the rule. The Euro WILD network were largely focused on finding ways to establish business practices that could also fulfil their personal and political commitment to the women's community. As Lewe, in a typically impassioned statement, declares: 'Yes, I do believe in a woman's music network. I do

believe that we have to work on finding the right way to do this business and I do believe that neither pure love nor imitating capitalism is the right way. And its not very much time left' ('Letter 14 November, 1980, italics mine). Was there a middle ground to be furrowed between 'pure love' and 'capitalist imitation'? Did Women's Music distributors manage to do things differently?

'A commitment to the creation, ongoing development, and expansion of alternative working structures' was part of 'The Fundamentals of European Distribution' (n.d., 1) devised by Euro WILD. Within this document members of the network stated:

These structures must reflect and support the process of individual women taking control over their own lives, but always in a dynamic relationship to the general struggle against women's oppression. This commitment includes the ongoing evaluation of these structures in terms of the relationship between form and content.

Creating institutional and business structures where women could learn the processes and skills of economic independence was central to the ideology of the Women's Music Industry (Petersen, 1987, 208). Yet for Euro WILD, the question of economic independence for individual women must always be situated within the framework of 'the general struggle.' Furthermore, the running of an effective feminist business 'must be based upon the above political fundamentals. This commitment includes, as a definition of effective businesses, ones in which we take, and expect to work with others who take financial responsibility' ('The Fundamentals of European Distribution'). This widened conception of responsibility, which includes being accountable for and taking care of the financial risks was conceived 'as a vital part of political effectiveness.'

Running an effective feminist music distribution business was therefore an act of political and economic invention. Such practices were easier to realise, as Lewe expressed, 'if you were clean' and did not rely on the money to survive. Feminist music distributors in Europe, it should be made clear, were not motivated by profit: 'none us is making a living from record distribution [...] All of us have an ideal to at least partially live from our businesses, but none of us feel certain that this is possible' (First Meeting, July 18-20, 1980). As with any activist endeavour, the labour involved can be incredibly time consuming and this factor made some women adopt music distribution as a full-time job. 'The distribution network evolved from the political desirability and necessity (because of the content of the music). As more music becomes available, it has become increasingly difficult to have time to go and earn money elsewhere – so distribution becomes a full-time job and therefore has to support women financially' ('Minutes, Jan 8-11, 1981'). As women became more involved in the full time business of feminist music distribution, the lack of robust alternative economic structures and the necessity of working within capitalist models presented its own sobering risks to the political project they were engaged in: 'We are aware of the risk that in pushing for financial viability, the politics may be forgotten' ('Minutes, Jan 8-11, 1981').

The business models that would meld financial and political responsibility did not yet exist, and feminists in Europe were taking their lead, in part, from frameworks and 'ideologies' designed in the U.S. For the Euro WILD network women's music

distribution would not work, fundamentally, without ‘a shared commitment between labels and distributors [...] In working together it must be clearly agreed between the labels and the distributors that we are operating from a shared political basis’ (‘Fundamentals’). Yet it is precisely the shared political basis between labels and distributors that would prove difficult to negotiate. At the same time Euro WILD were carving out their dynamic vision of a politically responsible, transnational Women’s Music Industry the U.S. heartland was undergoing big changes. We have glimpsed these circumstances momentarily in Lewe’s letter, through her chastising of Olivia’s desire to ‘reach the top 40,’ emphasising growth and success over commitment to the political values of Women’s Music. Forwarded with Agnes Lewe’s report from her summer trip is a bundle of correspondence relating to a heated dispute between the main Women’s Music record labels—Olivia, Redwood and Pleiades—and members of the WILD network. The documentation provides insight into the power relationships between the labels and distributors, and how this was couched in very particular affective registers. We shall see how the response of Euro WILD to these disputes, at an organisational level, also indicates the improvised quality of the women’s music distribution business as it sought to establish standards that would enable its transnational transactions to run smoothly.

### **1980: The Tipping Point for the Women’s Music Industry?**

The term ‘network’ in contemporary digital culture and the women’s liberation movement normatively conjures the image of a decentralised or horizontal organisation with no individual leader or group. The WILD distribution network was not organised in this manner. Members of WILD were accountable to the ‘large’ Women’s Music Labels whose products they were selling. They were required to provide timely and accurate bill paying and monthly sales reports, and they also had to do a certain amount of publicity to support sales of albums within their local communities. Working within the parameters of one’s own established territory, and not encroaching on another’s territory, was another key obligation of distributors, and this didn’t always happen. If the labels felt that women were not doing their job properly, there was the risk that their ‘responsibility’ as a distributor would be terminated.

Celebratory descriptions of the WILD network are nevertheless common. According Cynthia Lont, ‘there was little competition among distributors as parts of the country were evenly assigned to WILD members, distributing women’s music to individuals, feminist bookstores, and audiences at concerts and festivals’ (1992, 246). The letters Lewe forwarded to the Euro WILD network largely contradicts this presentation of a friction-less network, devoid of power relations and interpersonal conflict. Instead of an egalitarian distribution network functioning in a seamless, clockwork manner, we encounter territory disputes and punitive measures for women failing to do their job properly. Instead of cooperation, a climate of suspicion, paranoia and fear circulated among the network. The tone of Lewe’s letter captures the climate of fear that seemed to define the relationship between labels and distributors at this time.

Even if myself have not lived through the times, when distribs [sic] were hired (and fired?) by the labels, I still know the stories and can not avoid thinking, that only the names have changed and not the behaviours of both labels and distributors. I don’t want to see myself as an independent but powerless little

distributor. I'm running a feminist business, I'm providing the labels with information and money and do you really think a male, even alternative distribution company would care that much for women's music? *And then I take a look at the Olivia report and see Troubdisc on rank 16 and expect the firing the next day!*' ('Letter 14 November, 1980, my italics).

The suspicion, articulated by Lewe, that Olivia, Redwood and Pleiades were quick to sever unproductive distributors from the fabric of the Women's Music Industry must be read in the context of an important letter written by members of the WILD network. Dated October 14 1980, the letter outlines collective objections to a spate of contract terminations initiated by the 'major' labels. A total of eight distributors had recently been 'fired' by the labels, a decision that was made, the letter claims, without sufficient forewarning. The distributors were 'unprepared for your action. They had already planned and begun their business strategies for the fall season [...] They need time and sales to reduce their inventory, pay their bills, inform their accounts of the change in distributor' ('Letter October 14 1980'). The action is presented as contravention of both good business *and* feminist values. 'The least you could have done out of common business courtesy, not to mention respect for these women, who have worked with you for years to gain exposure for women's music, would have been to give them adequate notice of your plans' ('Letter October 14 1980'). This letter, signed by a number of distributors affiliated to WILD such as Calico, Ladyslipper and Women's Music Express decried the labels' actions as toxic and uncaring. What the labels did, the authors wrote, also undermined the possibility of good business relations in the future: 'We would all be best served by good relations between outgoing and incoming distributors. Your action has seriously hampered this by creating an atmosphere of mistrust, resentment and bitterness' ('October 14 1980').

There was one distributor, however, who refused to sign the letter. Betsy York, from Women's Music Distribution wrote back to express her frustration with the lack of professionalism of both distributors and labels.

I want us to get better. But I simply have not heard many other distributors talking about distribution as a business and believing 100% in the possibility of a self sustaining business. Why has it taken distributors so long to realize this is no longer totally an act of love but rather a serious business venture? Why have not distributors taken a look at their territory and pondered giving or selling it to another in order to help someone make a living? Why did the labels have to take the final step and force reorganization down our throats? ('Letter 9 Oct 1980')

In the context of the overall debates featured in the Euro WILD folder, York's letter provides welcome balance and perspective. It reveals the tensions within the Women's Music Industry at that time, elaborated here as the split between those who believed in distribution as a serious business venture and those who distributed Women's Music as an act of (woman-identified) love. We might deduce from York's letter that reorganization was indeed being forced down distributors' throats (and we might well pause to consider the violence of such a statement), and that acts of love no longer had a part to play in the business of women's music distribution. Certainly, when we turn to the perspective of the labels, the justification for suspending

distributor contracts was based on business objectives that were listed in a letter from Redwood Records as follows:

Repeated late payments

Failure to submit monthly reports by 10<sup>th</sup> of each month

Inadequate promotion

Poor sales and lack of opening overground accounts

Disregard for another distributor's established territories

Failure to communicate with RR directly ('Letter 23 October 1980')

Similarly, Olivia Records offered distributors this somewhat barbed vote of confidence: 'We fully intend to support the efforts of distributors when they demonstrate initiative and effectiveness. No distributor who is doing her job well need ever worry about the stability and supportiveness of her relationship with Olivia' ('Letter Oct 23 1980'). Reading such statements perhaps would not appear unreasonable in other business contexts, where we'd expect workers to be judged by their productivity. Yet wasn't this supposed to be a feminist business? Did members of the Women's Music Industry not have, as a central concern, a commitment to being reflexive about both the form and content of what they were doing?

The ambiguous statement about the distributor 'doing her job properly' was at the heart of the dispute, and generated much anxiety among the Euro WILD members. This anxiety was intensified because members of the network felt there were not adequate procedures through which they could measure if they were doing their job properly or not. This point is clear from the minutes of the second Euro WILD meeting, held in Amsterdam, Jan 8-11, 1981: 'In view of recent firings, and the general lack of understanding from the labels about European distribution, some form of contract with mutually accepted standards was agreed to be necessary.' Following this meeting, members of Euro WILD developed a detailed 5 page document 'Evaluation Standards for Labels and European Distributors' which aimed to outline the specific aspects of European distribution. The document covered issues such as exchange of rights, termination of a distributor, agreement to withdraw exclusivity right, payments, reporting, delinquent payments and opening new accounts. The issue of European specificity was a core part of the Evaluation Standards document which positions Euro WILD as a quasi-union who 'must be recognized as the negotiation body for European distributors, should problems arise' ('Evaluation').

The production of the Evaluation Standards text tells us important things about the evolution of the Women's Music Industry in 1980. Most clearly it indicates that the industry had outgrown the informal structures based on goodwill and an implicitly shared political basis. Protocols were becoming increasingly necessary, particularly if what Redwood called 'effective, efficient' business was to be established, or what Euro WILD called shared 'financial responsibility' was to be realised. Protocols were necessary to secure the emotional stability of the network, too. The atmosphere of subterfuge, accusation and suspicion is palpable within the letters, and arguably motivated Euro WILD to produce what, on the surface, looks like a fairly boring business document. Yet behind the rapid invention of bureaucratic structures are the complex machinations of a growing, transnational Women's Music Industry adjusting to its new sprawling size. The Euro WILD women who created the documents were, it seems fair to say, mobilised by the fear of unjust exclusion from the industry they

participated in, a participation fuelled largely through ‘commitment to the work we’re doing [and] to one another’ (‘Evaluation’). Establishing clear boundaries and frameworks was also unquestionably about redistributing and re-territorialising power. Although distributors were certainly not powerless, as members of the Euro WILD witnessed the unfolding drama between labels and distributors across the U.S. territories in Autumn, 1980, the imbalance between labels and distributors was evident. Such imbalances are underlined by Redwood Records’ bold rebuttal of WILD in letters circulated amid the disputes: ‘We would like to officially notify WILD that we do not recognise your organisation as one that represents any distributor (s), makes decisions, or policies’ (‘Letter 23 Oct 1980’). Ultimately it seems that in 1980, when the evolution of the Women’s Music Industry was at a crucial stage, the labels did have the final say on who could, and who could not, be part of it.

### **The Ideology of the Women’s Music Industry**

What was ‘the ideology that must remain the priority for all of us working in the “women’s music industry?”’ (‘Fundamentals of European Distribution’) Viewed through the lens of the historical actors in the Euro WILD folder the answer to this question is not entirely clear. What is more apparent is that *the ideology* of the Women’s Music Industry *in practice* was not balanced perfectly between the ideals of woman-identified culture and feminist-friendly commerce, which aimed to ‘make political culture accessible to as many people as possible and to counter imperialism and sexism as best we can’ (‘Letter from Redwood 23 Oct 1980’). *As best we can* is perhaps the animate phrase here: as soon as the Women’s Music Industry became driven by growth and territorial expansion, its ideological contradictions were amplified by the industry’s movement outside U.S. borders. Yet as the Euro WILD folder tells us, the growth of the Women’s Music Industry was never solely about sales. It was about the expansion of a woman-identified culture that European-based women sought to embrace and resist in equal terms. For Troubadisc these contradictions were, ultimately, too difficult to overcome. At the final Euro WILD meeting held in February 1982, Agnes reported her retirement from Women’s Music distribution. She closed her business with debts of 15000 DM (equivalent to around £11, 830 in 2016) and ‘a current stock equal to that shelf-price value’ (‘Minutes Feb 13-14, 1982’). At that same meeting Bloom handed her distribution responsibilities over to a Dutch collective called Borstplaat (literally translated as ‘Breast Plate’). With the loss of distribution in Denmark and Sweden, ‘Caroline stressed that if it turns out that the UK and Holland are the only two countries which continue to distribute, communication and strong ties with each other must continue and grow. Everyone agreed that if the UK and Holland are the only two which remain, the position of Euro WILD will become much weaker’ (‘Minutes Feb 13-14, 1982’). As for the next meeting of the network the minutes somewhat playfully state: ‘If only WRPM and Borstplaat, the meeting will be held on the boat in the channel. If Iben is still distributing – maybe Denmark?’ (‘Minutes Feb 13-14, 1982’)

The story of Euro WILD seemed to finish abruptly as I reached the end of ‘Folder 12’. But the narrative fabric was loosened again during a hurried and sleep deprived visit to Atria, the Institute on Gender Equality and Women’s History in Amsterdam December 2016. Even though my trip was related to a different research project, out of curiosity I type ‘Euro WILD’ into the database’s search field, wondering if there

was a life for the network beyond the moment its history seems to stop in 'Folder 12'. Nothing specific appears, but there are a number of entries relating to Borstplaat, the collective who inherited the Dutch distribution from Carol V. Bloom. I blink and almost immediately three digitised images of Borstplaat appear. One depicts their work as distributors, packing and un-packing records; the other is of four women standing outside the front door of an Amsterdam apartment, gathered around a record they are cradling like a baby. The women distributors are smiling, happy, together and purposeful. The final image is a poster advertising their role as importers and distributors of women's music. There is also a digitised image of badge.

Tantalisingly, at the end of the list, are two copies of *Borstplaat vrouwen muziek distributiebedrijf nieuws*, from September/ October 1983 and 1984. Excitement wells inside, as this document will likely help me to join the dots just that little bit more, and I enthusiastically request the material from the archivist. An hour or so later, I ask where the documents are. 'They are lost,' she says. 'I am sorry, what do you mean?' my reply. 'We can't find them. Someone probably requested them and took them, you know, or lost them.' With a loose hand gesture she waved the incident away like it was an everyday, and wholly understandable event. I stare into space, transfixed by disbelief and a shred of grief because I know how rare such materials are, much like my visits to Amsterdam when I can consult the Atria collections. Yet the digitised photographs do not seem to lie. They are evidence that Women's Music continued to be distributed in Europe between 1983-1984.

Certainly there are more stories to unravel about Euro WILD and the transnational circulation of Women's Music, which is part of a wider project to understand how feminist cultural activism connected and disconnected activist communities within women's liberation movements and beyond. Sustained research in this area might, in the future, enable a panoramic reconstruction of flows, exchanges and events that occurred; nevertheless, the material traces and archival remains are also an invitation to resist such interpretative practices. This article has listened to the ellipses archival remains emit and dared to inscribe them because of the new forms of knowledge they facilitate: about ephemeral yet ambitious, world-making feminist projects that sought to transform cultural representation, power and practices across transnational borders, and the frustrations, joy and impossibilities encountered in such acts of political, cultural and economic invention.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gold.ac.uk/library/collections/wrpmcollection/>