



*Rubymusic: A Popular History of Women's Music and Culture* by Connie Kuhns. Qualicum Beach, British Columbia: Caitlin Press, 2023. 256 pp. ISBN: 9781773861012.

**Reviewed by Meredith C. Graham (North Carolina State University)**

*Rubymusic* is a celebration of women's music in Canada and Connie Kuhns's unique perspective as a journalist and broadcaster over the last four decades. This volume presents Kuhns's most consequential essays, which first appeared in publications like *Geist*, *The Georgia Straight*, *Kinesis*, *Kurated*, *Hot Wire*, *Fuse*, and *Herizons*. These essays tell the history of music during the women's movement in North America beginning in the 1970s to the present. By weaving together her life's work, Kuhns highlights women musicians of her generation, drawing on her experiences as a festival goer, researcher, fan, and audiophile. Through her show, *Rubymusic*, "a radio program featuring music by women, exclusively" on Vancouver Co-operative Radio, she introduced listeners to new music without imposing her preconceptions (p. 12). This trust in the audience extends to the readers of *Rubymusic*.

A key theme in Kuhns's work is the emergence of women-only spaces in the mid-1970s, where women could congregate and create a community. These coffee houses and clubs hosted performances by women musicians in cities across Canada. Notably, it was in 1974, when the first Canadian women's festival was held in Castlegar, BC, that music from performers beyond the hyper-local could be heard together. Kuhns argues that the shows at both local women-only clubs and larger festivals were the impetus for more inclusive standards of production as the organizers addressed accessibility and child care while also allowing women the opportunity to participate and learn more about technical production (p. 30). These spaces were not only about enjoying music; they also served as hubs for activism, idea-sharing, and advocating for new standards that included women in all stages of their lives.

One of Kuhns's strengths in this book is to share the stories of women who may seem inconsequential today, but who laid the groundwork for future generations. In one instance, Kuhns lists women (and some male bandmates) as part of "The Family Tree" of musicians in Vancouver from the 1970s and 1980s, listing not only artists but also their managers, production crew, and back-up singers (p. 84–91). She also discusses record labels like Olivia Records and Redwood Records, founded in the 1970s, that were pivotal in promoting women musicians. Again, Kuhns is able to argue for a more inclusive musical space—one that positions women in roles from stagehands to sound technicians to publishers.



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Throughout the book, she presents photos of women and their concert posters alongside her stories and interviews, illuminating the act of music-making. Kuhns features relatively unknown artists alongside the famous stars whom she wrote about from a historical perspective, like Yoko Ono and Gloria Steinem, and those she interviewed, like Amy Grant, Etta James, and Ellen McIlwaine. In her interviews, Kuhns poses concise questions, allowing interviewees to share their thoughts. She weaves topics of feminism and politics into the conversation while consistently bringing the focus back to music. Her essays contextualize her subjects, offering a multidimensional view of their lives within the political climate of their times. She, again, provides information for her readers, but lets them decide what to think about these different characters.

Although sharing her writing, this book does not include enough celebration of Kuhns's own significance to the women's music movement in Canada. The book reflects her reverence to other women, those listened to, reviewed at a festival, or interviewed. I believe that readers would appreciate a more introspective reflection from Kuhns about how her radio show, which aired from 1981 to 1996, and her lengthy career as a print journalist contributed to the growth of women's music. In her 1991 essay, "A Woman's Place Is on the Radio: Ten Years of Rubymusic" (p. 143–148), she positions herself primarily as a historian, sharing the narratives of others rather than her own influence.

*Rubymusic*, the radio program, lives on through this publication, situating Kuhns at the heart of a historic shift that saw the proliferation of women's music. While some essays may feel repetitive due to the nature of compilation, Kuhns effectively links the growth of women's popular music to the feminist movement, documenting musicians who played pivotal roles—even if they only produced music for a year or two in the 1980s. She meticulously records their contributions and performances, highlighting those who sparked the movement and paved the way for others to take even larger stages.

And as she said each Friday night, "You've been listening to *Rubymusic* on Vancouver Co-operative Radio. 102.7 FM. I'm Connie Kuhns. Good night" (p. 148).