

Taking Note

CONNIE KUHNS AND RUBYMUSIC

Story by ROBB MAGLEY

IT'S RARELY CLEAR IN THE MOMENT THAT YOU MIGHT BE WITNESSING HISTORY —

much less find yourself willingly armed with pen, camera and tape recorder at the time.

But Connie Kuhns spotted and documented the nascent women's movement in Canada for the same reason those who fuelled it couldn't help but know it was going on: they were all moving through it together, and in the case of women musicians, quite literally in concert.

"What was happening in the women's movement was this parallel universe was being formed," says Kuhns. "Women were coming together and starting newspapers, art galleries, printing presses, health collectives — this kind of thing."

For Kuhns — a self-admitted "compulsive" music lover — getting hooked on listening to radio as a youth grew into an affection for concerts, and then the airwaves. Her 1979 half-hour debut with Vancouver Cooperative Radio soon enough was granted more time, blossoming into a 15-year run of programming music, interviews and documentaries with Rubymusic Radio. She brought eager listeners closer to the women artists that powered movements — from folk to punk — in Vancouver and across North America.

"At the time, they were unsure whether there was enough music by women to fill an hour — and I'd asked for an hour time slot," says Kuhns. "They gave me 30 minutes. We're talking about a station, politically, that had been started by a bunch of lefties!"

But a robust women's music scene emerged from the underground with tenacity, while Rubymusic and Kuhns became essential waypoints for artists throughout B.C. and beyond — it launched Kuhns into her own passion, collecting and preserving the very personal stories of the women she met.

In 1996, Kuhns retired the radio show and began hosting the Rubymusic Stage at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival — all the while writing articles and interviews for newspapers and magazines, including the feminist mainstay Kinesis. Carefully squirrelled away over the decades, those historical gems are now the source material for her new book Rubymusic: A

Popular History of Women's Music and Culture.

It's a thoughtful collection of point-in-time pieces that capture conversations with artists and thought leaders in the moments that mattered most — and, often, at their most sincere. Many of the names are practically synonymous with women's culture from the '70s-'90s — Etta James, Koko Taylor, Katie Webster, k.d. lang, Gloria Steinem — and they all came through Vancouver, on tour or performing for special events.

And they all spoke with Kuhns.

"There was such an openness in that time," says Kuhns. "We were all bonding over music, and we were bonding over womanhood. And there was a desire to tell each other what was happening in our lives."

Kuhns describes a conversation with Etta James, who spoke with her after she had just led a choir at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 — and who opened up about how she had still felt overlooked, and uncared for.

"And at the same time, she talked about crossing paths with Janis Joplin," says Kuhns, "during a closed recording session with Sly Stone!"

The interviews were powerful, and remain compelling decades later, because at the base of it all, and despite her being "the press," at the core of things they were women talking with one another, says Kuhns.

"It was never adversarial," says Kuhns. "They understood what I was attempting to do, trying to give them a voice."

Those timeless voices and Kuhn's photos now are collected in one place for the book, for the first time — and, says Kuhns, there's so much more waiting.

"I have file cabinets," laughs Kuhns. "A thousand pages of transcribed interviews. I have notebooks, full of notes. So many things I've been collecting over the years, and things that women have given me to hold on to in some way."

It's a "massive, massive archive," she says. "This is just the beginning."

Kuhns lives on Salt Spring, and is launching her book from 2 to 4 p.m. on Sunday, May 7 at the Mateada Lounge, 150 Fulford-Ganges Rd.



Author Connie Kuhns, and cover of her book Rubymusic below.
(PHOTOS COURTESY CONNIE KUHNS)

