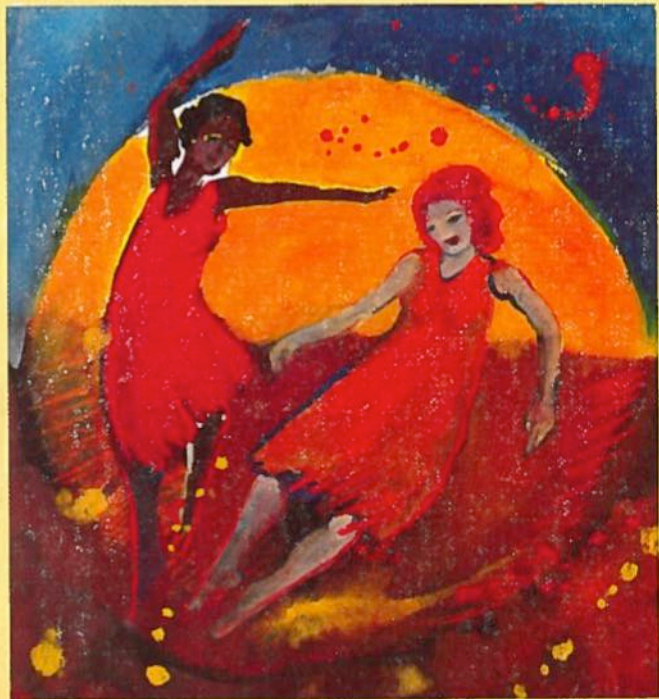


EVERYWOMAN'S
ALMANAC
·1983·





— Helena Wehrstein

SINGING ALL TOGETHER

Born in Spain, Mariana Valverde came to Canada when she was thirteen. She writes, teaches at York University, and has been active in the women's movement for a number of years. Mariana is a founding member of the Red Berets, a Toronto-based singing group with seventeen members.

I had thought for a long time that there should be a group to sing at demonstrations and events like that, to make things more lively. In other countries I've been in, singing has been part of the culture of the left. That's not really the tradition here. So a few of us pulled together a group of women, mostly socialist feminists, in early January 1981. We were so happy to discover that we could all sing a lot of the same songs — "Union Maid," "Bread and Roses," "Solidarity Forever" — and happy that we didn't need to have elaborate practices and a lot of theory. We made our debut on International Women's Day. Everyone thought it was wonderful because nobody had offered that kind of music before. People are used to having one person do his or her thing, but they're not used to a group of people who will put in the energy to motivate everybody to sing.

We decided to have a distinctive symbol, so that people could identify us. It had to be something we could wear in all seasons; it couldn't be a T-shirt because in the winter everyone is wearing coats. Someone hit upon the idea of red berets — a stroke of inspiration, because now people can recognize us immediately, and when we're at a demonstration or a picket we can see who of our partners is there. And it adds a touch of revolutionary tradition. We want very much to recover for ourselves some of the cultural traditions of the left, whether it's singing "The Internationale," carrying red flags or wearing red berets.

We're a rather ad hoc, free-flowing group. In deciding where to sing, we don't usually sit down to argue the merits of each case. It's more a matter of people wanting to go. And we don't go en masse to everything. We come from a variety of musical backgrounds: church

music, both traditional and of the Catholic left, Yiddish socialist influences, and of course folk music and the more recent women's music. As far as skill is concerned, we're a mixed and democratic group. We walk a fine line between wanting to improve, sing four-part harmonies and so on, and staying accessible to anyone who wants to join. I find it a very non-competitive group. We see one of our functions as the building of connections between all the different movements. We've sung at an El Salvador rally, an anti-Klan rally, and union benefits, as well as women's events. We basically present all our issues at all the events we go to. If we're at a trade union event and we're doing a song that has a stanza about gay rights, we'll leave it in. Sometimes we get flak about this. If people ask us to sing specific songs, of course we will, and we do shift our repertoire depending on the audience, but we will not eliminate issues altogether.

Because we are a feminist group, we change sexist lyrics. In the song, "Which Side Are You On," there's a verse that goes, "Will you be a lowly scab, or will you be a man?" We changed this to ". . . or will you take a stand?" We also encourage the writing of new songs, or adding new stanzas to songs. Different people write material about different struggles, and the Red Berets can act as the channel. For example, the Communications Workers in Oshawa can learn what the Steelworkers were singing at Irwin Toy.

It seems to me that in North America, the revolutionary movement has been a little too intellectually oriented. It hasn't given people those cultural manifestations they can really identify with. Singing is one of the most powerful of these and one of the most accessible. I've always thought that it's an incredible impoverishment and alienation when people say they can't sing. Not many people will be chefs, but we can all have basic cooking skills. It should be the same with singing. To me, the fact that it isn't is very much a sign of what consumer capitalism does to you. You think that music is something you buy. It is important that we reclaim singing, and singing together.

Group singing does impose certain limits on our choice of music. The tunes should be easy to carry, and people must be able to understand the words when we sing. Folk songs and church hymns usually meet these requirements, because that's what they were designed to do. The music for a lot of early trade union songs came from hymns.

Singing all together can be very powerful and moving. I remember being in Spain in 1977 when the country had free political expression and free elections for the first time in forty years. On a train after a political rally, coming into the station, thousands of people singing "The Internationale," knowing the words and singing together — it was one of the most powerful experiences of my life.

We really have a good time in the Red Berets. Sometimes it seems like a hassle to get to practice, to make one more meeting, but whenever I go, I'm always in a good mood when I leave. It's the kind of group that breaks down the barriers between the woman who shares our ideas but isn't a member of any political group, and the heavy politico who goes to meetings all the time. It's a fun group.

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New Year's Day

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