

An interview with Starhawk

Origins of the Spiral Dance

October 31, 2009 marked the 30th anniversary of the San Francisco Spiral Dance ritual.

The first ritual was organized in 1979 as a book-release event for "The Spiral Dance" by Starhawk.

As part of our "Anniversary Archives" work, RQ talked with Starhawk about what led her to organize the first ritual, and the eventual decision to make it an annual event.

RQ: How did you first come to Witchcraft and the Goddess?

The first time I met witches was when I was reading tarot cards at a Renaissance Faire when I was around 15, in Los Angeles. There was a booth of witches next to us. I didn't know what they were about, but they were selling herbs and potions and stuff.

When I was at UCLA in 1967, my friend Patty and I did an anthropology project looking into witches, and eventually we met up with these same people. They were from the American Celtic tradition, their names were Fred and Martha. They talked about the Old Religion and the Goddess.

This was the first time I had ever heard of the Goddess in that kind of context. I had never thought of seeing spirit as female. My images of spirit had always been in terms of nature and sexuality. These witches said this was the Old Religion, that nature and sexuality are sacred.

I said, "Wow, that's what I've always believed." And from that time on I was hooked.

RQ: What were your first steps?

We started training with these people,



although that didn't last long. We had a little coven going, but we didn't really know what we were doing, we were just experimenting.

I was like 17 or 18 at the time. There were a lot of other things going on, and I kind of drifted away from spirituality.

Several years later, in the early 70s, I got involved with a women's consciousness-raising group, around '72-73. We met for a number of years, and got very close. A couple of times we got together and did rituals.

But in the feminist movement at that time, there was sort of an anti-spiritual bias – I always thought there was a connection between feminism and spirituality, but it seemed like no one else did.

Then one day I was driving through L.A. and I saw a shop called Feminist Wicca. I immediately stopped and

went in. There was Z Budapest. She had a shop and a coven in her Dianic Tradition.

I got very excited, and went to one of her rituals – she was having big rituals, with 75-100 women.

RQ: So this got you started with organizing rituals?

No. Right after that my relationship ended, I dropped out of school, and I left L.A. and went traveling around on a bicycle.

I ended up spending a winter in New York. I went there to be a writer, but New York wasn't right for me. I decided to come back to the west coast

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and move to Northern California. This was around '75. I imagined living in Bolinas and reading fortunes and writing books. But I wound up in San Francisco.

RQ: What were your hopes and dreams at that time?

When I moved here, I wanted to be a writer. I really wanted to write fiction. I'd written some novels that I wasn't able to get published. An agent I talked with suggested nonfiction was a lot easier to get published.

I started to write about my spiritual quest and what I saw as a new approach to spirituality. Gradually this focused on the Goddess tradition and turned into *The Spiral Dance*.

So I wanted to write that book and get it published – and I wanted to make a living as a writer.

I didn't foresee that this would lead to public organizing. I was teaching and reading at psychic fairs as a way to develop material for the book. But I didn't see myself as an organizer.

In the 60s, I had been politically active. I would show up at demonstra-



tions and get chased around campus by the police. But I didn't see myself as a leader.

Way back in nursery school, my lowest mark was in leadership quality. I guess I've been overcompensating ever since.

I am by nature shy and quiet. If I were naturally outgoing and extroverted, my whole life might have been different.

RQ: Let's talk about your early

involvement in activism. You mentioned Vietnam-era protests, which I remember you wrote about in *Walking to Mercury*. Where did your connection and commitment to activism come from?

Partly from my family background. My father was an activist and communist in the 1930s. He died when I was five, so I didn't really know him directly. But I heard stories about him and his activism.

It also came from living in the Bay Area. There has always been a strong activist community in San Francisco. Groups of witches got involved in rituals at Take Back the Night marches, anti-nuclear marches, and other events.

And I had my own sense of connection to the Earth and the Goddess. It seemed to me that this was part of the work of creating liberation for women and men – shifting our perception of the sacred.

RQ: Was this a common view at the time?

No — at the beginning it seemed totally nuts to a lot of people. As I mentioned, a lot of feminists were anti-religion. There were a few people like Z Budapest who were doing feminist Wicca, but it



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was a very small group who was saying “all this political stuff has a bearing on feminism” — that creating our own rituals and exploring our own spiritual nature can be part of our political work.

RQ: Had you helped organize public rituals prior to the 1979 Spiral Dance?

Not really. I had been to some public rituals of NROOGD (the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn). And I mentioned doing rituals connected to Take Back the Night marches that were politically focused.

The 1979 book-release for *The Spiral Dance* was the first big public event.

Really, the book release was the excuse for doing a big ritual. It was more like an aesthetic experiment — I had friends, different artists, poets, musicians, and we wanted to create a big spectacle and see what happened.

I was thinking about how to bring together music, dance, art — the way art and music are brought together in other traditions. I said, “Let’s start our own

and see where we can take this.”

RQ: How did the first Spiral Dance ritual originate?

I had been writing *The Spiral Dance* pretty much from the time I arrived in San Francisco in 1975, writing early drafts and getting a lot of rejection notices.

I helped start a coven called Compost Coven, women and men. A mixed coven was not unusual at the time. What was unusual was a mixed coven with an explicitly feminist point of view — feminist covens were typically women-only.

During this time we started an all-women’s circle called Raving — that circle, including myself, Kevyn Lutton, Susan Stern, Lauren Liebling, and Diane Baker — this group formed the core of the first Spiral Dance ritual.

When Harper decided to publish *The Spiral Dance* in 1979, they gave us money for a book party. We decided to use it to organize a ritual. We invited friends who were artists, dancers, poets and more, to create this amazing ritual.

That first ritual was two nights — the first included the media and photographers, the second was more private. It was free, since Harper put up money. It was held at Fort Mason, in a space that no longer exists. The second

night, there were 500 people. It was so packed that we turned people away.

RQ: Let’s talk about a few details from the early days. I’ve always wondered about the source of the spiral dance itself — the dance, not the ritual.

To be honest, I don’t know the source. I would guess as a form that it goes way back, although not necessarily as a continuous, unbroken tradition. Many different cultures have versions of it. And the spiral as a symbol goes way back, to cave art.

In 1975, when I moved up to San Francisco, I saw NROOGD do a version of the dance. They had everyone start facing outward. They spiraled out, made one turn, then spiraled in to finish.

At a 1975 Women’s Summer Solstice at one of the rivers in Northern California, other organizers seemed to be dropping out. I felt like if we said we were going to do something, we should make it happen. I have a hard time letting go of that sense of responsibility. Others were laying around saying, “Whatever happens, happens.” I was saying, “Let’s make things happen.”

One of those things was a spiral dance. At that ritual, I started the dance facing in, and spiraled inward to start.

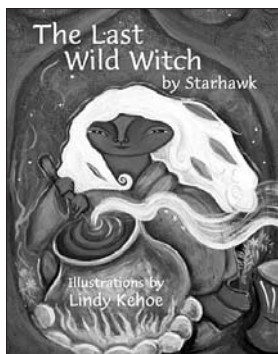
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The Last Wild Witch

by Starhawk • illustrations by Lindy Kehoe

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I don't remember how I knew it. It just seemed right.

RQ: Did you see the Spiral Dance as an ongoing event?

No, we didn't imagine we would ever do it again. We thought it was a one-time thing we were doing. But we hoped that it might open some other doors. We wanted to push the intersection of ritual and art, push it to an edge and see what came out of it.

At that time there weren't a lot of people doing public rituals. There was very little that was "out" or public about Wicca. So the big ritual was unusual.

In 1980, Gwydion Pendderwen, who was part of NROOGD, organized a Witches' Ball. He asked us to do another Spiral Dance ritual in

conjunction with the Witches' Ball. It was not quite as elaborate as the first, but it included the chorus.

In 1981, a lot of us were down at Diablo Canyon (construction site for a nuclear power plant in southern California) most of September. Macha NightMare and others stepped up



and organized the ritual, the first at the Women's Building (a multi-use building in the Mission District of San Francisco), where it was held until the tenth anniversary in 1989.

The Women's Building was not that large (it held about 300 people when packed), so there was a limit on

tickets. People were always pressuring us to get in, that part of the organizing was a living hell.

In 1989 (the tenth anniversary of *The Spiral Dance* and the first ritual), I wanted to do a ritual for 1000 people...

To Be Continued...

See next page for Starhawk on the "Music of the Spiral Dance."

This interview and the next about Reclaiming music conducted in Fall 2009 by George Franklin ©2009 by RQ.

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Where did the songs come from?

While talking with Starhawk about the history of the Spiral Dance (see preceding pages), we asked about the music for the ritual, which has evolved steadily over the years.

RQ: Where did the music for the Spiral Dance come from? Which of the songs on *Let It Begin Now* are from the first few Samhain rituals?

The “Let It Begin Now” litany, the earliest version, is from the first Spiral Dance. Some of us had gone to a poetry reading by Diane Di Prima, and she read a long poem with the refrain “May It Continue,” a very Buddhist feel. That gave me the idea for the refrain “Let It Begin Now.”

In the original version, there were four spoken litanies: one for people we knew who had died; one for endangered or extinct species; one for heroes and heroines; and one for victims of violence.

We ended by remembering the witches who had been killed.

The ritual circle would spiral slowly inward to these litanies, and then spiral out to more positive litanies. Of course, it never worked exactly right.

As I recall, we used “The Gates,” with music by Bonnie Barnett, and the refrain “What is remembered lives.” The spoken litanies were done over this.

It wasn’t until 1989, for the tenth anniversary, that I wrote the Quatrain (“Let it begin with each step we take / Let it begin with each change we make / Let it begin with each chain we break / Let it begin every time we awake”). The song was still changing at that time.

In the mid-80s, we also added the first version of the “Goddess Song.” People also wanted a new God song, because they felt “Honor to the Untamed God” didn’t have enough energy.

I went out in the back yard at Black Cat house and asked: “What do you want us to say?” From there I came up with the words, and Michael Charnes added the music. (All of these songs are

on the *Let It Begin Now* CD.)

In the 1990s, Deborah Hamouris wrote a new version of the “Goddess Song” (which incorporates much of the older song — available on Reclaiming’s *Witches Brew* CD).

RQ: It seems like the early Reclaiming days were a very rich time for pagan chants. Tell us where some of yours came from.

A lot of people were writing new chants and songs at that time. I remember writing “Demeter’s Song (I Am the Wealthy One)” at a time when I was really broke, and singing, “There is no end to my abundance, no end.” I wrote it and forgot about it, but someone found the words and liked it. Eventually, we included it in the Spiral Dance.

“Weave and Spin” was written for the multi-cultural ritual in 1992, at the

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from Reclaiming

Witches’ Brew

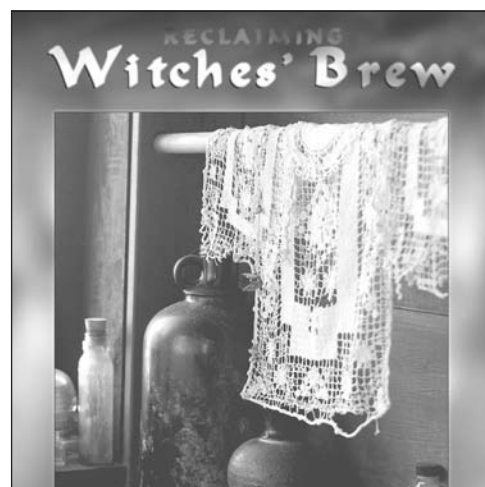
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Spiral Dance Music

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County Fair Building. We had altars to different traditions and ancestors. The idea was that people would take a strip of colored cloth from each of the altars, then weave them into a big basket – “Weave and Spin” was written for that working.

The “strand by strand” descant came from a song some of us wrote at BC (British Columbia) Witchcamp called “Powerful Song,” and we noticed it worked with “Weave and Spin” too.

“Weaver, Weaver” is written to the tune of an old lament to Bonnie Prince Charlie. The Chieftans recorded it on an album one year when we were doing SpiralHeart Witchcamp in West Virginia.

We were working with different pentacles. For the Pentacle of Death night we needed a song. I loved the music from the Chieftans, so I wrote new words to it.

“We Are the Power in Everyone” is from the Livermore 1982 anti-nuclear protest, held on Summer Solstice. It was also a full moon, so that’s the part about the “dance of the moon and sun.”

Note — most of these songs are on Reclaiming’s Let It Begin Now or Chants: Ritual Music CDs. These and other CDs are available on the RQ website, where you can hear samples and order CDs or downloads.



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