

A Hub and Home for Women Who Rock

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Women who rock are making scenes and building communities at the 3rd annual local Women Who Rock (Un)Conference and Film Festival on March 9th.

Admission is free.

Participants will also Rock the Archive, with the launch of the Women Who Rock Oral History Archive, a film project facilitated by UW associate professor Michelle Habell-Pallán.

“The Women Who Rock Project was inspired by local Seattle women who have used music as a tool for community building, social transformation, and as a tool for social justice,” says Habell-Pallán.

The project has evolved over the past three years.

“In 2011, my University of Washington colleague Sonnet Retman and I planned to teach a course on gender and music scenes,” Habell-Pallán says. “We came to realize that, although Seattle had a history of local grassroots organizations such as Home Alive (a women’s self-defense organization) tied to the grunge scene; Ladies First, a organization that supported women in the Seattle Hip Hop Scene that was connected to Communities Against Rape & Abuse; and Seattle Fandango Project, a translocal participatory music project, there was not much documentation of their histories in scholarly research or otherwise.”



Activist Nobuko Miyamoto is this year's "Women Who Rock" keynote speaker. Photo courtesy of Nobuko Miyamoto.

Habell-Pallán and Retman created a partnership with the University of Washington Libraries to collect and preserve the oral histories of such organizations, with the support of UW Gender, Women & Sexuality PhD students and Ethnomusicology students. 'The community conference and film festival (curated by GWSS graduate student Angelica Macklin) supports the oral histories,' says Habell-Pallán. "The film festival helps bring that history alive through short mini-documentaries based on the oral histories. Over the last two years, we expanded the archive to include indigenous scholars from Australia, filmmakers from South Africa, and women from the Son Jarocho tradition in Vera Cruz, Mexico."

The goal of the (Un)Conference is not only musical and scholarly, but also rooted in activism.

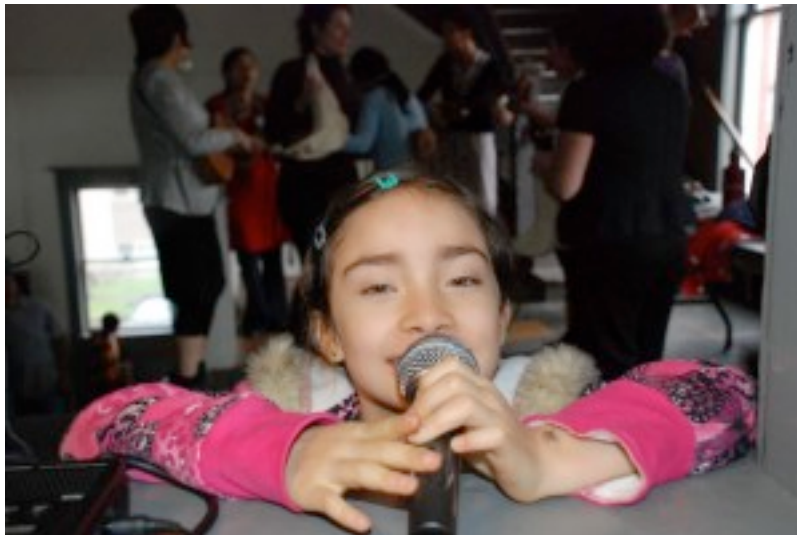
"We've intended for the community conference to be a place where folks who normally don't interact can come together around the theme of music and healing – intergenerational and multicultural."

This blend of purposes inspired the conference committee to invite musician and activist Nobuko Miyamoto as keynote speaker.

“Miyamoto is known as the Joan Baez of the Asian American civil rights movement,” says Habell-Pallán. “We love the way Nobuko has connected across multiple communities.”

Miyamoto’s music and activism are not just historical.

“She’s recently created fun short musical videos that focus on environmental issues,” says Habell-Pallán. “One of her videos (Cycles of Change) was made in collaboration with UW Gender, Women, & Sexuality PhD student Martha Gonzalez, who just won a grammy with her band Quetzal for best Latin Alternative CD.” Miyamoto reports being thrilled not only to collaborate with Gonzalez and Quetzal, but also to serve as the Women Who Rock keynote speaker.



Youngest rocker from the first annual “Women Who Rock” event.

Photo credit: Angelica S. Macklin

“As an artist and activist with roots in the ‘70s movement, I’m still part of this evolutionary change and want to link with the next generation,” Miyamoto says. After training in ballet, Miyamoto studied other forms of dance.

“I came into show business in a time when Asians were portraying the imagination of dominant white cultural mind, a time when ‘Orientals’ were ‘in,’ I guess, because of post-World War II curiosity,” Miyamoto says. “I had excellent training, and took work where I played all kinds of stereotypes: the spy, the slave, the maid, the good ol’ geisha.”

Only later did she challenge these images.

“If I did not push for crossing the color line, I would have been relegated to playing

out other people's ideas of what Asians were about," Miyamoto says. "'West Side Story' was the one time I did cross the color line ... I passed for Puerto Rican! And it was a great show with a good message. But how do you follow that? That sent me searching, searching for my own voice."

She began finding that voice as part of the Asian American movement, in collaboration with folksinger Chris Iijima.

"Those three years of touring and making the 'Grain of Sand' album was a rich experience," Miyamoto says. "We did a lot of questioning and soul-searching about the meaning of our songs and culture in general, in growing our movement." Then Miyamoto decided to establish a home in Los Angeles.

"The Buddhist temple, Senshin Temple, which became the place I taught dance and established my organization, Great Leap, has been my spiritual home and a place of inspiration for my work," she says.

Great Leap began as a way to tell the Asian American story on stage, and then evolved with events in American history.

"When the 1992 LA riots happened, with conflicts between Asians and Blacks, I knew Great Leap had to change and become multicultural," Miyamoto says. "We put the stories of Asians, Latinos, Blacks on stage together. We did the same after 9/11: we expanded and explored and created artistic intersections for Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Christians."

More recently, Miyamoto has explored environmental activism, with an EcoArts Initiative.

"We are creating a series of environmental music videos. We are doing residencies within communities that focus on the environment," she says. "As an artist, I want to keep expanding, exploring what is relevant to this moment, now."

Miyamoto plans to share this work in her keynote speech, and also engage youth in dance and performance, at the Women Who Rock Festival.

"Together, we forge a stronger future," she believes.

Women Who Rock (Un)conference and Film Festival is on Saturday, March 9 from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. at Washington Hall, 153 14th Ave. in Central Seattle. For a full schedule and more information please visit womenwhorockcommunity.org.