

**U.16. Long Civil Rights Movement: The Women's
Movement in the South**

**Interview U-0504
Melody Ivins
January 31 2011**

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Field Notes—Melody Ivins

(Compiled January 31, 2011)

Interviewee: Melody Ivins
Interviewer: Stephanie Rytilahti
Interview
Date: January 31, 2011
Location: Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Length: 1:14:17

The Interviewee: (description provided by interviewee)

Melody Ivins was born in 1955 in Anchorage, Alaska, to Air Force parents. She grew up in the egalitarian community of military bases in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Naples, Italy. Her father retired in 1968, moving the family to Smithfield, NC, which still had a Klan sign "welcoming" people to town. Melody has yet to recover from the culture shock.

After five years she escaped Smithfield for college in Chapel Hill, where she majored in English, with Highest Honors in creative writing. She has remained in the area ever since, working in restaurants and then as a bookseller, and volunteering for progressive organizations. Her proudest accomplishments so far are founding and directing the Women's Book Exchange, a community feminist library, and managing Southern Sisters Feminist Bookstore for four of its five years' existence. She is currently an independent researcher in southern, women's, and civil rights history, and delights in getting paid to learn.

The Interviewer: Stephanie Rytilahti is a graduate student in the Department of History at Duke University. Her research focuses on gender, race, and sexuality in twentieth-century U.S. social justice movements.

Description of the Interview:

This interview builds upon a previous group interview conducted with Melody Ivins by Professor Jacquelyn Hall's oral history class (interview date is January, 26 2011 and available through the Southern Oral History Program). The previous interview covers more information on Ivins's family background, and her coming to awareness of the feminist movement; whereas, this conversation circles around her involvement in various movements in North Carolina (mainly Chapel Hill) in the 1970s and 1980s. The topics covered range from the classes Ivins attended as an undergraduate at the University of

North-Carolina Chapel Hill, her work with the Women's Book Exchange and Southern Sisters feminist bookstore, and other movements relating to peace and racial justice.

The interview took place at Ivins's cozy condo in Chapel Hill. Colorful afghans and two lively cats create a homey and warm feeling in the small space. Windows in the back of the building overlook a lushly wooded area, and we sip beverages in the living while discussing Ivins's involvement in various movements and political circles. Even though I have just met Ivins, she talks to me like an old friend, and her natural storytelling ability quickly draws me into her narrative. Her anecdotes are well-formulated and reflective; she gives a strong sense of the interconnectedness of activism during this time period and flavors her examples with personal interest stories pertaining to moments of humor, tension, and disappointing setbacks. Overall, her passion for continuing these movements in the present is evident in the concise analyses she offers and the rich enthusiasm that seeps into her retellings of the past.

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 Interviewer: Stephanie Rytilahti
 Interview Date: January 31, 2011
 Location: Chapel Hill, NC
 Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

Tape Index

<u>Time</u>	<u>Topic</u>
0:01	"Today is Monday, January 31, 2011. My name is Stephanie Rytilahti, and I am meeting with Melody Ivins in her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina."
00:54	Ivins explains that feminism was her primary activist affiliation in the 1970s and 1980s, but she also engaged in racial justice and peace movements. She describes the interplay between various movements as "organizations and interests [which] overlapped in every conceivable way."
1:26	Discussion of a Women's Peace Encampment meeting in Savannah River, Georgia. Here Ivins met many of her political mentors such as Mab Segrest, a lesbian activist who worked with North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious violence; Mandy Carter who was involved in the War Resister's League and many other groups; and Candy Hamilton who worked for the <i>Great Speckled Bird</i> in Atlanta. People in her circle of friends also worked on the Leonard Peltier campaign [Peltier was a member of the American Indian Movement who was arrested in 1977 for the shooting deaths of two FBI agents on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation], and issues pertaining to Nicaragua, and Latin America. Everyone worked with three to five different political groups, but most people shared an interest in peace movements in addition to feminism, and gay and lesbian rights.
4:01	Ivins explains that these movements melded local, national, and international issues. For example, individuals worked locally on housekeeper rights, but also engaged with broader domestic issues.

- 5:21 Discussion of the black freedom struggle and interracial organizing. More activism took place in Durham than Chapel Hill. Additionally, in Ivins's assessment, groups like the Women's Book Exchange were "whiter than we wanted it to be." Yet, in Durham more groups were racially diverse. Southern Sisters is a good example of this.
- 7:12 The Women's Book Exchange began in 1983. It was eventually located in the Orange County Women's Center in Chapel Hill. The book exchange had over 5,000 volumes, and operated as a membership library with dues of \$5.00. She explains the types of items the exchange held, how people checked out books, and the early referral network that grew out of this space. Unlike a gay and straight split that characterized Southern Sisters Feminist Bookstore in Durham (established later), the book exchange was patronized and run by lesbian and straight women.
- 13:24 Ivins describes some of the tensions that arose when the Women's Book Exchange moved into the Orange County Women's Center. Ivins attributes the tensions to the lesbian materials the exchange offered. The director, Frances Henderson, was the main supporter of the Women's Book Exchange, but older, wealthier patrons of the Center continued to protest the explicitly sexual materials in feminist and lesbian sex manuals. All of the materials are now at Perkins Library at the Duke Women's Center.
- 19:47 Ivins explains that most women socialized and found political events outside of the university structure. Despite the high levels of activism in Durham, many Chapel Hill residents held prejudices against Durham (Ivins cites a perception that Durham was a dangerous place). Yet, Rape Crisis, The Battered Women's Center, and the YWCA were in Durham.
- 22:18 Ivins describes a falling out at the Durham YWCA in approximately 1986. She explains that the black women accused white women in the organization of being racist, and the white women (primarily lesbians) accused the black women of being homophobic. After this point, the Y "imploded."
- 23:07 Ivins responds to a question regarding the importance of spaces like bookstores, cafes, and YWCA's to women's communities. She explains that they are "absolutely essential. That's where women meet each other. That's where we find what we didn't even know we were looking for but we know it when we see it." She describes

the Women's Book Exchange as a "smaller, younger, poorer" version of Southern Sisters.

- 23:58 Community networks sustained Southern Sisters during its years of business. In contradistinction, the relationship with Duke University was not strong in terms of patronage. Most students and faculty members did not support the store, and there was not an institutional relationship that facilitated the purchase of books through individual course offerings.
- 26:08 Ivins responds to a question regarding the relationship between the community and Duke University, Central, and UNC-Chapel Hill. She describes a "chasm" between Women's Studies Departments and activist feminists in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In her estimation, Women's Studies Departments engaged in very disengaged, abstract deconstructionist theories whereas local activists dealt with concrete social problems. Yet, a few people had "a foot in both worlds." For example, Ivins recalls having a friend who worked at a battered women's shelter and also was a student at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- 28:53 The Women's Book Exchange, however, was supported by female faculty at UNC-Chapel Hill. There was not a meeting place for women on campus at this point, and the Women's Book Exchange was right across from campus. Southern Sisters, however, was more physically removed from Duke University in its downtown location in Durham. For both the Book Exchange and Southern Sisters, Ivins suggests that there was "individual support but not institutional support."
- 31:49 Discussion of how feminist practices, such as consciousness-raising, began spilling into the classroom in the 1980s. She describes this process as slow and embattled with gendered hierarchies at the university and the state level. She remembers a friend being told that there were "no great women poets" in a class. As a response, Ivins wrote a paper on sexism in the Norton Anthology of poetry [she was an undergraduate in the English Department during this time period.] She remembers her peers "pushing" for more Women's Studies courses, but this process was "incremental and uphill."
- 37:00 Ivins responds to a question regarding how she developed political awareness. She describes finding a corner in the UNC undergraduate library with women's anthologies in the late 1970s. When she found this space, she recalls, "My hair stood on end...electricity running up and down my spine. I had ancestors."

- She credits individual professors, librarians, and publications like *MS*, *Off our Backs*, and *The Women's Review of Books* with her personal and political education.
- 41:21 Ivins describes working for an English Professor after she graduated, and listening to him complain about having to include women in the Norton Anthology of Female Playwrights.
- 43:20 Not many students challenged sexist viewpoints in the classroom while Ivins was an undergraduate due to the culture of respect and the paucity of female professors. Yet, when asked whether women were "hungry" for feminism during this time period, she makes a distinction between her friends outside of the classroom who were eager for this material, and the relative lack of feminist topics raised within classrooms.
- 47:00 Ivins describes Chapel Hill as a place of less racial integration in comparison to the interracial coalitions in Durham. This was largely due to the racial demographics of the city.
- 47:36 The Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists (TALF) was an important activist group. Their newsletter included many resources for women looking to find out more about activism and local networks.
- 49:17 Ivins describes the tribute she wrote for Bob Sheldon in the TALF newsletter [Sheldon founded Internationalist Books in Chapel Hill in 1981. His bookstore offered literature on Marxism and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. In 1991, he was murdered and many suspect this was due to his radical political leanings]. Due to the depth of feminist networks during this time, Carol Seajay read this tribute and eventually reprinted it in *Feminist Bookstore News*, a national publication that served as a resource for women operating feminist bookstores across the country. This anecdote points to the centrality of feminist bookstores and national networks during the early years of the second-wave feminist movement.
- 50:58 Tensions existed between TALF and the owners of Southern Sisters. Many of the disagreements surrounded the store's anti-pornography policy.
- 53:25 Ivins responds to a question regarding the type of fissures that prevented coalition building. She enumerates problems with consensus-based decision making, sexism from male members of groups, and splits between gay and straight women. She also describes the general unpopularity surrounding "hardliners."

(Individuals who thought there was a proper analysis for everything).

- 57:20 A discussion of radical feminists, and their critiques of the cultural feminist focus of the Women's Book Exchange. She describes the general beliefs of "hard-core separatists," and the type of analysis they offered—mostly their desire to completely sever ties with men. She does not see a hard line between political activism and feminist cultural appreciation.
- 100:35 Ivins describes straight and lesbian coalitions at The Savannah River Women's Peace Encampment. The Peace Encampment and Southern Women's Music Festival were women-only spaces. Ivins remembers these events as places where "you are safe. You are safe in a way that you are not safe anywhere else in the world." She also describes some of the tensions surrounding the presence of a separatist camp at these events.
- 100:05:13 Ivins recalls stumbling upon her first Goddess circle at one of the two events. Some of her friends from the Women's Book Exchange also joined a coven, and, accordingly, she references the importance of spirituality to feminist movements.
- 100:07:22 A consideration of the setbacks that inhibited activism. She lists the problems that plagued the Y, and the closing of The Women's Book Exchange and eventually Southern Sisters. She describes Southern Sisters as a "wonderful gathering space," and recalls that people drove from all over the state and from other states to patronize the store. The store was the "lesbian welcome wagon," the gift registry, and offered many women valuable resources. In this instance, the interviewer comments the importance of place-based spaces to feminism, and Ivins agrees that these physical locations were essential to local movements of all types.
- 1:11:32 In response to a question regarding what kept people going during this time period, Ivins responds, "We needed each other. We needed each other so much. I met the best people I've ever met...in these movements. We needed to do something with our indignation, with our passion for justice, with our quest for more knowledge. We learned from each other."
- 1:13:03 Ivins challenges the presumption that activism in 1960s failed. Regarding the vibrancy of these movements in the present, she states, "It's all still going on. Absolutely and everywhere...And it hasn't quit happening. We may not be making as many headlines. We may not be as visible, but I'd say it's happening in more places,

from more perspectives, from more directions, and women are in more leadership roles than ever before. And more power to us.”