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Musical Trio Honors Women's Suffrage Movement

by Jack O'Brien

On the heels of the widely-publicized Women's Marches, a group of self-described "herstorians" are singing traditional feminist anthems to commemorate the movement's history.

On Saturday, March 25, Pat Lamanna, Lydia Adams Davis and Sharleen Leahey, a musical trio of folksingers and social activists, performed their hour-and-a-half long show, "Songs to Celebrate the Centennial of Women's Suffrage in New York State." The event was held before a capacity crowd at the Boardman Road Library.

The group performed a mix of original songs as well as those written by African-American abolitionist Sojourner Truth, British suffragist composer Ethel Smyth, and an interpretation of an 1859 letter written by Mary Brown, the wife of the controversial abolitionist John Brown.

The first act focused on songs emphasizing the role of women in the abolitionist movement, followed by their involvement in the anti-alcohol temperance movement. After a short intermission, the group dedicated the second act to songs about the modern feminist movement from the turn of the 20th century until the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, which granted women the right to vote.

Some songs were of a serious tone, like "The President's Proclamation," which featured the same chorus as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and was written two weeks after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Leahey played an uptempo melody on guitar for the group's rendition of "Harriet Tubman," a song from 1977 written by African-American composer Walter Robinson.

The trio also performed a Temperance anthem based on the melody of "The Star-Spangled Banner," complete with Leahey waving the movement's signature white flag. Between songs, Davis added that her great-grandmother Merrill was a member of the Temperance Union.

Despite the subject matter, other songs were whimsical, even playful at times. "Keep Woman in Her Sphere" was a tongue-in-cheek performance highlighting the demeaning view men had of women decades ago. Armed with a pink ukulele, Davis led the way in a performance of "Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be? (Women Are Wanting To Vote.)"



Folksinging 'Herstorians'

(left to right): Sharleen Leahey, Pat Lamanna and Lydia-Adams Davis performing "Songs to Celebrate Women's Suffrage"

The show concluded with an updated version of "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie and an encore performance of Albany-based songwriter Ruth Pelham's "I Am A Woman."

Commenting on the group's performance, Leahey said that she was honored to collaborate with both Davis and Lamanna by performing songs to honor the legacy of "our courageous suffragist foremothers." In reference to the latest wave of the feminist movement, including the recent Day Without A Woman protests, Leahey remarked that she has seen women from various backgrounds organizing to challenge the agenda of the Trump administration.

"The modern feminist movement is a bright and growing ray of light in a darkening sky," Leahey said. "The rising tide of women's energy and compassion is humanity's best hope to heal our broken world. Women are standing up for peace, human rights, social justice and the end to ecological destruction."

Leahey added that she is encouraged that Lt. Governor Kathy Hochul has been named Chair of the New York State Women's Suffrage Commission. Leahey said that the Commission has plans to organize a series of statewide programs to celebrate the accomplishment of women's suffrage and the central role New Yorkers played in achieving it. Those events are slated to start this year, the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in New York State, and continue until 2020, marking a century since women nationwide achieved suffrage.

As for the group, they plan to perform again at various venues.

For more information on "Songs To Celebrate Women's Suffrage," call 845-309-3853, email patla42@gmail.com, or visit www.rumorsofpeace.net/women-s-suffrage-centennial