

## **Reclaim the Note! A very brief history of the Pre-Madonnas: London's feminist choir, 1981-1997**

**Gail Chester**

In 1981, with the help of a couple of friends, I founded the London Feminist Choir (as it was originally known, though we became better known as the Pre-Madonnas 'because we were famous before she was'), having been inspired to do so by attending the sixth anniversary concert of Anna Crucis, Philadelphia's feminist choir. At that time there was already a vigorous Sister Singers Network in North America with around 30 member choirs, whilst the Pre-Madonnas was the first feminist choir in Britain.

In this presentation, I will place the rise and fall of the Pre-Madonnas within the context of the Women's Liberation Movement, both nationally and internationally, and examine the extent of its relationship with other political and community choirs in Britain (which themselves encompassed a range of personal and political perspectives) and the networks which evolved to support them.

To assess the impact of the choir on the lives of those who sang in it, I plan to interview a number of women who took part in the Pre-Madonnas, and to explore something of the way we developed our varied and eclectic repertoire.

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**Gail Chester** [gailchester@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:gailchester@blueyonder.co.uk) has been continuously involved in feminist activism since 1970. She has written and edited articles and books, many on the history and practice of feminism and on the radical booktrade. She co-authored *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* (Comedia, 1981). Her articles include 'The anthology as a medium for feminist debate in the UK', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2002, 'Sex, Race and Class: A Century of the Radical, Alternative, and Minority Booktrade in Britain' (CUP, 2019), and most recently, 'From Self-Publishing Collective to Multinational Corporation: The Publishing History of *In Other Words: Writing as a Feminist*' in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 2021. She helped set up HOWL: History of Women's Liberation, which is gathering material from the WLM and encouraging grassroots groups and campaigns to produce new material for its website. She is very fond of a one-minute video of her life story, made in 2018 <https://vimeo.com/304187336>