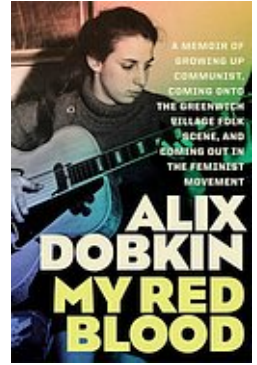




Dobkin, Alix (b. 1940)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Alix Dobkin's autobiography (Alyson, 2009).

Alix Dobkin has been a lifelong progressive activist and a pioneer in women's music. She was already a seasoned folk music performer in the early 1970s when a consciousness-raising group led her to the feminist movement and she came out as a lesbian. She thenceforward focused her energy on creating a women's culture based in radical politics.

Dobkin's first album, *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, produced in 1973 with Kay Gardner and Marilyn Ries, not only ushered in a new era of lesbian music, produced by women for women, but also paved the way for mainstream lesbian musicians from k.d. lang and the Indigo Girls to Bitch and Chely Wright.

The biography of her early years, *My Red Blood*, published in 2009, chronicles not only her own life, but the coming of age of a generation.

Dobkin was born on August 16, 1940 in New York City into a Jewish Communist family. She was named Alix for an uncle who was executed while fighting against Fascists during the Spanish Civil War.

She grew up aware of a rich family tradition of leftist politics and resistance to oppression. In early childhood she bit a neighbor child who used an anti-Jewish slur, thus exhibiting her own early dedication to fighting back against intolerance.

Reared at a time when anti-Communist hysteria came to dominate American life, Dobkin grew up in a family that was constantly aware of surveillance and suspicion. She learned to value the power of solidarity and the galvanizing force of music to build that solidarity.

The Dobkin family lived in New York, Philadelphia, and even two uncomfortable years in Kansas City during the mid-1950s. She graduated from Philadelphia's Germantown High School in 1958, and from Philadelphia's Tyler School of Fine Arts in 1962. Soon afterwards, she left for New York to join the growing folk music movement which was centered in Greenwich Village.

During the next ten years, she became deeply involved in the folk scene and built a successful career as a folksinger. She was known especially for a diverse repertoire of songs from many countries.

In 1965, Dobkin married Sam Hood, who managed the Gaslight, a popular Village folk venue. The couple had a daughter, Adrian, before divorcing during the early 1970s.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, progressive women began to examine their position as women, in the larger society and in the social justice movement. One of the most powerful organizing tools in building the women's liberation movement was the consciousness-raising group, where, often for the first time, women began to talk to each other about the injustices in their lives.

Dobkin became part of a consciousness-raising group and soon became an active feminist. As happened with

many women, once they became open to the possibility of loving women, she also fell in love with her close friend, writer and radio host Liza Cowan, and came out as a lesbian.

As an activist and a musician, it was natural that Dobkin soon began to put her new passions into song. By 1973 she had joined with two other lesbians to produce *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, the first album produced entirely by women with songs specifically for women. With titles like "The Woman in Your Life," and "Her Precious Love," *Lavender Jane* was openly lesbian and forcefully feminist.

The album ushered in the genre of "women's music," a feminist offshoot of the folk movement that combined traditional and original songs with an intent to raise political consciousness, which Dobkin hoped would lead to political action.

Dobkin followed *Lavender Jane* with *Living With Lesbians* (1976), *XXALix* (1980), and *These Women* (1986). Her music became the coming-out soundtrack for thousands of lesbians, and her women-only concerts became dynamic meeting places for emerging lesbian communities across the country.

Dobkin, who wrote columns and articles for lesbian and gay newspapers and magazines, such as *Chicago Outlines*, *Windy City Times*, *off our backs*, *Lesbian News*, and *Rain & Thunder*, became almost as well known for her rousing commentary as for her woman-positive lyrics. She remarked wryly, "My job is to say 'lesbian' as often as possible."

Throughout her long performing career, Dobkin peppered her act with songs of many cultures and languages, and, in the best folk tradition, she often changed the lyrics of well-known songs to reflect feminist and lesbian consciousness.

In spite of her success on stage and vinyl, Dobkin was never content to remain a movement star. She began attending the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as a performer, but was immediately struck by the powerful community aspect of the festival. She returned to Michigan annually for over a decade, always participating as a worker as well as a musician.

During the 1990s, as "genderqueer" politics began to replace the woman-identified lesbian polemic of the 1970s, Dobkin remained unapologetically feminist and lesbian-identified. She continued to perform both nationally and internationally and devoted a great deal of time to her column for the feminist newsjournal *off our backs*.

However, by the mid-1990s, though she re-released some of her earlier albums, Dobkin had begun to lose interest in songwriting.

She began the 17-year-long process of writing the story of her family and the early years of her life. *My Red Blood: A Memoir of Growing Up Communist, Coming Onto the Greenwich Village Folk Scene, and Coming Out in the Feminist Movement* (2009) tells of Dobkin's experiences growing up as a "red diaper" baby (child of Communist Party members) and her career as a singer during the exhilarating renaissance of folk music in 1960s Greenwich Village.

The book is both an education about and a celebration of leftist activism and the movements, such as the struggle for civil rights, that paved the way for feminism. To readers disappointed that the book ends on Valentine's Day 1972, the day before she came out as a lesbian, Dobkin replies that the story of her lesbian life is contained in her music.

That music, however, cannot be easily separated from her early life, since it grows from the rich background her early life provided her, as she observes in the epilogue to *My Red Blood*, "My career in women's music sprang from the soil of J. S. Bach, The Red Army Chorus, Louis Armstrong, and Broadway

shows, topped off by the folk music scene of the 1960s, and has granted me a life rich, challenging, and satisfying beyond my wildest dreams."

Nominated for a Lambda Literary Award, *My Red Blood* is described by songwriter John Sebastian as "a magnifying glass on a revolution in music, culture, and politics. Here's the sixties from someone who remembers EVERYTHING!"

During the early 2000s, Dobkin, ever militant, joined the steering committee of Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC), a national activist organization that works for visibility and empowerment of old dykes within the queer community and in the world. She was recently named the group's co-director.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.