Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Naomi Littlebear Morena

An Interview
Conducted by
Caro Carty
01/19/2023

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LEOHP Interview
Interviewee: Naomi Littlebear Morena
Interviewer: Caro Carty
Date: 01/19/2023

Caro Carty 00:00
Hi, thank you for joining me. I'm Caro Carty here with Naomi Littlebear Morena, to talk about her life history for the Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project, which is part of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Today is January 19, 2023 and we are recording remotely. I'm in Minneapolis, Minnesota. And Naomi, do you want to share where you are?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 00:29
Hi, I'm Naomi Littlebear Morena and I am live alive in Portland, Oregon and it's just another gray day [laughter]—

Caro Carty 00:40
Live and alive and gray [laughs]—

Naomi Littlebear Morena 00:42
Live and alive and gray, yeah.

Caro Carty 00:43
Great. Well, we'll start at the very beginning. Can you tell me when and where you were born and a little bit of what your childhood was like?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 00:53
Sure. I was born in the L.A. County Hospital in Southern California and grew up in a barrio in San Fernando, California in the 1950s. The barrio was segregated. So the school that we went to was a very poor school, I think it was a place where teachers who, you know, kind of like, okay, you want to work with poor kids, we'll send you to this school. And so there was— some of the teachers there were pretty racist and we'd be punished. Students would be punished if they spoke Spanish in class. And so it was a very rough neighborhood. A lot of gang violence. My family was pretty poor and some of my family members were involved in gangs and drug dealing. And I was raised by my grandparents. And so there was a lot of chaos, really growing up but I gravitated towards music. I would see my uncles playing guitars on Friday nights, playing the blues or the oldies. And, you know, those hot, Southern California nights where you're out on the porch, nobody has air conditioning, and you're just out there playing music. And so I—from very young, I started listening to groups like the Shanels or the Shirelles. And that's how I learned how to harmonize because they just have these great harmonies. But that kind of music also

taught me that women are supposed to suffer in love because it's that you're always heartbroken or you're pleading for "oh, please love me" or "oh, my baby's gone" or "I'll do anything for you." And so I think it— that kind of infiltrates your mind. And I, from the time I was a little girl, I recognized that I was different. And that I was— I thought I was a boy and didn't want to do any girl stuff. I hated dresses, and you know, in our generation, we had to wear dresses, pretty much until the 10th grade and then they finally let women wear pants. You know, so scandalous! Shows you how slow progress has been.

But when I was 13, I was sent to live with my mom and my other two siblings who— my mom had escaped the barrio. She wanted to get away from all the negative stuff, you know, there were some deaths in our family and incarcerations. And so she just wanted to be as far from that as possible. And because she was light skinned, she could pass as white. And so our— her and her new husband lived in a, in kind of a working class neighborhood that was white. And so after having grown up in this rough neighborhood with mostly brown folks everywhere, I was in a white neighborhood and probably one of two Hispanic kids in the entire middle school and then high school. So the— and shortly after I moved to Orange County, that's a very conservative part of Southern California. My— both my grandparents died within a few months of each other. So I just— I asked my mom for— well, I wanted to play guitar. And, and of course, you know, my mom wouldn't buy a guitar. And so I started babysitting and I earned money to buy a guitar, electric guitar. And at the same time, while I was babysitting the lady I was babysitting for had an organ at her house. So as I was learning chords on the guitar, I learned chords on the piano, I thought, oh, they're the same kind of thing, except it doesn't hurt your fingers as much. So I was simultaneously learning chords on the piano, or organ, and learning the guitar and starting all girl bands by the time I was 16. And we would play songs by The Kinks, The Rolling Stones, The Beatles. There is a group called Love that I really enjoyed among their music. The psychedelic music movement started to influence my musical sensibilities, you know. And so I went from, you know, being very much influenced by a lot of the pop music that was coming from England who, in fact, were kind of capitalizing, if not— what's the term? Appropriating Black musicians, Black blues musicians, the Stones did that and, you know, I, as a teenager, I wasn't cognizant that that's what was going on. But sort of in that same period of time, I got exposed to folk music and to Buffy Sainte Marie, who I saw on television and and it was like the first time I felt I saw myself represented because I used to have long, black wavy hair. And I was dark skinned and it just like, it was seeing this woman singing these powerful songs, and playing a guitar. It just like, I was mesmerized by her message. And then I started to listen to Joan Baez and she's talking about pacifism. So I was interested in reading about Gandhi, I read his biography. And so I just started to get more linked into music, not just being something that you can dance to, and rock to but something that can give a message, a social message. I remember hearing Joan Baez's “There But for Fortune”, and I was really moved by that song, and I would play it over and over again. And it was similar with Buffy Sainte Marie with “Now That the Buffalo's Gone” and “My Country 'Tis Of Thy People You're Dying”. It just— I didn't know that part of history. I didn't

know, you know, there's just so much I didn't know. I was— around this period of time to I was reading *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck and learned that it wasn't just our people that were coming and always picking the fruits and veg and it was, you know, white folks, poor white folks. And so it gave me an understanding too, of the impact of classism on people. Not just racism, but how classism affected white people. And so that all just kind of filtered into my head. And I think because I grew up in a community where there was so much poverty and so much racism and lack of opportunities for jobs, lack of opportunities for an education. No one in my mother's family ever finished high school and much less gone to college. So I don't know. I —then, when I was about 18 at— well, when I graduated from high school, my mom wanted me to be a secretary like her because that's what she had done. And that's what she had been successful at in terms of assimilating and fitting into white culture, but I had a deep— I was having a lot of resentment about that, about that culture because I saw how my grandparents had suffered under poverty. And I couldn't get that out of my mind, I couldn't get the fact that they died poor. And we were mistreated and so I wasn't somebody that could just "oh okay, now I'm just going to pretend I'm white and just go along with this thing." So I, you know, I started— I didn't want to be a secretary, I worked at a warehouse when I got out of high school, and that didn't work out really well. And then I had a bunch of friends that I had played music with in high school who knew these other, these two guys that were like, pretending they were Jesus, and you know, long haired hippie boys singing, doing their sermon on the mounts, about, "oh, we gotta get back to the land. And women have to do this." And they wanted to just move a whole bunch of us to Oregon. And I had no place to go. I was— I left home and I was just kind of crashing around different places, I had no real stability. I did work a little bit at a cafeteria.

But anyway, I went off with these hippies when I was 19 and we came up to Oregon and lived in this little lumber mill town. And really all we [laughs]— you know, when you see *Easy Rider*, and we see these people there have this commune and they're planting a garden, no, we didn't do that, all we did is party. All we did was take acid and go hike up in the woods, and just like be amazed by everything. And it was an amazing experience for me because I had just known nothing but concrete and traffic and no mountains, no snow. I hadn't seen any of that nature really like that, until I'd come to Oregon and the Columbia River Gorge is just an incredibly beautiful place and waterfalls and just hiking trails. And so in that period of time, I met one of the young men that moved up to join us in the commune. He had a younger brother, who was a guitar player and he had a friend who was a flute player and when our— there was going to be a big event in Portland where the Foreign Legion not Foreign Legion, American Legion— it was one of these big conservative groups, right. And Nixon was president I think, at this time, and they wanted to get the hippies out of town because they were afraid that hippies were going to have this big anti-war demonstration because that's what was going on during this time was a lot of anti-war demonstrations. And even though I wasn't participating in anti-war demonstrations, somebody donated a piece of land to have a big concert and it was called the Vortex Festival. And the local farmers supplied all these vegetables and so we had this big festival by the river

with free food, all the hippies came. And myself and the two young men that I was playing music with, we were called Mild Eye, typical hippie little band. And we closed the event and it was just so amazing because, you know, I was like 19 and Johnny was about 16 and Harvey was 17. We're just these young kids up there on this stage and we closed with this song by the Incredible String Band called “A Very Cellular Song”. The chorus is "May the longtime sun shine upon you, all love surrounds you, and the pure light within you guides your way home." So we were just so deep in the hippie thing. And then in that same time period, everybody from Southern California, it snowed— the little shacks that we were living in only had wood burning stoves and nobody had fire wood. You know, nobody thought about this stuff, we were just young Californians and just oh, let's live in the woods, let's party, let's dance, you know, let's, you know, we'd panhandle to get money to pay our rent and so anyway, I had come to visit my family in Southern California. And then when I came back, everyone was gone at the commune. Well, you know, my friends, most of them were gone and so I went back to L.A. and I was hitchhiking back and I met this guy who knew a guy who worked at a recording studio. I told him about my band, I told him about Vortex Festival. And he introduced us to some guy in Hollywood, who liked our music and wanted to record our music. So we spent a year recording an album of music. And one of the highlights of that was— I don't know if you're familiar with a song “Nature Boy”? It was sung by Nat King Cole and it was very popular in the day, it's a beautiful song. And it was written by a fellow named Eden Ahbez. Well, Eden lived in a step van, an older guy, and he recorded, he played gong and drums on my songs, you know, I've written an instrumental that he played music on. And so we did all this work on this album and then the fellow who was the engineer got kicked out at the studio and we never saw him again. And we never got to hear all this music that we had, you know, I played all these instruments and did some harmonies. And so it was just, it was just gone. I have one CD of just a few of the songs— you can barely kind of make them out. So that was a little bit depressing. And then, do you want me to carry on?

Caro Carty 17:16
Yeah, so at this point, you're still in Santa Ana and souther—

Naomi Littlebear Morena 17:20
Yeah, we're in Santa Ana— well, at that point— no, I hadn't gone to Santa Ana yet, I was still in the Valley. I was just kind of— I was actually just homeless at that point, when we were recording music. I stayed at different places, you know, garages and inside of a cupboard that was in, you know, somebody's parking garage. Do you know how they have these cupboards at the top of the parking garage where you can store your luggage? So you know, I had my sleeping bag in there and then my friends chipped in, and bought me a $75 car that I could live in. And so anyway, the music, you know, after the music didn't go anywhere, and I just started to get really depressed and I really needed to come out. Because I kept having these crushes on straight women, my straight friends. And it was just heartbreaking. I just — I couldn't handle it. But you

know, in those days, you know, there really wasn't any, any way to find out where, to even find out— you know, I knew about homosexuality because I looked it up in a dictionary when I was a teenager. But so— I went back when I was in Hollywood, I copied down the number, the telephone number of Daughters of Bilitis, but I never called them. It was one of the earliest lesbian organizations. But I didn't call them because I just like— the term Daughters of the Bilitis, I thought I was going to join a cult and I would be a daughter, and I just am not a joiner. You know, I go along with things I kind of jump into scenes that are part of the scene, but I'm not a, I've never been, you know, much— I don't know, I didn't know what it was, you know, and I just thought, oh my god, I'm gonna be a daughter, I want to [laughs]— so it was very intimidating to me. And then the other choice was going to the bars and I wasn't into the bars. And it wasn't until you know, I just had to come out and I had had a— I think I'd shared this experience with you where I had been arrested for making an illegal left turn but it was really for driving while Hispanic. And that was the first time when I was in this prison bus that I saw two very, very, a hardcore butch and an hardcore femme with the hair up to here and it was just like, it was very confusing. The whole coming out process for me was painful, very painful, very confusing. But music was, I guess, I was writing love songs for for these, you know, young women that I'd fall in love with when I was young and I was just deeply closeted until I finally got to Santa Ana and I got involved in the— there was a women's center there, it was a building and it was a resource center and they would have consciousness raising groups. And that's where my consciousness was raised about feminism, about the patriarchy and about just a lot of things except racism. But I met somebody there who also played guitar, she was a very good guitar player, and she was very much into folk music. She introduced me to some folk singers I hadn't heard before, like something Neil. What's his name? Somebody, anyway, Judy Hench. These kind of obscure folk singers I had never heard of before that were really great. And I started writing feminist songs. And we— her name was Robin Sours, and she later changed it to Robin Flower. And we started a duo called Sisterhood. And we played a little bit in LA. And we played backup on there was a singer at that time, a lesbian singer named Maxine Feldman. And she had written what was considered or has been considered the first lesbian recording. It was one song called "Bar two", and the other one called "Angry Athis." Athis being a character in one of Sappho's poems. And so we did some backup with Maxine in the clubs in Southern California to promote her 45. And Robin and I were promised that “oh, yeah, we're gonna record you next," and no, they didn't record us next. So we played a gig with Maxine at the Tucson Women's Music Festival. And that's where we met these. You know, what they call themselves dipsy dives, who are just kind of traveling from the southwest. And they said, “oh, you should come out to Albuquerque with us”. And so we just left our apartment, and everything in it, all the furniture in it, and we just kind of just, we had had a $90 car. I think that the rod blew in just like about a couple of weeks. And so we'd left it on the freeway. So anyway, we just hopped in with these women and ended up in Albuquerque, but not before they got lost. And we went, we're supposed to pick up somebody in San Francisco. And from there, we were going to cut across through Nevada to Arizona and New Mexico. And Robin and I fell asleep in the back of the car and when

we woke up, they were naming the streets that were in Southern California, where we had just come from. They had gotten totally lost and we're heading back south. And so we head back up and they said, oh, well we meditate by the moon. So that, you know, we can get a sense of direction. Okay, so we get out of the car and they do some meditation by the moon. And we get back in the car, we start to head off. The dog isn't in the car. They forgot the dog. So we had to go back to where we had been meditating. And I mean, this is how things were back then, you know, it was just so insane. And then we ended up waking up somewhere in Arizona, we had camped out and then when we woke up there was all these Easter egg hunters around us, because it was a little park. But anyway, in New Mexico at some point, after about nine months, we traveled a bit. We traveled to New Hampshire and stayed there a bit and Robin was from Cleveland and we hung out there for a bit but Robin and I did some gigs in Portland for a very short time, but she didn't like Portland. It wasn't really her thing because it's gray and green. And that's when we were playing together, we started an old timey band and played a couple of gigs in Portland. But then she got into another band and I started. So this time I'm back in Portland, and I finally meet some lesbians that I can relate to, these old hippie lesbians, not old. I mean, they were young, hippie lesbians. And—

Caro Carty 25:42
What did it feel like kept you from fully relating to the other groups of women you'd been with or the other worlds that you'd found yourself in and all of a sudden?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 25:52
Well, breakups. You know, you become partners with somebody, and then you break up and then you're not doing music with them anymore. Well, when we were traveling in the southwest, we were busking in different— wherever we could, you know, we'd get together, get on our instruments, go on the streets and just play and then the cops would come and then we'd have to go away. We weren't doing music seriously there. Although Robin and I were doing some good guitar work and good instrumentals. I really liked what we were doing musically. It reminded me of like, when I was playing with Johnny and Harvey, because we are all very much into instrumentals, you know, we would all lead breaks and we were playing acoustic guitar. Same thing with Robin. But when Robin and I stopped traveling in the Southwest, and I said, "Why don't we go back to Portland?" And then we started that band and that seemed like a good band. But she fell in love with a banjo player [laughs]—that's how it happens. Well, I don't know, it doesn't really matter. I was really, and it was my first relationship with a woman.

Caro Carty 27:19
Oh, so painful, though.

Naomi Littlebear Morena 27:21

Yeah, it was kind of painful. It was and it, but then, you know, I met Kristan. And she played flute. And I said, tell you what, I'll write some flute parts for you and we can start doing some music. And I started writing more songs. And we got together with— I mean, I didn't stop doing music. It's just that it became, I started finding musicians that were more stable in terms of like, yeah, let's do this. Let's rehearse. Let's rehearse every day. Let's rehearse, you know, more than half an hour. You know, let's just let's just play until we get these things right. So by the time I'd gotten back to Portland, and I had met Kristan, and then I met Izetta Smith. And Izetta had been an actress or actor with a local theater company called Storefront Theater. And she had also been an actor prior to moving to Portland and San Francisco with ACT. And her family is amazing. She comes from a family of her mother, her great grandmother was a suffragette and also a stage actress. And they were all from New York. And so they were very, you know, the president of that time went to see her great grandmother on the stage. And so she came from a very interesting background, Izetta did. And she's an incredible singer, incredible harmonies and just has been an incredible support to me of my music for decades. So we had a fourth member several fourth not several, two different other members that joined [unclear band name]— it was always me, Kristan, and Izetta. And then in the beginning, Robin Chilstrom, who was also an actor that worked at the Storefront Theater, she joined us. And I don't know how. And then we started a— well, I started a choir of a lesbian choir called The Ursa Minor choir. I had written the songs for the Bicentennial, and it was an anti-bicentennial piece called "Why did you come to America?" And, you know, I had these friends that were in political theater and they wanted to sing in the song and so we recorded this and it was going to be on television. And they lost the tape. You know, lost the tape, so they never aired it. You know, and so I think it was just, it was too political, you know, and so, but that's okay, because we were still playing the music and and I don't know who turned us on to who told us about the Michigan Womyn's Music Festivals and the Champaign Urbana Music Festivals. But anyway, we were invited to play at the festival and it went over really well. We played the main stage and we played two years and then two years in Champaign Urbana. And then we just started to tour from the mid-seventies until 1980 we toured. And I was writing all the music. And yeah, we wrote all the music. There's— I think we only cover, we did one cover, we did a Sweet Honey song. But mostly, and oh, a Victor Jara song, Chilean folk singer. But mostly, we were, we would tour and wherever we would go, we would ask the promoters to organize the pickup choir to join us because I had written two songs. One was called "Sisters Take Care of Sisters" that had a really nice chorus. And the other one was called, "You Can't Kill the Spirit" And I had written "Can't Kill the Spirit" when we were still in, when I was in Portland. We were starting to play locally as well, some north northwest things. And at this, by this time, Olivia Records had started. And they were starting to produce women's music. And so we met with some folks from Olivia and they didn't think our music was commercial enough. They were hoping to have a— they wanted to find a salsa band. And, you know, there was always this expectation because I was Hispanic that I needed to sing songs in Spanish. And that's, you know, I grew up speaking Spanish but it just felt like, you know, I felt like I was being, they want to meet to be this token Hispanic, to sing these songs that— losing

my language was a very painful experience, because I grew up speaking Spanish with my grandparents and then when I moved to Southern California with my mom, I was no longer speaking Spanish. There was no longer a Spanish speaking community around me. And so it was a very painful loss. And I remember that this was kind of a humiliating experience in high school where there was some song on the radio at the time that had this little you know, to me despicable little, Spanish, or sounding [sings]—you know, that kind of thing. You know, it was this kind of a, in a popular song that was out that time. And during lunch, they would have these loudspeakers where they play the dedications and somebody dedicated a song from me to some guy and it was that song. And it was just, it was humiliating. I was like, I didn't even know where to go to get away from hearing that. So I was always very sensitive to songs that would have a little bit of a— they want to give it a little bit of a Spanish sounding flavor, whatnot. So it was a sensitive point for me when I was being told why don't you sing songs in Spanish? Why don't you do this? And they don't realize that my culture was ripped from me in really the most painful ways and so much of my family died and suffered as a result of, you know, poverty, which in itself is a tool of racism. And so, and I knew the music I was doing was unusual, you know, and we would frequently be told, "Hey, this is unusual." Well, you know, I'm self taught, and I've listened to a lot of different kinds of music and that's what was coming, coming from me.

But nevertheless, we recorded an album called *Quiet Thunder* as a result of going around and passing a hat at the different venues when we were on tour. And then the band broke up. I was I just turned 30. And it was, it was pretty painful, you know, not having music anymore. And, I had broken up with the love of my life. And, I was emotionally crushed. And because I'm a musician, I just wrote a bunch of songs, and I wrote a lesbian rock opera, you know, and a lot of songs about our love and about my love for her and about the struggle of survivors of abuse and the rock opera was called *Survivors*. And anyway, but after that, you know, I've had a— Portland has always given me a lot of support as a musician. I can just talk to one person or call one person and next thing you know, I have a bunch of other people that are willing to either work with me on a project, whether it was the rock opera, we had a lot of people work on that, dancers and singers and musicians. And then in just the last thing I did, as part of a big community event was organizing something called "The Way Back," because I was starting to get in touch with the trauma of neglect, and abandonment and abuse that I experienced as a child. And so I was writing, a lot of my songs were dealing with some of that pain. And also, my belief that the violence that we do against women is similar to the violence that we do against the earth. You know, it's system domination, its power and control. And it's the rape of the earth and the rape of women. And so a lot of my music was sensitized to that. And so this project, the way back, Isetta and I got together a lot of women. I had mentioned this to them— to Kara when we first talked, that when we put out, we're going to do this event, we want women who are interested in sharing, how the arts helped them heal, from various different abuse, sexual violence, and just we got 100 people and 100 women just to create different— the poets, the musicians, the artists, the people who built the sets, therapists, it was just it was a huge event, and it was very well

attended. And we did that over a couple of years, the way back, and then I kind of ran out of steam at this point.

And at that point, I was working as a dishwasher at a restaurant called Old Wives Tales. And somebody came and told me, "they're playing your song on NPR." And, and that's when I found out that my song "You Can't Kill The Spirit" was being sung by the women at Greenham Common Peace Camp. And I heard that they had surrounded this missile base, 30,000 women surrounded the missile base, and they were singing my song. So that was kind of a mind blower. It was very cool. And then just, it just seemed like a few weeks later, these two women from London came, one of them an Irish woman, and an American woman who had been living in London. And they said they wanted to help me come and play, do a gig or something, either in London or something, they just wanted my music. They heard the music really wasn't anonymous. There was a person behind the song and so we raised money for me to go to England. And it was just me and my guitar. And I would meet various women along the way. And they'd say, "Oh well, we can set up a gig at this library and in Edinburgh," or "there's going to be this festival in the Netherlands, a lesbian festival, you can play there." And so next thing you know, I was able to play oh, gosh, maybe about eight different events around the UK and I was on the radio and I was on television and because in England, the peace of the peace movement had also adopted my song, so it wasn't just the women's, the women's movement, at Greenham, the CND, which is something for nuclear disarmament. It's been this group that's been in the UK probably since the forties. They were very, the band the Bomb Movement, and I played in an event for them. And there were thousands of people that and that was just there was in Leeds. And so it was just kind of almost an out of body experience. Because you know, I come from the barrio and I was a depressed dishwasher, and now I'm, you know, in the UK, and I'm doing these gigs. And I ran into the banjo player in the Netherlands, and she was so sweet. You know, she sent me a nice sweet little note, and I had no hard feelings towards her, you know, at all. But she's a well known artist, comic artist and Mary Wings. And so Mary was so supportive of that gig in the Netherlands because the woman got so drunk, really, really drunk, and were dropping glasses and bottles, and were up there singing. And then when I get to Camp Kill the Spirit, it's like, ah!!!! all hell breaks loose. And, you know, it was the same thing in London because nobody had realized that there was lyrics to this song, "You Can't Kill the Spirit." They just thought it was just the chorus. And so anyway, I ended up being there for a few months.

Caro Carty 43:05
Do you know how the song got there? Did you ever piece that together?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 43:12
I think I pieced it together because probably women from the UK, I don't think it was women from the UK. I think it was women from some Scandinavian country. That's what I was hearing that they'd come to the festival in the, probably the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. And they

heard the song there. And it just seemed like every time I sang it, everybody always sang the chorus and they would sing it over and over again. And so I think that's how I remember it got to the women at Greenham is that it started with some women that were somewhere in one of the Scandinavian countries. And so anyway, I'm in the UK and when we were in the UK, Pete Townsend of The Who donated a recording studio Eel Pie Recording Studio. I used to love The Who. They and we, I put together a choir pickup choir in London and we sang a version of my song on this album that was called, I don't know, it had a bunch of songs of the movement in the Greenham Common Women's Movement. And you know, I was just— it was one of the most painful experiences of that is just seeing more of the personal stories.

There was a woman I met, I was staying at her house, her and her husband's house in, I think it was in Branford and she was telling me how she had a little girl who was a toddler and she was pushing her across the street or in the stroller and some guy deliberately changed lanes to where the stroller was, and took the stroller and her daughter was killed. And she told me that she couldn't bury her daughter. She was having a very hard time. And then her friends gathered around her and started singing "You Can't Kill the Spirit" and that helped her bury her daughter. And so, really, since then, that song, I get letters and requests for that song of women who have— not just women, there was a young man whose mother, who was aunt, had used to go to Greenham. And when she passed away, a bunch of the old Greenham women came to her funeral and sang “Can't Kill the Spirit.” And he did a rendition of “Can't Kill the Spirit” with an opera singer. Very avant garde. Very different version. But you know, I just respected the hell out of it, you know, that he would do this for his aunt, and that he recognized that this was kind of an important song for her. So I think over the years, since then, I get requests for the song, or somebody says, "I'm going to include it in this book," and I say, "Well send me a copy of the book, or send me a copy of the CD." Or there's a choir from somewhere. And this is just in the US. I know that it's probably gone through similar things in the UK. But I'm sure they haven't gotten a hold of me, because I knew that there was a German group that had recorded the song, the chorus. But, you know, so it's, it's kind of interesting that it's been it has inspired a lot of folks, either in the peace movement, or in periods of grief, or anti-war movement. It's sung in pagan circles, women's circles, women's spirituality circles. And, but it's not you know, it's just, it's not something that I've ever made money on, to say the least, really.

So really, after I came back from the UK— oh well, I fell in love with a Scottish woman. Well, we both fell in love with each other, and she eventually moved out, moved to the US, then she wasn't happy. And then we moved to the UK, and we lived there for a year. We lived in Wales. And then she wanted to go back to the US. And so we went back to the US. But at that point, I was doing music very sporadically. And it was just myself, you know, I'd be invited to play a gig somewhere and I'd written a couple of songs and, but by the time that relationship ended, you know, six years later, I just stopped doing music and I and then in about 1999, I had a car accident and it and I broke, I got a crack in my knuckle and so I couldn't play my guitar without

a lot of pain. And then at some point, I had been working a lot of, you know, working class jobs. I worked in poultry factories, I worked in— just I've done a lot of hard work in my life. And I had a dear friend of mine who recommended that I, she was the clinical supervisor for the alcoholism program at our local university hospital. And she says, you should take this course, it's a year, you can get a job as a counselor, and she knew I'd wanted to be a counselor.

And so, and I did take some counseling classes when I was in London. So anyway, I ended up learning to be a counselor. And because I was bilingual, I was able to get a job pretty quickly. Because in Portland at that time, the Hispanic community was pretty small. In Portland, the larger part of the community was mostly a migrant communities. And those were in more in the rural counties. And so I would work in those communities with people who had been arrested for DUIs or domestic violence. And then so I did that for about four years, I was a counselor. And then I got hired to be a mental health counselor at Washington County Community Corrections. And the person that I was working for, my supervisor, got hired to work at the Violence Against Women's office with Janet Reno. So I ended up taking her position and I became a senior parole and probation officer. And so the irony of it, when I was a young kid, I would talk to the parole and probation officers when they'd come looking for my uncle's— he's not here. You know, I don't know where he is, you know, because I would translate for my family, you know, translate when these cops would come around. And I was used to writing letters to my uncles, when they were in prison. When I was young, I'd write them for my aunts who didn't know how to write as well. So that world was not foreign to me. And I've—so for the next 20 years, I didn't play any music. I worked as a supervisor of a bunch of POs. And we worked with primarily Hispanic folks until they all started to get deported. And then I got in another relationship. And when I was 55 years old, my partner got pregnant. And now, Sunday, my son turns 18. And during his early childhood, I couldn't play guitar, he was always interrupting in his cute little ways. But I always had music around him, I'd have a harmonica and I had a little drum set for him. And I gave him drum lessons. You know, we gave him drum lessons. So that by the time he was 14, yeah, I think 13 or 14— well, around the time when I divorced from my partner, and this was around the time that Trump was running for office. I couldn't handle it, I couldn't handle the fact that this horribly racist man was running for office. And it was, and it just, it just triggered a bunch of stuff for me about the racism I experienced growing up. So I started to look at some of the songs that I'd written back in the day. And I got together different community members and my son played drums on a couple of the songs. And so that's what I did. And since then, I've only written one new song. And I had a mad crush on somebody that didn't go anywhere, but whatever, you know, at least I got to have that feeling again. And I wrote a really I thought, a cool love song. Not, well it's not a lot of song, it's like where the hell are you?

Caro Carty 54:41
Which song is that?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 54:42
It's called "Sick Love." I don't know if you saw it on there. But you know, it's just one of these, you know, things of where somebody got a little freaked out about their feelings and I got a little freaked out about my feelings. And then it was like, no woah, what's going on? And so I wrote a song about it [laughter]—

Caro Carty 55:06
Sounds like a familiar story.

Naomi Littlebear Morena 55:07
Yeah, yeah. And so since then, well, you know, I had that car accident '99. And it took a long time for my hands to recover to play guitar again. And then during the pandemic, I broke my hand. My son and I took an escape to the beach and we were so happy. And one of the things I used to like to do when he was little was wrap him up with a big piece of seaweed. It was long seaweed that have the little bulb at the end. If you wrap a little child up with them, and then pull, like a top— [unclear]. It's really hysterical. But he's, he was so much bigger now. So he didn't spin instead, I fell and my hand fell right on a rock, and it's just like, broke my finger here. So my hand was like a dead fish for months. And I had to like, I mean, seriously, I had to learn how to play again. And but I did, you know, I took a bunch of PT and then that's when I recorded the very last piece, which was "Song to a Dying Star." You know, recognizing that we're still not paying attention to global warming and what it's doing to our planet and what it's doing for our, you know, this utter selfishness of not thinking about the younger generations and children that will never get a chance to know what good clean water tasted like. And so I am, I was pretty politically active. During that period of time, I attended a lot of the BLM demonstrations. I photographed a lot of the things that were going around in our town, wanted to document stuff. And so that's musically, that's what I've been doing up to now at the ripe old age of 72.

Caro Carty 57:34
Wow. Yeah, it's such an incredible life of so many paths. And yeah, what does it feel like to have a song that you wrote decades ago speak to the present? Like, during the Kavanaugh hearings, for instance?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 57:54
Right, well, you know, it's just— spirituality, has been a big part of me and creating music. So that I recognize that the music comes through me. And that the music informs me because sometimes the music can get to these unconscious levels of we're not always aware of what we're observing and absorbing. And as a child who experienced trauma, I was somebody that was always observing. So it was always like, I'm seeing things, I'm seeing things but I'm not verbalizing what's going on because a lot of it, a lot of the crazy stuff, I was pretty young. And I think I just kind of retreated into this place where I, you know, I just I look to the great spirit to

inform me, my ancestors to inform me and I know one song, so they're kind of like visions in a way and I know I've been teased about that a little bit, but I remember when I wrote this one song called "Million Eyed Woman." And it was about how if you know that the garden is perishing, and if we don't take care of the garden, you know, it's not a good thing. And that came when I was in my early 20s, I'd gone to Mexico for the first time with Kristan and a couple of friends. We took a— we caravanned. And Kristan and I were driving a '57 Chevy panel truck. And because the original van that we had, it was a Volkswagen, we were on our way to Mexico, where she knew some friends in Oaxaca. But I had a car accident because I was meditating. We had been meditating by the beach, I got back into the van and I was so chill. I was looking at the driftwood that I just picked. And then the car kind of slid over to the side and I overcorrected and we just kind of tumbled on the freeway. But Kristan, because she had been an auto mechanic and studied auto mechanics. She— long story short, we had the wreckage towed to this place where the student let us sublet her apartment while she was gone on something and Kristan sold all the parts of that van, of the VW, including the engine that she had just rebuilt, and we bought another vehicle for $500. And that was the Chevy. And that was all beautifully tricked out with a bed and stove and little lantern and fridge. It was great. We lived in that for a year.

So anyway, we go down in New Mexico to Mexico. And the women that we stayed at were these two Cuban women. And they were— I thought in my mind taking advantage of the local young women that were there. And so I didn't want to be served by them. I didn't want because that's what they were using them as like servants. And I just like no, I'm gonna let my own people serve me. And so, you know, I had this vision in the fields, you know, I was just kind of lying there. And I'm just having this these thoughts and feelings about the Earth. I feel like— I'm an empath, you know, and so I'm very sensitized to the suffering of the world. And that includes the suffering of the earth, and it comes out I think, in the songs. And so I just always and because I— I saw how people like Buffy Sainte Marie and Joan Baez made some kind of impact into people's consciousness, by the types of songs that they wrote. I didn't intentionally try to do that, but it would just come out. I just had to think about my own life experiences, like price of freedom, you know, I was thinking about my grandparents, you know, and what they had to experience. And sisters take care of sisters. There was all this infighting going on in our community and a lot of like, oh, you guys are too feminists, you guys aren't feminist enough. And it just like— and I just thought we can't have this fighting, you know, life is short. And so it was just— I don't know. I just feel— I feel like it's, it's kind of a blessing, you know, to know that a lot of people— that these messages can still resonate, even though some of the songs were written decades ago.

And I, you know, I still have songs that I would love to be able to release, but as I've mentioned to you, now with my age, you know, I have what's called an essential tremor. And it makes it difficult for me to play the guitar. And just, there's just so much anxiety in the world, you know, and it's just like, I feel it all and it's— I know my, when we recorded our last song, "Song to a

Dying Star", which I dedicated to Greta Thunberg. I, my body, I just experienced tremendous amount of pain in my body afterwards from— because I have stenosis in my neck and my lower back and arthritis all over the place. So I've had to take a break. And I don't know. I do, I don't, I'm not going to say I've given up completely. Ideally, I'd like somebody else to do the heavy lifting and I'll just sing and do the harmonies. But it's been such a huge part of my identity and also the thing that saved my life many times that I'm glad I got to be part of people's lives through through music. And they were able to get something that was of value to them, perhaps in times that were pretty difficult. And that's a blessing, you know, and— but I think now I need some, a little bit of blessings myself, you know, to get through through these years, you know?

Caro Carty 1:05:37
Yeah, yeah, it sounds like it. I mean, just the experience you're describing is so mind blowing to me that your song like, "Can't Kill the Spirit"in particular just had a life of its own, and was impacting so many people without you even knowing. I'm so curious what the experience of that was to know that your song had been traveling around the world, you know, and people thinking it was like anonymous, or like an ancient folk song. I'm sure there's like a beauty but also kind of some heartbreak there.

Naomi Littlebear Morena 1:06:11
Well, you know, I don't feel like— I don't feel it was so much heartbreak. I feel like it's too much for me to even take in. Because I still hear about it. You know, I had mentioned that during the pandemic, I heard from some filmmakers, a team of women filmmakers in France, and they were doing a thing on Greenham. And then most recently, I heard from a woman who's coordinating the music for a program on Greenham, that's out of the BBC. And I just like the opportunity to talk to people about "well, when did you hear that song?" You know, and "what was going on with you? Where did it— " You know, I'm more interested in how it got to these people that are in so many different faraway places, you know, and in fact, I want to go to the UK again. And, I was invited to meet with the music coordinator for the BBC thing. And I'm just at a place where telling me the stories, I want to hear the stories because that makes me feel good. Because I think it's important to feel like your life has some purpose. And I know that some people say, well, you know, that's such a patriarchal thing that you have to have a purpose. But you know what, we need to be giving back to our communities. We just do, you know, and it's better for us. And it's part of, part of the journey is to give back. And if it's raising consciousness, whether it's about rape or violence against women, obviously, we still need it because it's still happening. And I guess the way I saw it, is because, you know, racism was rearing its ugly head.

And this anti-Mexican propaganda being pushed by Trump, this anti-immigrant propaganda. It's like, it rings an alarm bell in my heart. And I feel like I want to go out there. There was a march this week. We couldn't find it. It was a Don't Shoot Portland March. And I'm still very much invested in fighting this war. Because I believe it is a war. I believe it's a war against people of

color and LGBTQ people. I believe that a certain segment of white folk feel very threatened by not being in control. And that's really, it's all about power and control. And that's why it doesn't matter if there are pathological liars on their team because that's how desperate they are to stand their ground. But that just means okay. That's desperation on that side. So what we can do is just gonna just we just got to stay strong and keep telling the truth and keep people invested in knowing that that that our participation does help. It's just that we get these boomerangs? You know, it's like you one step forward, two steps back sometimes. So what I feel is that, yeah, a lot of times people didn't know the origins of the song but I think now people do. And then, and I think I wanted to set the record straight and by going to the UK that time. And then so when people do connect with me, I'll tell them "well, you know, that what you're quoting is just the course, you know, there's more words to that. And the other words have, have some significance too." And so that's always kind of a good thing to be able to share that there's there's other stuff out there. And I think, you know, I don't know how it went to go as far as it did, but it has and it's just meant to be that maybe, maybe that's just that was the trajectory of that particular moment because when we had gone to Olivia Records, and we came back and I was feeling very— well, you know, feminism, the second wave of feminism didn't really address racism very well. And, you know, I came back from that whole meeting, and I just sat at the piano and that's the first thing I did [pause]— it's a lot. And so, I don't know. I had no idea it was going to do what it did. But I had no idea I was gonna have an 18 year old son either. I mean, life, life happens.

But I want to encourage more activism. And songwriters too— I think we talked about this, that we need to bring back song into our movements. And because they have always been there, from the civil rights movement. You know, that's what propelled people to walk and march and then get beat up, you know, is they had these songs that were carrying them through. And we are relatively, we're not as evolved as we think we are in terms of human rights. And this country has such, so much, such a horrible history of mistreating and hiding the history and the stories of not just women, but a people of color and their contributions. And you can see how threatening that is with politicians like DeSantis wanting to attack CRT. Just today he's attacking some AP African American Studies. And that's just they want to silence us. And so, no, our response should be no, don't silence us. And we have to tell ourselves, no, you can't, you can't silence us. Because we're a wave. We're gonna we're just going to keep coming because that's the eventuality. That's the reason that we are able to survive as a species and as a race and as people is because we work with each other in a coordinated effort towards respecting our common humanities. And when we go against that, you know, it's antithetical to survival. And because then people are just focused on what's here now, the money now, the greed now, the fancy car now, the fancy house now, the let me see how many billions like, oh, I have so many billions, I can go to Mars. You know, it's just like, that's insane. So, in a way, we're balancing things out. And I think there's always that pendulum that swings towards balance. Because I think these movements that are rooted in fear and violence and antipathy towards ethical behavior is, you know, thank you Trump, you know, he introduced pathological lying and made it be okay. You

know, so we have to counter that in whatever way we can. We have to counter the mistruths and whether we do it with music, or whether we do it with working with our communities. But we got to do it in a way that we also get a feeling of empowerment while you're doing. So that's that piece.

Caro Carty 1:16:04
Yeah. And I think I'm so grateful that you decided to share your story with this Archive as one way to have our stories told.

Naomi Littlebear Morena 1:16:13
Yeah. I'm grateful for this project for considering that because women of our generation who were part of this second wave of feminism did make some inroads and but, you know, our energies can only go for so long. And we have to keep passing the baton. And hopefully, we can— hopefully, younger generations can learn from our mistakes. And, and that we can continue to be able to support the younger generation to not give up. Because we have to draw— it's not just ourselves, it's we have— our ancestors died and struggled for us to exist at this very moment. So if we think back to all the different people in our lives, and what they went through to continue to be here, that's got to be pretty incredible. And considering that in this country, the history that we've had towards treating minorities, that's a lot of ancestors that had to be very strong, very resilient, they had to be very ingenious to survive. So those are things that we can draw on. And, I do, so I am, I was very eager to be part of this event because I feel like I have something to say. And I had something to say and I want to have representation because you don't see Mexican-American kids grow up to have any kind of influence in our society, you know, we don't look at them. We're still out there being the maids and the drug addicts in the films. And you know, considering that all of Southern California and Texas and Nevada and Colorado, these all belonged to Mexico, you know, this was our land. And yet our influence has been just like squelched. And we're just kept at this very level of, well, we don't want you to leave your menial jobs. That's what we want you to do. And so that's why it's imperative that we present positive role models for young people. And so I do get a little bit, oh, if I hear about an archive, you know, can I talk to you? You know, and I know there was a couple of archival places I contacted and I said, "How do I, how do I get a chance to talk with you?" But I haven't heard back so it's just it's kind of annoying that I have to knock on doors because I feel there's ego just knocking on doors, but you know, I feel like I don't see somebody, I don't see a lot of brown women that can do that. I mean, I've seen a little bit more. You know, I really like Selena Gomez. I think she's adorable and just really smart whip smart. So I'm just, you know, we got to just keep keeping on. And sort of in closing to our our conversation. I just want to thank you Caro for being so open minded and I really enjoyed talking to you about music and about your cultural heritage.

Caro Carty 1:20:02

Aw, I want to say the same and then some to you and I'm so honored to have heard your story and I'm so sorry it's fallen to you to fight to have, you know, your contributions really included and recognized. But I'm so honored to play a part in doing that. Yeah. So thank you so much for your time and energy. Is there anything else you want to share before I stop recording?

Naomi Littlebear Morena 1:20:27
Oh just, I don't know who's gonna be listening to this. So I just hope that y'all go on YouTube! You know, get inspired, make songs, make music. That's, you know, inspire people. That's—that's about all we can do.

Caro Carty 1:20:46
Yeah. Well, I feel so energized and inspired by your example. So thank you for setting such an enlightening path. Thank you Caro. So, if you want to shut off the recording, that's okay. And then I can see