

## READING 13

Taken from: Hadley, S. (Ed.) (2006). *Feminist Perspectives in Music Therapy*, pp. 227-244. Gilsum NH: Barcelona Publishers.

### **Feminist Music Therapy: Transforming Theory, Transforming Lives**

*Sandra L. Curtis*

*It's revolutionary for women to sing the blues,  
but it's even more so to sing all the songs of life.*

—Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from Within*

The widespread impact of feminism is undeniable, with a diverse array of fields enriched by its contributions. Feminist therapy represents one of the most significant of these contributions in the area of women's wellness. Developing in response to the second wave of feminism and feminist critique of traditional therapy, feminist therapy has now established a rich tradition of theory, practice, and research (Bricker-Jenkins, Hooyman, & Gottlieb, 1991; Brown & Root, 1990; Burstow, 1992; Worell & Remer, 2003). This tradition has influenced those working in such fields as psychotherapy, counseling, and social work— whether in choosing to practice feminist therapy directly or to use it to inform their own practice. With its roots in the 1970's, feminist therapy is still greatly needed today: to address unique issues facing women; to provide a more complete understanding of women in the sociopolitical context of ongoing patriarchy and institutionalized oppression; to fill gaps in current theory and research; and to provide creative therapeutic approaches which better meet women's needs (Worell & Remer, 2003).

At the same time as feminist therapy has been developing, music therapy has been developing its own rich tradition of theory, research, and practice. This tradition has, however, been relatively untouched by feminist therapy. While some music therapists' lives and practice may have felt the impact of feminist therapy, until now this has been little reflected in music therapy writing, theory, or research (Baines, 1992; Curtis, 2000; Hadley & Edwards, 2004). Yet each has much to offer the other. Feminist therapy brings with it an understanding of the silencing of women's voices in the current sociopolitical context. Music therapy brings with it a creative approach which provides women a powerful and real counterpart to the metaphor of voice. Both recognize women's affinity for the creative arts, particularly music (Curtis & Harrison, 2006; Herman, 1997). Combined, they provide a dynamic new approach for empowerment—feminist music therapy.

In this chapter I will look at the development of feminist music therapy— as both a specific practice and as a process others may adopt should they be interested in starting their own journey towards feminist music therapy practice. Focusing initially on feminist therapy, I will outline its definition, principles, goals, and techniques. A process for the feminist transformation

of music therapy will then follow. I will conclude the chapter with women's own voices, using examples from their individual experiences in feminist music therapy to illustrate its theory and practice—to demonstrate the power of transforming theory to transform women's lives.

## **Feminist Therapy**

Feminist therapy is a philosophy of treatment which is based on a feminist belief system and which has as its purpose both personal and sociopolitical transformation (Rosewater & Walker, 1985; Worell & Remer, 2003). As such, it has many different definitions, just as feminism itself has many different definitions (Hadley & Edwards, 2004; Lerman & Porter, 1990). There are also many different types, such as liberal, womanist, cultural, and radical feminist therapy (Brown & Root, 1990; Burstow, 1992; Johnson, 1983; Worell & Remer, 2003). Yet despite these differences, there is a strong consensus concerning the basic principles of feminist therapy (Brown, 1994; Rosewater & Walker, 1985). There are essentially three major and overarching principles from which all others derive: 1) the personal is political; 2) interpersonal relationships are to be egalitarian; and 3) women's perspectives are to be valued (Bricker-Jenkins et al, 1991; Worell & Remer, 2003).

The principle that *the personal is political* is rooted in a feminist analysis of women as an oppressed group in our culture and of the psychological effects of such oppression, as well as its interaction with other forms of oppression such as classism, racism, ageism, ableism, and heterosexism (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Ballou & Brown, 2002). As a result, the focus of feminist therapy is both internal and external. Its purpose is not to enable women to adjust to a dysfunctional culture, but to seek social change for all women in order to improve the situation, while at the same time seeking personal change for individual women who have been harmed by the current situation (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Lerman & Porter, 1990; Worell & Remer, 2003). Feminist therapy must be practiced not only as a healing art for individuals, but also as an "intentional act of radical social change" (Brown, 1994, p.30).

The feminist therapy principle which stipulates that *interpersonal relationships are to be egalitarian* applies to the client-therapist relationship, as well as to the personal relationships of both client and therapist. Thus, clients must be empowered within therapy and within their own individual lives. Feminist therapists must not only empower their clients, but be empowered themselves in their own lives. To be and to practice are one and the same in feminist therapy (Bricker-Jenkins et al, 1991; Worell & Remer, 2003).

Similarly, the third overarching principle, that *women's perspectives are to be valued*, applies within the client's life, the client-therapist relationship, and the therapist's life. Feminist therapists are to enable their clients to understand and value women's perspectives; they must also enable their clients to value themselves. In order to do so, feminist therapists must also value themselves, their clients, and other women, both in attitude and action (Burstow, 1992).

The goals common to all feminist therapy practice stem directly from these overarching principles. As such, they include both personal and sociopolitical transformation (Bricker-Jenkins et al, 1991). The focus of these goals is threefold: to eliminate the oppression of women; to enable women to recover from the specific harm of oppression; and to enable women to deal with the internalization of this oppression.

Some of the specific goals within this focus are:

- 1) to empower women and increase their independence, developing their personal and social power
- 2) to increase understanding of the sociopolitical context of women's lives and

- problems; to increase understanding of the interaction of multiple oppressions (e.g. sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.)
- 3) to achieve optimal functioning as defined by each individual woman, rather than by the therapist or society; and
  - 4) to initiate necessary social change (Burstow, 1992; Worell & Remer, 2003)

To accomplish these goals, a number of feminist therapy techniques have evolved. Although small in number, they are essential, distinguishing features of feminist practice. The core techniques include: demystification, feminist analysis of power, and feminist gender-role analysis (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Worell & Remer, 2003). *Demystification*, although not unique to feminist therapy, is essential—only by providing clients with information about therapy and in actively involving them in all its aspects, is it possible to establish the necessary egalitarian client-therapist relationship. The feminist therapy technique *of power analysis* is unique and is used to increase clients' understanding of the relative societal powerlessness of women and the role that this plays in their lives. This feminist analysis of power is not used to identify women as helpless victims of society or as entirely powerless. Rather, it is used to enable women to see both the personal and societal sources of their problems, to see both their sources of powerlessness and of power, and to see both societal and personal solutions to the situation (Hall, 1992; Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Lerman & Porter, 1990). The feminist therapy technique *of gender-role analysis* is used to identify and critically examine women's and men's socialization process—the shared messages received by women and men (regardless of race, class, culture, etc.) and the impact these have. These reflect institutionalized, integrated, and internalized sexism and, while shared, they intersect with and are mediated by other societal oppressions such as racism, classism, heterosexism, etc. As with power analysis, feminist analysis of gender-role socialization identifies the sources of strength as well as harm and involves personal and societal change (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990; Worell & Remer, 2003). With these core techniques, stemming from the core goals and principles, it is clear that feminist therapy is far more than a non-sexist approach; it involves a radical transformation of the therapy process, with feminist analysis engaged in by client and therapist to accomplish both personal and political change.

## **Transforming Music Therapy**

Feminist therapists generally receive training within a traditional therapeutic approach and only later undergo an individual process of feminist transformation of their practice. It is this process, as it pertains to music therapy, which will be outlined next. Judith Worell and Pamela Remer (2003) identify five steps in this feminist transformation: 1) to identify sources of bias in the theory; 2) to modify or eliminate any biased components; 3) to assess the theory's viability; 4) to determine its compatibility with feminist criteria; and 5) to highlight its unique contributions to feminist therapy. In developing my own practice of feminist music therapy (Curtis, 2000), these steps were most helpful and will be briefly outlined here.

A search for specific sources of bias reveals music therapy's history to be a source of strength. Music therapy has been informed by a variety of other theories concerning such issues as personality development, source of client problems, and the client-therapist relationship. If we strip away these other theories, their inherent biases can be eliminated, leaving a generally neutral music therapy theory about the human response to music. The focus of this neutral theory is on the capacity of music to evoke physiological, affective, and cognitive responses, making it a unique and effective treatment medium. By stimulating brain functions involved in

memory, in learning, in motivation, and in emotional states, music has considerable potential for use in therapy to influence human personality and behavior, and to activate healthy thinking (Thaut, 1990; Thaut & Smeltekop, 1990). This potential to elicit change is put into action by means of the unique relationship established between client, therapist, and music

In light of this neutral focus, music therapy proves to be especially available for feminist transformation (Curtis, 2000). Music therapy meets, or can be readily adapted to meet, feminist criteria. There is nothing specific in this neutral music therapy theory which precludes it from being: gender-balanced (as opposed to androcentric or gendercentric), multicultural (as opposed to ethnocentric or heterosexist), interactionist (as opposed to intrapsychic), and life-span oriented (as opposed to deterministic). While music therapy theory has not traditionally included a specific focus on women in general or on women of diverse races, cultures, classes, abilities, and sexual orientation, it is certainly sufficiently flexible to be modified to include these. The neutral music therapy theory does not address the issue of the source of the individual's problems and so, while it is not specifically interactionist or life-span oriented, it too can be modified to become so. Finally, while this music therapy theory does not necessarily or specifically adhere to feminist principles, neither does it contradict them. To go further and embrace feminist criteria fully in the development of a truly feminist music therapy requires transformation of the client-therapist relationship, of the music therapist's personal life, and of music therapy principles, goals, and techniques.

The neutral music therapy theory, while acknowledging the importance of the client-therapist relationship within the framework of music experience, makes no specific stipulations concerning the nature of that relationship. Thus, it must be transformed to incorporate the very important and specific stipulations of feminist therapy for an egalitarian relationship—as much as is possible given the inherent power differential in any therapeutic relationship. This issue of power has been problematic for feminist therapists who increasingly accept that power exists in all interpersonal relationships and that the eradication of all power differentials, even in feminist therapy, is impossible (Lerman & Porter, 1990; Smith & Dutton, 1990). Feminist therapists, however, see the power inequity in therapy as temporary—it is their task to make the therapeutic relationship as egalitarian as possible and at least equal in respect and value, if not in actual power. They must strive continually towards a greater balance of power through their work with their clients within the therapeutic process and through simultaneously working for social change (Lerman & Rigby, 1990; Smith & Dutton, 1990)

To place such importance on the nature of the client-therapist relationship highlights the importance of therapist attitudes. As a result, personal transformation is required such that the personal relationships of feminist music therapists themselves are characterized by equality and ongoing feminist analysis. Furthermore, they must spend a portion of their personal lives in actively advocating for social change in order to better the external world for all women.

In the area of principles and goals, music therapy's transformation is readily accomplished through the straightforward adoption of all feminist therapy principles and goals. This is not unreasonable to assume given music therapy's long tradition of adopting those of other theories. Feminist transformation of music therapy techniques involves the integration of feminist techniques within a music therapy context. The techniques of feminist analysis of gender-role socialization and power are hallmarks of feminist therapy used to accomplish a number of its major goals. Two music therapy techniques which involve a combination of music and verbal processing are particularly well suited for this: lyric analysis and songwriting. Music performance, composition, and recording can also be used to accomplish the feminist goals of empowerment and of reclaiming voices which have been silenced in patriarchy. As well, the valuing of women and of women's self-nurturance can be accomplished through the music

therapy techniques of music-centered relaxation, music and meditation, and music and imagery.

The final step in feminist transformation is the identification of the unique contributions music therapy can make to feminist therapy. These lie in the dramatic power of music to change lives, in the unique medium music therapy offers with its particular appeal to women, and in the rich resource of women's music well suited for feminist analysis of women's lives in the current sociopolitical context. Perhaps the greatest contribution lies in the opportunity it provides for women to write and record their own songs. In listening to and singing the words of women songwriters, women can explore the subversion of the patriarchal message. In writing and singing their own songs, they can tell their own stories and lay claim to their own unique voices.

## **Personal Contexts**

In discussing the development of a new practice of feminist music therapy, it is important to understand that this practice will reflect great diversity. While each therapist will strive to incorporate an understanding of the complex interaction of oppressions in our lives, we all view the world through our own lenses. Our clinical practice and our writings are informed by our personal frame of reference. Therefore, I would like to be transparent about my own perspective by sharing a little about my personal background.

My personal context is characterized by the contrast of experiences of privilege and of oppression. I am a white, middle-class, educated, able-bodied, heterosexual woman born in the mid 1950's. As such, I have experienced certain privileges of dominant group membership, such as access to privileged places, people and resources, including higher education. As a heterosexual woman, I have been free to love whom I choose without fear of discrimination or hatred. I have also, however, had the experience of being the "other," of living on the margins, and of being oppressed as a woman living in a patriarchal culture. The nature and extent of such marginalization has been the topic of considerable feminist literature (Anzaldúa, 1990; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Chesler, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; hooks, 2000). For me, it has run the gamut from feeling constrained by gendered career stereotypes to being unable to find myself in any of my readings which only made reference to men and mankind. Indeed it was these readings which led to my initial interest in feminist literature during my teenage years. It is, however, my personal experience of violence which has been the most profound.

## **Violence in Women's Lives**

Violence is central to the lives of women living in a patriarchal culture (Burstow, 1992). This violence can be both emotional and physical: Women are violently reduced to bodies, bodies for men as seen in the widespread objectification of women; these bodies themselves can then be violated. This violence can be either actual violence itself or simply the fear of violence which shapes our lives in a myriad of ways—from the way we dress and talk to the times and places in which we walk. In whatever shape it takes, violence is integral to women's lives regardless of any differences such as race, class, etc. (Curtis, 2000 & 1994).

In addition to the general experiences of any woman living in a patriarchal culture, my personal experiences of violence have also played a part in creating the lens through which I view the world. I have an on-going struggle with issues of weight, body-image, and self-esteem; I believe this struggle to be partly a direct result of a culture which violently reduces women to bodies and then enforces increasingly unrealistic standards of beauty for those bodies. As well, I have had personal childhood experiences of emotional and sexual abuse. The insidious nature of some of the emotional abuse was such that it served to leave me questioning the actual

existence of the sexual abuse: Was it really "*that bad*" that it should be called sexual abuse? It is only as an adult that I have come to see it for what it truly was—sexual abuse prefaced by the ultimate betrayal by a male adult authority figure.

## **Transforming Lives**

Having examined the feminist transformation of music therapy and having outlined my personal contexts, I will turn next to the actual experiences of women in feminist music therapy. From the large number of women with whom I have had the honor of working, I have chosen to focus on two here so that their stories can be fully heard in all their contextualized richness and complexity. While unique, the stories of these two women—Julie and Roslyn<sup>1</sup>—are representative of the many women I have worked with in Canada and the United States. Their experiences truly reflect the marvelous transformation I have witnessed.

Julie and Roslyn participated in a feminist music therapy group with me at a battered women's shelter. Prior to working with these women, I had to do some preparatory work—to ensure I had an in-depth feminist understanding of the nature of male violence against women and to develop cultural competence for working with diverse women. Feminist analysis of woman abuse within intimate relationships identifies it as a gendered phenomenon deeply rooted in a patriarchal culture which not only perpetuates the violence, but is in turn perpetuated by it. This abuse is related to all types of male violence against women (e.g. rape, incest, sexual harassment, etc.), each one being a manifestation of male control of women and each one being condoned and encouraged by patriarchy (Curtis, 2000; Marshall & Vaillancourt, 1993). While women abuse survivors share much in common, their experiences also differ because of the diversity of their backgrounds (Burstow, 1992). Subsequently, I began a self-directed process of developing cultural competence for working with the diverse women in my practice. This is a life-long process recommended for any therapist working with clients of differing sex, race, class, sexual orientation, etc. It involves an examination of one's own cultural background and attitudes, followed by the development of cultural literacy and skills (Curtis, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

## **Julie**

### ***Julie's Story***

Julie, an African American woman, was 25 years old when she joined the music therapy group. She was single, with a 6-month-old daughter. She came to the women's shelter seeking safety from an abusive boyfriend.

In describing her experience of abuse, Julie indicated that the abuse had started in the first year of her 4-year relationship, escalating as time passed, becoming particularly bad at the time she became pregnant. This is not uncommon for abused women. Julie mentioned that the abuse included all types, with control being an important part of it all:

"He would come home and he would bad-mouth me, call me fat, urn, bitch . . . and other words, you know, I'd rather not say . . . But you know he controlled me so much to the point where I was really scared to leave. He would threaten me, tell me that he would kill me if I left him. And I really thought he would, so I wouldn't."

### ***Julie's Songs***

Julie was involved in a feminist music therapy group with me twice weekly for 10 sessions. Because of the demands of infants present in the group on their mothers, Julie was not able to do any relaxation to music. Her time in therapy was spent doing feminist analysis of power and gender role socialization through lyric analysis, singing, and songwriting. For purposes of lyric analysis, Julie received a songbook and recording of a wide variety of songs written and performed by women on a great diversity of themes such as love, romance, violence, gender role socialization, healing, and empowerment. From Alanis Morissette to the Dixie Chicks, from Tracy Chapman to Alisha Keyes, women singer-songwriters are singing eloquently about women's lives.<sup>3</sup> Julie was very articulate and participated enthusiastically in the discussions during lyric analysis. She readily drew connections between issues addressed in other women's songs and her own experience. She also suggested some song titles— R&B—which she thought would be good for the group to listen to and discuss. These songs by Jody Watley, Mary J. Blige, and Chantay Savage, as well as songs from the "Waiting to Exhale" movie soundtrack (1995), were particularly effective for Julie and the other women in the group—they mirrored their experiences as women of color.

In songwriting, Julie was much more hesitant initially. Her first song was a genuine struggle for her. Yet by the next song, her progress in recovering from the abuse began to become apparent. Written with the piggy-back technique to the melody of "Hand in My Pocket" by Alanis Morissette (1995), it sings of hope and resistance: "And what it all comes down to is I've finally got peace of mind / I've got one hand in my pocket and the other's thanking the Lord . . . / What it all comes down to is the road's not so rough anymore / I got one hand in my pocket and the other's shooting the bird." Julie's final song—her first with original lyrics and music—clearly illustrates the changes in her thinking about women's and men's relationships in general, and about her own relationship in particular. "Not Anymore" provides a strong message of resistance and of self-valuing.

#### Not Anymore

There comes a time in a woman's life when she doesn't want to be alone  
She wants that peace of mind, the need to be touched  
By a strong man with strong hands, the kind that turns her on  
But not anymore

I thought I found that man of my dreams  
But roses turned blue and milk got sour, the grass wasn't green  
Not anymore

Who do you think you're calling bitch?  
I was good to you from day one, and never stopped  
I should have recognized the signs, but I was blinded by love, you see  
But guess what baby?  
Not anymore

You see I realized the day I left you That roses are red, only  
violets are blue So you can kiss my ass and the baby's too

I don't have to take your shit  
I am Black, I am beautiful, I am strong, I am proud  
And we don't need you

No, not anymore.

Julie chose to do this song in the style of Jody Watley's "When a Man Loves a Woman" (1996)—spoken, with background music. Julie also chose to perform it herself for the final recording—a very self-affirming experience for her.

### *Julie's Transformation*

Julie's progress in feminist music therapy was notable. This was reflected both in standardized measures and in Julie's own words. Her self-esteem increased from the 60th to the 80th percentile on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Roid & Fitts, 1991). When asked in an exit interview about her efforts to recover from the harm of abuse, Julie replied:

"You were one of them. Yeah. Because I love music and it helps for me to get it out because [in a whisper] I never talked to anybody about my problems ... So I kept everything inside and it was killing me . . . Just being here, talking to the girls, talking with you ... It really helped me out."

Julie described her experience in music therapy saying:

"It was, uh, more emotional therapy, you know, because some part was putting your feelings into music. It was just, it was the way I expressed myself that made it good. And that really helped me out emotionally. Made me sit down every Monday and every Wednesday and just think a little more. You know, and uh, and [she starts clapping as she sings:] "I don't have to take this shit." You know, you know [laughter]."

In summarizing what she would take with her from her experiences in music therapy, Julie commented:

"I won't leave here and get involved with a man and go through the same changes I been through before. It will never happen again. And I know a lot of women say that and don't follow up behind it. But I think even if I didn't have a child to live for . . . It's not just because of her, but it's because of me . . . so I meant, "No. Not Anymore."

## **Roslyn**

### ***Roslyn's Story***

Roslyn, a European American woman, was 45 years old when she started music therapy. She was single, with grown children no longer living at home. Roslyn came to the shelter seeking safely from an abusive boyfriend.

In describing her experiences of abuse, Roslyn indicated that her last two relationships had been abusive. Roslyn described the abuse in her most recent relationship as involving both physical and emotional abuse:

"It was 2 weeks ago he took me with a rope ... I was asleep ... I woke up with a noose around my neck. And he was hollering, "Say you want to live." And he said, "If you want to die, I'll kill you." And what's sad is I never did ask him to stop . . . because he had me convinced I was just an idiot, just totally stupid."



### ***Roslyn's Songs***

Roslyn was involved in feminist music therapy with me twice weekly for 8 sessions. Being in the same group as Julie, Roslyn's time in music therapy was spent doing lyric analysis and songwriting using the same collection of women's songs.

Although she was somewhat quieter than the other women in the group (particularly in the earlier sessions), Roslyn listened attentively and then later participated eagerly in the discussions during lyric analysis. For Roslyn, it seemed that hearing women songwriters sing about abuse and hearing the other women in the therapy group discuss their experiences helped break the isolation and gave her permission to discuss her experiences. Initially she expressed her feelings of fear and shame. When faced with a song which had women's righteous anger as a theme, Roslyn stated simply that she was not at a point where she could express anger at her abusers, nor could she visualize herself ever reaching such a point. Yet 2 weeks later, she eagerly and with much laughter recounted to me in therapy how she had puzzled her counselor earlier that day; to his question about what she hoped to become, she had replied, "a bitch with a bad attitude," making reference to the song of that title (Adegabalola, n.d.). Roslyn finally felt that she had the right to be angry, to express that anger, and to refuse to be abused or to be blamed for the abuse any longer. As in one of her favorite lines from that song, "It's better to be pissed off than pissed on."

This remarkable progress for Roslyn from victim to strong survivor is clearly evidenced in the songs she wrote in music therapy. Roslyn took to songwriting immediately. For her, the written word seemed a safe way to express herself. In songwriting, Roslyn had no difficulty finding the right words and those words clearly reflected her progress.

In a song with original lyrics written to the melody of "Hand in My Pocket" (Morissette, 1995), Roslyn expressed some of her conflicting emotions at that time—the harm she suffered, yet her hope for a new life, one with peace of mind and serenity. Roslyn felt strongly about her repeated line, "I've closed my mouth and opened up my ears," commenting that it reflected her desire to listen and learn from her mistakes. I believe it also reflects the stage Roslyn was at during the time she wrote it—a time when she still felt considerable self-blame for the abuse and a time when her voice was still silenced. This was also reflected in one of her song's lines—"And what it all comes down to is I'm looking for me." Her final song reflects a remarkable difference. In "Here Comes Roslyn," with its original music, no longer is Roslyn a silenced woman. In good-humored fashion, Roslyn gives voice to her anger, holding the abuser responsible for the violence. But "Here Comes Roslyn" is not just a song of anger and resistance. It is a song celebrating her new found life and her new found ability to value herself—"Watch out world 'cause here comes Roslyn / I'm claiming my spot, gonna have me some fun."

Here Comes Roslyn  
I prayed to God and got away  
Now son of a bitch you're gonna pay  
I'm signing your card and  
    purling it in the mail  
Happy Mother's Day babe,  
    I hope you rot in jail  
I've got your name on the sole of my shoe  
Watch out now,  
    you don't know what I'll do

Chorus:

Watch out world 'cause here comes Roslyn  
I'm claiming my spot,  
gonna have me some fun  
Watch out world 'cause here comes Roslyn  
I'm claiming my spot,  
gonna have me some fun

Home, family, & friends are back so far  
Hopefully soon I'll come up with a car  
My psyche is strong,  
another human won't break

The burden on my heart is  
no longer an ache  
You controlled my life  
like a cancerous mole  
Now I have my life,  
but you're still an asshole

I'm happy, happy, having fun  
I'm happy, happy, having fun

You say you teach tough love  
with every hit  
I learned loser you're full of shit  
I'm out on my own and lovin' Roslyn  
If I were a big man  
you'd be totin' a bruisin'  
Your bridges you are burning out fast  
I pray for all victims  
that I was your last

Chorus  
I'm happy, happy, having fun  
I'm happy, happy, having fun

In discussing the recording of her song, Roslyn had been adamant that I record it for her, saying that she had no voice for it. At the very last minute, having heard Julie record her own song, Roslyn asked if she might also record hers. Although she had thought she would recite it as Julie had done with her song, I suggested she try singing it in the blues style in which it had originally been composed. With microphone in hand and with some initial trepidation, Roslyn started to sing her song, surprising both of us with her deep and strong voice. Roslyn had truly found her own genuine voice.

### ***Roslyn's Transformation***

As remarkable as Julie's progress was, Roslyn's eclipsed it—both on the standardized self-esteem test (with an increase from the 8th to the 46th percentile) and as reflected in her

final interview. In response to a request to describe herself, she commented:

"Like I told you, I'm fixin' to be [a moment of silence]. What the, the [Interviewer: You can say it on tape], the bitch with an attitude. I'm talking about ... I, I have found so much of myself that I like and I have found out that I have a lot of good in me."

Discussing the experience of songwriting, Roslyn stated:

"Oh, you saw me glowing in there like a light bulb! I'm still lit up now. I'm so excited I can't stand it and it looks so professional. I think if people heard it, they'd love my song! I do. Now you can see I'm well. . . I'm strong."

Finally in summing up what she would take with her from the music therapy experience, Roslyn said:

"I really do feel nobody will ever be able to break my spirit again . . . I've gotten it back a lot through this music."

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the transformation of theory has been examined, with an opportunity to hear the voices of individual women and their own particular experiences in feminist music therapy. In working with these women, I have learned much—about their experiences, about the fragility of the human spirit on the one hand and its resilience, when nurtured, on the other hand, and about the transformative powers of music. I have seen women move from unfamiliarity with feminist music therapy, uncertainty as to what it might offer them, and even, for some, initial reluctance to participate in such a thing when they were hurting so much, to eager anticipation and surprised delight in themselves and their music. There were times when they were no more surprised than I was at this transformation and at the power of music in their lives.

In exploring this new thing called feminist music therapy, the importance of group work should not be overlooked. Some have argued that women do not need therapy; they simply need to talk with other women friends about their experiences. One therapist, Laura Brown (1994), agrees but goes further to say that women of today rarely have the opportunity just to chat with other women and so, rather than supplanting woman talk, feminist music therapy provides a much-needed opportunity for it. Thus, it was when the women in my feminist music therapy sessions perceived their experiences as simply time spent chatting with good friends, that I believe they were most empowered. In feminist music therapy, the women were able to participate as members in group song discussions, as individuals within a group in writing and recording their individual songs, and as a group in listening to each other's original compositions—providing both validation and inspiration to each other in finding their own voices.

When looking back at the women's experiences in feminist music therapy—their self-esteem, their songs, and their voices in interview, the transformational power of music becomes clear. The testimony of these women is compelling. They have moved in feminist music therapy from finding their own voices and stories in the songs of other women, to finding the value of their own voices such that they were able to write and record songs themselves. Their experience has genuinely been one of finding their own true spirit. Since such a great debt is owed to these women for their lessons to us about the power of music to transform lives, it is

only fitting that the final words belong to their voices of subversion and of soul.

"My soul wasn't gone, but my spirit was totally crushed. And I've gotten a lot back through this music . . . I'm fixin' to be a bitch with an attitude . . . And nobody's gonna take my spirit from me."

—Roslyn

## References

- Adegabalola, Gaye (n.d.) Bitch with a bad attitude [Recorded by Saffire Uppity Blues Women]. *On Old, New, Borrowed, Blue* [CD]. Chicago: Alligator Records.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria (1990) *Making Face, Making Soul Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Baines, Susan (1992) *The sociocultural and political contexts of music therapy: A question of ethics*. Unpublished master's thesis, New York University, New York.
- Ballou, Mary B. & Brown, Laura S. (2002) *Rethinking Mental Health and Disorder: Feminist Perspectives*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bricker-Jenkins, Mary, Hooyman, Nancy R, & Gottlieb, Naomi (1991) *Feminist Social Work Practice in Clinical Settings*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Brown, Laura S. (1994) *Subversive Dialogues: Theory in Feminist Therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brown, Laura S. & Root, Maria P. (1990) *Diversity and Complexity in Feminist Therapy*. New York: Harrington Press.
- Brown, Lyn M. & Gilligan, Carol (1992) *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burstow, Bonnie (1992) *Radical Feminist Therapy: Working in the Context of Violence*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Chesler, Phyllis (1990) Twenty years since "women and madness": Towards a feminist institute of mental health and healing. *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 11, 313-322.
- Curtis, Sandra L. (2006) *A Diversity of Voices: Cultural Competence for Music Therapists*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Curtis, Sandra L. (2003) *Empowering Women Through the Healing Arts: A Manual for Workers with Survivors of Violence*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Curtis, Sandra L. (1994) Killing us softly: Male inner violence against women. In Stanley G. French (ed.), *Interpersonal Violence, Health, and Gender Politics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown.
- Curtis, Sandra L. (2000) Singing subversion, singing soul: Women's voices in feminist music therapy. (Doctoral dissertation, Concordia University, 1997). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60(12-A), 4240.
- Curtis, Sandra L. & Harrison, Gisele C. T. (2006) Empowering women survivors of childhood sexual abuse: A collaborative music therapy - social work approach. In Stephanie Brooke (ed.), *Creative Modalities for Therapy with Children and Adults*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publishers.
- Gilligan, Carol (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theories and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hadley, Susan & Edwards, Jane (2004) Sorry for the silence: A contribution from feminist theory to the discourse(s) within music therapy. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*.

<http://www.voices.no/mainissues/mi40004000152.html>

- Hall, C. Margaret (1992) *Women and Empowerment: Strategies for Increasing Autonomy*. Washington, DC: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.
- Herman, Judith (1997) *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence— From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hooks, bell (2000) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: Southend Press.
- Johnson, Eleanor (1983) Reflections on Black feminist therapy. In Barbara Smith (ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.
- Laidlaw, Toni A., Malmo, Cheryl, & Associates (1990) *Healing Voices: Feminist Approaches to Therapy with Women*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lerman, Hannah & Porter, Natalie (1990) *Feminist Ethics in Psychotherapy*. New York: Springer.
- Lerman, Hannah & Rigby, Dorothy N. (1990) Boundary violations: Misuse of the power of the therapist. In Hannah Lerman & Natalie Porter (eds.), *Feminist Ethics in Psychotherapy*. New York: Springer.
- Marshall, Pat F. & Vaillancourt, Marthe A. (1993) *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence—Achieving Equality. Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women*. Ottawa, Canada: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Moraga, Cherrie & Anzaldúa, Gloria (1990) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.
- Morissette, Alanis (1995) Hand in my pocket. On *Jagged Little Pill* [CD]. Los Angeles: Maverick Recording Company.
- Roid, Gale H. & Fitts, William H. (1991) *Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS): Revised Manual*. Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services.
- Rosewater, Lynne B., & Walker, Lenore E. (1985) *Handbook of Feminist Therapy: Women's Issues in Psychotherapy*. New York: Springer.
- Smith, Adrienne J. & Dutton, Mary A. (1990) Empowerment as an ethical imperative. In Hannah Lerman & Natalie Porter (eds.), *Feminist Ethics in Psychotherapy*. New York: Springer.
- Steinem, Gloria (1992) *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-esteem*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.
- Thaut, Michael H. (1990) Neuropsychological processes in music perception and their relevance in music therapy. In Robert K. Unkefer (ed.), *Music Therapy in the Treatment of Adults with Mental Disorders: Theoretical Bases and Clinical Intervention*. New York: MacMillan.
- Thaut, Michael H. & Smeltekopf, Roger A. (1990) Psychosocial and neurophysiological aspects of music therapy interventions. In Robert K. Unkefer (ed.), *Music Therapy in the Treatment of Adults with Mental Disorders: Theoretical Bases and Clinical Intervention*. New York: MacMillan.
- Waiting to Exhale* [CD] (1995) New York: Arista Records.
- Watley, Jody & Campbell, Larry (1996) When a man loves a woman [Recorded by Jody Watley]. On *Jody Watley: Greatest Hits* [CD]. Universal City, CA: MCA Records.
- Worell, Judith & Remer, Pamela (2003) *Feminist Perspectives in Therapy: Empowering Diverse Women*. New York: Wiley.