

IN THE ARTS

Former Vaselines rocker Eugene Kelly is getting a grip with his new band, Eugenius.

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The Arts

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THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE • SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 1994

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CARLA KIRKWOOD, longtime San Diego actress, rants and prays in her politically charged works.

Women's powerful

VISIONARY

performances



ANNE WALDMAN, poet and wit.



KAREN FINLEY "writes with the body" in her controversial solos about the political cultures that breed abusive families.

VOICES

Offer healing force

O sun, moon, stars — our other relatives peering at us from the inside of god's house, walk with us as we climb to the next century, naked but for the stories we have of each other.

— from "Reconciliation" by Joy Harjo

Unable to believe their stories, the frazzled Freud asked: "What do women want?" Persistent as a drum or heartbeat, female performers have been passing through town lately answering: "To be heard, to be heard, to be heard."

These writer-performers have their roots in different disciplines: performance artists Karen Finley and Rachel Rosenthal in the visual arts; poets Ntozake Shange, Anne Waldman and Joy Harjo from the African-American, Western humanist, and Native American oral traditions; Carla Kirkwood from theater; stream-of-consciousness comic Reno from the brash world of stand-up.

As feminists, they know that personal and political history are inextricably linked; as female artists, they create work aimed at healing not just themselves but the culture that marginalized or silenced their artistic forbearers and nearly killed the earth in the process.

Cutting across disciplines and taking on politics, medicine, science and technology as well as the art world, these female writers become oracular in performance, envisioning a future beyond the violence and churning ethnic conflicts of today.

All reconstruct history from the female.

By **ANNE MARIE WELSH**
Arts Critic



RACHEL ROSENTHAL has been making provocative theater pieces since she signed on to the women's movement 20 years ago.

See Women on Page E-4

'Trios' truly collaborative

By **GEORGE VARGA**
Pop Music Critic

"I love bringing together artists who normally don't collaborate, and on my album they do," said bassist Rob Wasserman of his new album, "Trios," one of the most distinctive all-star outings in recent memory.

The 13-song release features the Grammy Award-winning bassist performing in various trio settings with an unusually eclectic group of partners, as befits an artist whose past credits range from Lou Reed, Van Morrison and Oingo Boingo to Rickie Lee Jones, Bob Weir and jazz violin master Stéphane Grappelli.

But what makes "Trios" so notable isn't the fact that it teams Wasserman with, respectively, Neil Young and the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir; Branford Marsalis and Bruce

Hornsby; Elvis Costello and Marc Ribot; Les Claypool of Primus and Chris Whitley; Jerry Garcia and Eddie Brickell; ex-Jimmy Reed/Chuck Berry drummer Al Duncan and since-deceased blues pioneer Willie Dixon (to whom "Trios" is dedicated); and cellists Matt Haimovitz and the Kronos Quartet's Joan Jeanrenaud.

Nor is it the fact that the album opens with the stunning "Fantasy is Reality/Bells of Madness," which marks the first instance Brian Wilson has recorded with his daughter Carnie; a Wasserman-prompted pairing that has since led to a reconciliation between the former head Beach Boy and his long-estranged family.

Rather, it's that "Trios" manages to be a truly democratic and collaborative work despite

showcasing artists who, for the most part, usually insist on calling all the shots themselves.

"I'd have to say that everyone I worked with on 'Trios' was very collaborative on my project, and often I end up working with them on their projects and they're not collaborative at all," said Wasserman, who performs Wednesday on TV's "The Tonight Show" with fellow "Trios" collaborators Weir and Marsalis.

"The singer-songwriters who came on my album did something that we normally wouldn't do, which is reaching out," he continued. "There are no 'anonymous sidemen' on my album; it's a great democracy. And I'm reminded again and again that

See 'Trios' on Page E-8

Ford's film legacy

It is well and proper that the San Diego Symphony will honor America's greatest filmmaker this week with a formal exhibition of his most ambitious silent film, complete with authentic accompaniment by organ and orchestra.

What, you may ask? Did Orson Welles make silent films?

No. But Orson Welles, asked in a 1967 *Playboy* interview to identify his principal American influence, said: "... the old masters. By which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford."

In the two decades since his death, John Ford has slipped further from unfashionable toward forgotten. Critics offer him respect rather than analysis. Even his most zealous fans tend to cherish his work rather than acclaim it.

For the general public, the question never arises. John Ford is just history. Friday at 8 p.m. in Copley Symphony

Welton Jones

CRITIC-AT-LARGE

Hall, many of us will get our first opportunity to see Ford's 1924 epic, "The Iron Horse," complete with the premiere of a newly reconstructed accompaniment by San Diegoan Eric Beheim, played live by theater-organist Dennis James and members of the symphony under the baton of Carl Daehler.

There will be fun and games starting at 7 p.m., with live performances of railroad songs, a trivia contest and even a rare silent spoof film titled "The Iron Mule." But the attraction is Ford's film.

See Jones on Page E-11

Women

Healing is goal of artists' performances

Continued from E-1

therefore nondominant point of view — from the vantage point of "the other." Their language springs from myths and archetypes newly unearthed by a reborn women's consciousness. Their writing is exuberant with that sense of discovery, and their vatic utterances are almost always shot through with humor.

As artists performing and thinking on the cultural edge, they humanize the subjects dealt with theoretically by academic feminists, including the hundreds of scholars gathered for the ninth National Graduate Women's Studies Conference, "Thinking on the Edge," ending today at UCSD.

This year's conference, like those in the past, featured performance — by solo writer-performers Kathy Acker, an iconoclast from the art world, and Yareli Arizmendi, head of the theater program at Cal State San Marcos.

An earlier conference presented the first play by Cheryl L. West; her much-praised "Jar the Floor," now in a vivid production at the Old Globe, potentially explores the virus of female self-hatred triggered by incest and passed on through the generations.

But unlike the playwright who hands her script over to a director for interpretation, the performing writers create and package their own images, communicate from the base of their female identities, perform with power and authority, and therefore become examples of what their work is about.

Their work subverts the age-old

entitlements of white, middle-class heterosexual males (and their female accomplices) as ideal audience, as producer, as publisher and arbiter of taste.

Dancers from Isadora Duncan through Martha Graham to Twyla Tharp had already broken through to achieve artistic autonomy and control of their stage work; and women in comedy could at least look back to pioneer Ruth Draper and trailblazer Lily Tomlin for a tradition. But this newer kind of writer-performer could only have happened after the feminist movement of the 1970s.

Not to worry, Sigmund. They

don't want to substitute a new female hegemony for the old male one. With a varied 20-year-old tradition of feminist writing and performance from which to draw, there's nothing monolithic about their work.

Social rituals

The exchange of energies — audience to performer and back again — at these performances can accumulate great heat and power, for the oracular style is a return to pre-theatrical forms of communication, back to story and poetry as social ritual, not formalist

artifact.

The exhilarating reading by Harjo, Shange and Waldman on the Cross Fertilizations Series curated by UCSD poet Quincy Troupe for the San Diego Museum of Art had the intense, visceral performer-audience connection of a good rock concert. For many in the packed house, it amounted to a kind of ritual cleansing.

Yet those three poets are very different in approach, form, technique and style, despite their shared pull toward performance and the many underlying and essential similarities of vision.

Shange straddles the usually separate worlds of poetry, fiction and theater. She often transmutes a work, generally about African-American girls or women confronting men and the dominant culture, into several different genres. As a performer, she mixes the dramatic and stand-up, or at least did here, for the wild meditations on sex and on gender separatism she presented.

Harjo, the best writer among them and one of the great visionary poets of this fermenting end-of-the-century moment, projects as gentle and forgiving,

her politics of the disenfranchised absorbed in an earthy, all-encompassing spirituality. A member of the Creek tribe and a saxophonist, Harjo usually performs her poems with her jazz-reggae group, Poetic Justice.

Waldman, an heir to Allen Ginsberg, is a charismatic performer whose work, less interesting on the page than stage, spans a staggering range of references, all of Western and Eastern culture from both ironic male and presentational female points of view. She trades in satiric wit and humor as she builds her sometimes epic-length postmodern narratives.

She directs the writing program at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colo., and has performed for radio, video, television and theater. She knows how to work a crowd.

Her incantatory "To the Censorious Ones" addressed the self-styled arts policemen such as Sen. Jesse Helms. Using a deep-throated voice and male sexual imagery — parodies both of oracular religious rhetoric — she begins: "I am coming up from the tomb, men of war, just when you thought you had me down, in place,

Reno rewired:
Reno has been moving away from stand-up toward theater in extended comedy routines paralleling personal and political issues.

hidden. I am coming up now. Can you feel the ground rumble under your feet. It's breaking apart. It's turning over. It's pushing up. It's thrusting into your point of view, your private property."

Tall and imposing, she rises to her full height, promising stories of women with lascivious tongues, sharp eyes and claws. She threatened with her aerobic fitness: "I've been working out. My muscles are strong." Then, claiming to lead up hell hounds ready to "bark and bite and scoff," she deflated the male-authored myth of Pandora's genital box of evils, crying out: "I'm opening the box. BOO!"

Finley, a regular at Sushi Performance and Visual Art, often deflates the political attacks on her and other performers with a similar refrain: "I'm only an artist."

In her AIDS-inspired "A Certain Level of Denial," recently performed at SDSU, Finley also becomes the suppressed material that the Helmses of the world fear — a free and honest woman exhorting the suffering imposed by narrow gender roles, by callous governments and abusive families.

Rosenthal's latest performance piece, "Zone," explores some of the same themes at this end-of-century moment, a time, as Harjo puts it, "of incredible destruction and incredible possibilities." With more than 100 people of color performing at UCLA as The Throngs, Rosenthal dramatized the wavering between a steady and a turbulent state, the clash between the massive, migrating nonwhite world and Western patriarchal civilization (and its attendant multinational capitalism) which may no longer be able to control it.

Writing with the body, Finley and Rosenthal, but also Reno and Kirkwood, shock audiences out of complacency with their language and their bodies.

In her earlier pieces, Finley objectified and symbolically abused her own body, stuffing its orifices with yams or covering her breasts with chocolate, the symbolic feces reflecting extremes of rape, sexual abuse and other assaults upon women. Descriptions of such activities triggered the much-publicized defunding of her work, along with that of three gay artists, by the National Endowment for the Arts.

The 1990 "A Certain Level of

See Women on Page E-5



Photo / MARK HISS

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Tues/Wed, June 7-8	RAY CHARLES/sp. gst. Ernestine Anderson	8:00	\$38
Thur/Fri, June 9-10	THE ROBERT CRAY BAND	8:00	\$32
Sunday, June 12	MILTON NASCIMENTO/ZAP MAMA	7:30	\$23
Wednesday, June 15	STYLISTICS/DRAMATICS/CHI LITES	7:30	\$27
Friday, June 17	DAVID SANBORN	7:00/9:00	\$32
Sunday, June 19	BOBBY CALDWELL	7:00/9:00	\$20
Monday, June 20	EARL KLUGH/sp. gst. Cassandra Wilson	7:30	\$26
Tuesday, June 21	DR. JOHN/LEON RUSSELL	7:30	\$26
Friday, June 24	RICHARD ELLIOT	7:00/9:00	\$20
Sunday, June 26	OTTMAR LIEBERT & LUNA NEGRA	6:00/8:30	\$25
Mon/Tue, June 27-28	MANHATTAN TRANSFER	8:00	\$37
Wed/Thur, June 29-30	THE RIGHTEOUS BROTHERS	7:00/9:00	\$33
Thursday, July 7	GEORGE BENSON	7:00/9:00	\$28
Sunday, July 10	FIRESIGN THEATRE	8:00	\$28
Mon/Tue, July 11-12	JAMES BROWN	7:30	\$38
Thursday, July 14	NEVILLE BROTHERS	8:00	\$32
Friday, July 15	PAULA POUNDSTONE	8:00	\$23
Sunday, July 17	JERRY LEE LEWIS	8:00	\$33
Thursday, July 21	ACOUSTIC ALCHEMY	7:00/9:00	\$20
Friday, July 22	RITA RUDNER	7:00/9:00	\$20
Sunday, July 24	SMOKEY ROBINSON	6:00/8:30	\$33
Thursday, July 28	TOWER OF POWER/KIRK WHALUM	7:30	\$23
Friday, July 29	HIROSHIMA	7:00/9:00	\$23
Sunday, July 31	ART GARFUNKEL	8:00	\$33
Tue/Wed, August 2-3	AL JARREAU	8:00	\$38
Thursday, August 4	NORMAN BROWN/BONEY JAMES	7:30	\$20
Friday, August 5	DIANE SCHUUR/RAMSEY LEWIS	7:30	\$30
Sunday, August 7	MICHAEL NESMITH/sp. gst. Hellocasters	7:30	\$23
Thursday, August 11	KATHY MATTEA	7:00/9:00	\$20
Friday, August 12	DAVID BENOIT/KILAUEA	7:30	\$23
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No. 5 in B flat Major

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George Cleve,
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RACHMANINOV - Piano

August 17, 1994

Henry Lewis,
Guest Conductor
Marilyn Horne,
Mezzo Soprano
ROSSINI - Arias TBA
American popular songs

Women

Artists pack power into their performances

Continued from E-4

Denial" was less revolting and scatological, though every bit as tough in its depiction of patriarchal death-dealing as a form of necrophilia.

In "Reno Besides Myself," which the wild-haired comic performed at St. Cecilia's last winter, her theme centered on racial xenophobia as the public side of fear of intimacy. Reno gave it a boldly physical expression, as raunchy in body language as in words.

With her work a kind of illustrated "Civilization and Its Discontents," she lets her discontented body dance wildly or tosses her head so her hair jolts up, looking electrocuted.

Kirkwood's subject in "Bodies of Evidence" — the mental cannibalizing of her own body as a survival strategy for a sexually abused girl — is shocking enough. For most of the piece, she wears either a child's nightgown or the simple shift of a ward of the juvenile justice system.

Waldman's tour de force is "Jovis," a 335-page suite of poems about male energy coursing through the universe.

When she performs naked, Kirkwood expresses both the child-woman's vulnerability and the survivor's ultimate acceptance of her own body.

Though not intended as an illustration of theory, that piece, like all of Finley's and many of Rosenthal's, became an example of what feminist theorists call "writing with the body." Their bodies become the slate upon which they "write" their way out of sexual oppression.

They know intuitively that politics and ideology shape a culture's re-presentation of women as images, and they reframe the old images to see them clearly before creating new ones.

Becoming men

These performers take another route out of the old by taking on a male point of view, either ironically to expose it or directly to understand.

Male is not always the equivalent of bad — like that pig-headed sexist man on the recent *Time* magazine cover — though it can be, especially in the work of Finley. She transports herself into the mad minds of rapists with the ease of Eric Bogosian shifting into his substance abusers. He impersonates the addicted

characters in his male monologues; Finley presents them in that detached, critical way performance artists learned from Bertolt Brecht.

One of Finley's rapists rears his ugliness in a monologue called "I'm An Ass Man." He rips open the polyester pants of a woman in 4-inch cork heels, violates her, then flees when he discovers he has her menstrual blood all over his fist and arm. The images are so real they really do shock us with the man's madness, the woman's helplessness and pain.

Many of the men in Kirkwood's "Bodies of Evidence" are merely voices trying to persuade the girl to accept her mistreatment. "You can do this, you can do this," they tell her to calm down what they view as her hysteria. Or "You are so bright," various teachers, judges and social workers tell her as she moves from coercion in her family to coercion by the state.

But Finley and Kirkwood are just as likely to express empathy with certain men. Finley's love for her own father and brother and for her friend the late drag artist Ethyl Eichelberger suffuses "A Certain Level of Denial."

Similarly, Waldman's tour de force is "Jovis," a 335-page suite of poems about male energy coursing through the universe. Filled with invocations, letters, historical and contemporary poems and acrostics, it includes "Pieces of an Hour," the fey tribute to the late iconoclastic composer John Cage she sang at La Jolla.

From "Jovis," too, came "Linebacker," a stream-of-consciousness poem stimulated by a rush of TV images — football, news, advertising. "And now it's sport and war and violent sins against women and nature," Waldman intoned.

Then admitting that she may be preaching to the already converted, she allows the images and their associations to wash over her, until she reaches an orgasmic pitch: "To score to win to grow to prosper, to score to win to grow to prosper."

Like a cheerleader before the football is snapped, she finishes, "to take it to the top, to the top to the top to the top, take it to the top to the top, where all the old scores settle, then churn again. HIKE!"

Yet just as strong as this questioning of the continuum linking sport and violence is her love for her young son, the one she hopes never gets sent by the fathers to war. The boy, who lives with her in Boulder near the Rocky Flats Nuclear Arsenal, inspired one of her witty litany poems in "Jovis" on "How to Cover Up Plutonium."

Among the child's solutions: "Let's cover plutonium with frozen enchiladas. . . . Let's cover plutonium with what cliff dwellings are made of, get some Indians to come back and make some adobe. . . . Let's cover plutonium with hard candy, every single kind that gives immediate cavities. Let's cover plutonium with Play-Doh, dried dead people's bones and then there's just plain dead people with nothing on them."

Litanies and incantations

The ultimate litany is Harjo's "She Had Some Horses," an enigmatic poem that gave its title to her third volume of poetry. The poem repeats the "She had horses who . . ." construction 22



Performing poet: Joy Harjo, a Creek Indian and jazz saxophonist, is a visionary poet for the end-of-century era.

times and has achieved nearly cult status among her readers, so powerful is its cumulation of detail, so resonant and oblique its meanings.

Harjo's incantations resolve dualisms into an all-encompassing spirituality ("She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. / These were the same horses.") Finley, Waldman, Rosenthal and Kirkwood use repetition as exorcisms, like hag curses inverting the blessings of the beatitudes.

When the right modulations are there, the resonances are Biblical. The adoption of those rhythms gives depth and dimension to work that comes from a non-Christian, almost pantheistic point of view.

Female artists, of course, are not alone in their desire to heal the mind-body split as a paradigm for healing the earthly environment. They show over and over that the impulse to dominate the female body is the root metaphor for the impulse to degrade the natural environment. Nor are they alone in

turning to pre-theatrical, ritualistic forms. Many philosophically minded modernists in Western culture created work with links to more holistic, non-Western forms.

And in his recent, brilliant adaptation (with Robert Auletta) of the Western pre-tragedy "The Persians," Peter Sellars foregrounded the insight these women share: The domestic and personal become the public and political. Therefore: Be careful what you do to the women and children. It will come back like a ghost to haunt the culture.

What's so compelling about the work of this group is the wonderful assurance and variety among them as much as the shared meaning.

Though they all create work that embraces life lived in female consciousness and attuned to the earth, Rosenthal let her persona be murdered by a gang of futuristic thugs trying to steal a precious bunch of carrots in her 1992 "Bunface: FUTUREFAX."

Technology can't solve the human problems it seems to exacerbate. But Harjo, creating the most all-embracing, end-of-the-century myth, offers the most hope, although as a Native American woman, she certainly is a member of the most victimized group in this

country and has the most to understand and forgive.

Her "Letter from the End of the 20th Century" (from her yet-to-be-published volume "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky") is an urban folk tale in which a woman's grief has the ultimate power to heal. The spirit of an Igbo man, a Nigerian taxi driver murdered in a robbery, wanders Chicago seeking his killer. And finding the Jamaican murderer shivering in the bowels of a Chicago jail, he knows he could hang him or knife him, and it would be called suicide.

"It would be the easiest thing. But his mother's grief moves his heart," she writes. Because he can feel, he knows there is a choice, even after death.

And then, because he no longer feels ashamed, the killer fills with remorse — and cries all the cries he has stored for a thousand years. He learns to love himself as he never could because his enemy, who had every reason to destroy him, loves him.

These writer-performers offer hope that stories by women and other "others" might help us understand the inter-cultural conflicts erupting as the century turns. Their voices are alternatives

to the deliberate misunderstandings in the interests of power and profit that have dominated popular discourse.

As Harjo writes in her "Reconciliation," these stories can "keep us from giving up in this land of nightmares which is also the land of miracles."



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