

Interview with Thistle Pettersen

1. *How long have you been singing and writing songs?*

I have been singing and writing songs ever since my Dad put me on the back of his bicycle and started riding me to pre-school when my family lived in Cambridge, England in the 1970's. He said it was like having a "little songbird" on his bike and that I would just sing original songs out loud throughout the duration of the ride.

2. *Have you used your voice to advocate for justice?*

I have used my voice primarily to advocate for indigenous solidarity and justice for the people of Wisconsin and the world who depend upon the Great Lakes for clean water. I have also used my voice and organizing skills to advocate for justice for working class people by participating in the Wisconsin Uprising and Occupation of the State Capitol in February & March of 2011. I believe strongly in true social justice that honors those most oppressed by capitalism, colonialism, slavery and genocide.

3. *Has everyone wanted your voice to be heard?*

Many liberals/socialists/communists/progressives/radicals/leftists/thinkers/artists have loved to hear my voice and have supported the organizing work that I do until recently when trans activists began slandering my name and defaming me and many of my colleagues went along with them instead of standing up to them.

4. *Have you been called transphobic?*

I have been called "transphobic", "trans misogynistic", a "hateful bigoted fascist", a "TERF" (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and a FART (Feminism Appropriating Reactionary Transphobe) by supporters of the trans movement.

5. *Have you had support in the community and from women?*

I have had very little outward support from people in the Madison community but I have had tremendous support from feminists and feminist allies outside of the Madison community. I believe my supporters in Madison are too scared to come forward to support me for fear of becoming a target for the same kind of harassment and blacklisting I have endured. Some of my local supporters have also said that they do not want to alienate their friends and family who identify as trans and/or believe in trans ideology by outwardly supporting me.

6. *How do you reply to those who call your ideas hate speech?*

I often will say that there is no hatred of men in the promotion of love for women, which is what I see feminists doing when we critique transgender ideology and politics. It is our love for women that motivates us to point out and analyze the harms of a social movement that promotes invasive medical procedures on children in order to "fix" them and "make them



Thistle at the Wisconsin Capitol building participating in a New Zealand led feminist action with her sign and message of solidarity.

into who they really are.” Feminists are huge proponents of loving ourselves as we are and especially when we are women and have been taught to hate our bodies via the fashion industry. We preach loving our bodies as ourselves. Teaching love for one’s body, as it is, is not hate speech. Advocating for the rights of women to be autonomous, independent and to have boundaries against our attackers is also not hate speech.

The only way you can believe that what I say is “hate speech” is if you think all men are non-violent and therefore pointing out the violence of men is to falsely accuse them. Violent crime statistics prove that women are right to fear male pattern violence and that society should have laws in place to protect girls and women from said patterns of violence. Not all men are violent. This is true. But the majority of violent crimes carried out in society are carried out by men. This is also true and must be acknowledged when protecting those most impacted by said violence.

7. *What has been painful for you?*

The silence or impotence of friends in Madison has been extremely painful. Madison’s unwillingness or inability to take an effective stand against the defaming rhetoric aimed at me as an individual just wanting to pursue my dream of happiness like anyone else.

8. *Why have you stayed in Madison?*

Good question. I love my apartment, my housemate, my neighbors & friends, my job and I have faith that I will be redeemed and esteemed someday because I believe people are basically good underneath, and that they have gone along with extremists not because they are extremists themselves, but because they just don’t know the details and harms of the trans movement yet.

I have faith in the intellectual and activist history of Madison both on the left and in the lesbian feminist movement that has been strong in my town as well. Once people hear about what has really been happening and take a look at the rhetoric and ideology of the trans extremist movement and the local proponents of it, I think they will come around.

9. *You made a long bicycle tour some time ago.*

Yes. My life has been far from usual on many counts. On September 11th, 2003, my partner (at the time) and I took off on our bicycles, heading south like the birds. We did this after preparing for a year and a half to leave our apartment, our car, many worldly possessions and our jobs to pursue the dream of getting in touch with nature full-time as bicycle tourists, activists, artists and in my case, being a singer/songwriter. We booked shows all the way from Madison to New Orleans and managed to make ends meet by donations and the gig pay I got. Once down south, we remained on an organic Community Supported Agriculture farm on the edge of Austin, Texas for a year where we made a make-shift shelter from bamboo we cut by hand and things we found on the side of the road or dumpstered. You can hear a poetic description of that first bicycle journey and encampment in a make-shift shelter here: <https://soundcloud.com/thistleandthorns/05-austin?in=thistleandthorns/sets/selections-from-through-a-window>.

This song is like a sound painting that is an impressionistic view of my life in Austin, TX. The backdrop is a bit apocalyptic, yet the beauty of nature and its sometimes stinging force is appreciated and felt.

That was a really intense part of my life in which I wanted to live authentically and independently from the fossil fuels & capitalist economy as much as possible. Once I

returned to Madison in 2007, I immediately found bicycle activists, artists and enthusiasts who collaborated with me to create the Grassroutes Caravan Bike Rides. We rode in a group of 35 riders from around the country and even one rider from Ecuador, to the Republican National Convention protests, actions and demonstrations in St. Paul, MN in August of 2008. Our journey lasted for 12 days and we did performances and volunteer projects in the communities we passed through along the way.

10. *Where does it seem most possible to reconnect with audiences that haven't been able to hear you?*

I think at this point, with me being banned from at least three performance venues in Madison due to transactivist smear campaigns, the best places for me to play are people's living rooms and at private events. I was scheduled to grace the stage of the Cinema Systems Film Festival in Paducah, Kentucky in May of 2018, and local transactivists in Paducah got wind of it within 24 hours of the public announcement and attacked me and the festival online in a smear campaign. I decided with the producer of that festival, that it would be best to take my name off the bill so that her festival would not get angry mobs of protesters at it. At this point, the only places I can play using my own name are a few open mics in Madison that have yet to ban me and in underground venues. I am playing a Feminist Salon in San Diego next month and look forward to playing more shows like that in the future.

11. *What is your feminism like?*

My feminism is friendly towards everyone, which is also why I believe at some point, the lies will be exposed and I will be redeemed and esteemed. It is not that I don't feel anger at the injustices women suffer under male supremacist and violent rule, but I also believe there is such a thing as civil society in which both men and women of good will and rational thought can weigh-in on the politics of the day that impact us all.

My feminism is fiercely about love for women as full adult human beings who should be able to freely express our opinions and also be safe from male violence. It is about compassion, love and understanding for women as a class of people whose oppressors are the class of people known as men. This is not to say that I believe ALL men are violent perpetrators of crimes against women and society, but that structurally, men belong to the ruling class over women and are born into male privilege due to this created sex class system. Individual men can and should fight to defend women's rights to be free citizens protected from male violence. I can work in alignment on broader political issues and women's rights with those men and I do.

Women's need to gather safely and independently from men is also a big part of my feminism. I attended the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for several years and I witnessed firsthand the experience of women's safety and autonomy as a people at that annual gathering. There is a magic and gynergy, as Mary Daly put it, that can happen when women are free to create our own culture, politics, music and art independent of male culture, politics, music and art. My feminism is about being able to create that separate culture that strengthens and heals women from the wounds of patriarchy and ultimately, will heal all of society if we are allowed to do it.

My feminism is about the right of women to gather as a political people separately from the larger male-dominated culture and by doing that, some of us will be strong enough to reach out and participate in the larger culture that includes everyone. There are some of us who

see the value in remaining in public male culture and some who do not. Those women who wish to never be part of nor participate in male culture should have the right to draw a boundary and create a space that is their own. There is no violence against men in women gathering away from them to heal, commune and enjoy each others' company.

12. Is your effort to be heard part of a larger struggle?

Yes, definitely. In writing up the answers to these questions, I became aware of another smear campaign against feminist scholar of ancient matri-focal societies, Max Dashu. She and many many other women have been de-platformed and defamed in this struggle to allow women male-free cultural and community spaces and to fight male violence. Julie Bindel is another that has suffered many attacks by the extremist trans movement and also the pro-pornography/prostitution movement. Lierre Keith is another, Sheila Jeffreys another, Meghan Murphy another...the list goes on and on unfortunately in this leftist McCarthyism climate we find our society is in today.

13. Has everyone who has supported your right to speak out also agreed with your ideas?

Definitely not. The most important thing about my case and the case for any woman intellectual who has been de-platformed and defamed is that we represent society's willingness to have a civil discussion and disagree without it becoming a cesspool of personal attacks. Peace-loving people of every stripe and opinion can and should agree to a "commons" in public life where we can discuss the issues of the day, disagree and still maintain our integrity and civility.

14. What kind of discussion of gender would you like to see among activists?

I would like to see the institutions on the left such as the IWW (International Workers of the World), The Socialist Worker, Democracy Now and other leftist organizations and news media be able to amplify feminist and lesbian voices in their arenas with regard to discussions of gender. As it stands now, in most leftist organizations and media groups, you mostly see the trans narrative and point-of-view.

15. What can others do to help your case?

I think writing letters to the places that have banned me or gone along with the defamation would help. Organizations can write public statements of solidarity and media outlets can pick up this story and use it as a way to open up society's discussions of gender to include radical and lesbian feminist points of view. Writing to me, personally, just letting me know you hear me and are aware of what is happening will also help me to just keep on keepin' on. Booking me to speak and play my original singer/songwriter music would also be of great help. Co-dreaming and creating the civil society in which we wish to live is a big help to my case and the case of all of the women artists and intellectuals who wish to be free to be full citizens and participants safely in public.