

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 26
Doreen Valiente & Martha Maxwell

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live history storytelling. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm here with Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi, Susan!

SUSAN STONE: We're in Berlin, but sometimes the Dead Ladies Show finds another home far from our shores.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It does. We have a sister show now in New York City, and it's hosted by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper at the KGB Bar Red Room. Molly and her team have recently celebrated their one-year Dead Ladies Show anniversary. We're really pleased -- congratulations!

SUSAN STONE: Yay! Red Room. It just sounds so spooky -- Red Room, Red Room -- doesn't it? In fact, in this episode with help from our New York pals, we're going to get a little spooky ourselves. Now just because we have the word 'dead' in the title of the show doesn't mean we're scary, usually. Although for some, there's nothing more terrifying than the idea of a woman doing whatever she wants, achieving great things, and even changing the world. To get ready for today's recording, I've worn my scary lady skeleton hand hair-clip in glorious rhinestones. And Katy has a timely homage in brooch form.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yeah, so I have made this brooch out of a safety pin and a plastic spider which just lives in my kitchen in honor of Lady Hale, who if you've been following Brexit news, you'll be exhausted by now, but Lady Hale is the very senior judge in the UK who ruled that putting the parliament on hold -- so-called prorogation was illegal -- and they all had to go back to the Houses of Parliament and she did so wearing this beautiful glittering spider brooch, inspiring many memes. It's great.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, it is a very fine thing. And hey, we'll just call her a living legend. Go, Lady Hale! Now to our first Dead Lady; nothing says spooky and challenging to the patriarchy quite like a witch. Katy, please tell us more.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So we're going to learn about Doreen Valiente, who's known as the mother of modern witchcraft. In the UK and beyond, she was

key in the spread of modern day Wicca, which is now a worldwide religion. Doreen had more than a few secrets under her cape. Bringing you a story from New York is Claire Carroll, Claire's a writer and marketer from New York's Hudson Valley, as well as a practicing herbalist and magical realist. And you'll hear a few New York noises in the background of this recording, like sirens, but don't worry, it's not the spirits calling.

CLAIRE CARROLL: So I'm going to be talking about Doreen Valiente, who is the mother of modern witchcraft. A little bit about why I'm talking about Doreen: I do not consider myself a witch, even though my roommate does. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But I do practice herbalism, so herbal medicine. And I'm also really interested in sort of what texts and bodies of knowledge we look to, to ground our faith in, which is something that Doreen is really all about. But before I can talk about Doreen, I want to take it many centuries back, and talk about old English witches.

So we have 1542: England passes the witchcraft act that says it is a crime to be a witch, punishable by death. They start trying people, hanging people, it's not just women, they also try men. This goes on for a couple centuries. Then we get to 1732; they pass a new witchcraft act that says, 'we're enlightened, now we don't believe in witches, superstition isn't real.' It is now a crime to call yourself a witch, not punishable by death, punishable by jail time but still not a great place to be. This law is in effect, all the way until 1951. Okay, so it is repealed on June 22 of that year. So up until 1951, you can't call yourself a witch in England -- it is illegal. And just in case that seems like not that long ago, a lot of former British colonies still have versions of this law in effect. So, South Africa still has a practicing version of this law. And in Canada, it was only repealed in December of 2018. So it's still sort of a pressing issue.

But how do we get Doreen, who was born on January 4 of 1922? How does she get to a place where she becomes a witch when it is illegal to be one for most of her young adult life? So Doreen is born in South London to very conservative parents. This is a big problem for her. They try to send her to convent school. She leaves and never returns. But she does try -- even before she joins a sort of formal faith tradition -- to practice her witchcraft. So at the age of 13, her mom was being bullied at work. And so she cast a curse on the woman who was bullying her that supposedly caused a blackbird to follow the woman around and just chirp at her nonstop. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So Doreen really did feel like even before she gets to be part of this larger tradition, that witchcraft was something that she knew, and as something that she was a part of, these larger forces.

So Doreen grows up, she becomes a secretary as one does. But she also becomes sort of a spy, which is kind of cool, and kind of -- a lot of this information is still uncorroborated. But by 1941, she is working at Bletchley Park, which is where Alan Turing was where they were doing a lot of the code

breaking during World War Two, and she's going back and forth between Bletchley Park and southern Wales presumably to sort of watch port activity and sort of do covert operations there. She does get married. A lot of her friends think this is because her superiors needed her to have a reason to be going to southern Wales all the time. So in 1941, she marries this guy, Joanis Vlachopolous, who is a seaman. And within six months after their marriage, he is lost at sea. (AUDIENCE GASPS) So this is not a very sort of overriding relationship in her life.

But don't worry, she gets married again, in 1944 to Casimiro Valiente, who is a Spanish chef, so like, that's fun. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) And Casimiro and Doreen live in London again, so Doreen has stopped working at Bletchley Park, she started working at a codebreaking outfit in London. She continues to do this for several years until they eventually move to Brighton in southern England. But again, we're in the 40s and witchcraft is still illegal. So how does Doreen get to be a part of this actual tradition?

So we're going to backtrack a little bit again and talk about Gerald Gardner, who is called the father of modern witchcraft. So they kind of go hand in hand. Now Gerald writes this book in 1949, called *High Magic's Aid*, under a pseudonym. It is a novel, because it is illegal in 1949 to call yourself a witch. And in this book, he documents this ancient, pre-Christian English tradition of witchcraft that has survived through secrecy until the modern day. He talks about how he was inducted into this religion in a coven in Hampshire, by a woman named Old Dorothy in 1939. There's a lot of evidence that Old Dorothy maybe didn't exist, and that this was made up.

However, Doreen really did believe that Old Dorothy was real. So Gerald, after publishing this book, starts up a coven of his own in secret called the Bricket Wood coven. And he moves out to the Isle of Man. Here you can see a picture of him at this museum that he is sort of working at. Before 1951, this is the Folklore Museum. After 1951, this is the Witchcraft Museum. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) It's pretty much the same thing the whole time. And you'll see again and again that folklore is used as a mask to cover witchcraft when it's convenient to do so. Now, Doreen sees an article about the Witchcraft Museum in 1951. They start corresponding, she writes Gerald, they go back and forth. She meets him several times.

In 1953 on Midsummer's Eve, she is inducted into Gerald's coven, and she takes on the Wiccan name of Ameth. Now, to the right you can see a picture of Dafo, who is the High Priestess of the Bricket Wood coven, and I really just like her bird, honestly. Um, and so Dafo and Gerald are the people running this coven at the time that Doreen joins. And I want to take a brief aside to just talk about what a Wiccan coven looks like, to help explain this. So most of this is run by the energy between a high priest and a high priestess, who are capturing the energy of a God and the Goddess figure. So this is a fertility

religion. It is all about sort of these governing forces, creating the energy of the world. So you'll have a lot of iconography, you'll have a lot of food and wine, and also all the rituals are conducted in the nude, or skyclad. This is something that Doreen didn't mind at all. She says, "I've never felt any objection to working in the nude. On the contrary, it was fun to be free and to dance out the circle in freedom."

The first few years, Doreen is just a part of this coven. By 1955, she becomes the High Priestess, so she takes over from Dafo, and starts leading with Gerald. And this is a pretty good time for her. A lot of the texts that Gerald made — so in his *High Magic's Aid*, the book from 1949, he publishes a book of spells as a part of that. It's called the *Book of Shadows*. And all of the *Book of Shadows* was pretty much pulled from published sources, not the ancient material he claimed that it was a part of. There was a lot of Masonic ritual. There was a lot of the work of Alistair Crowley, who is this early 20th century sort of black magic magician/sex magician, which had a lot of negative connotations at the time. And this was something that Doreen really took offense to. She's like, "Crowley is going to give us a bad name. We can't just pull direct quotes from his stuff and put it in our *Book of Shadows*. We should fix something about this." And so Gerald famously takes a copy of the book and throws at her and says, "All right, you do better." So she does.

She rewrites the entire *Book of Shadows*. Most of it is very close to the original. So I don't know how much you can read this. But here on the left is sort of excerpts from Gerald's *Charge of the Goddess*, which is sort of the most famous theological text in Wicca, it's still used today. And then on the right, we see Doreen's copy, which is the one that people today say. But what's interesting to me is that Gerald's has a lot of mix of archaic and modern language, whereas Doreen's is a lot more about the poetry of it. And also Doreen's is much more about relationships. So Gerald, really again and again stresses the ecstasy of the body, the ecstasy of the spirit, as a very personal matter. Whereas Doreen talks about it as something that is born from the relationship with the world and the other people in your coven, which is something that I'm like — that's pretty cool. So Doreen rewrites the whole book of spells for Wicca, which is a great time, but it doesn't last. So, Gerald throughout this time, you can see in this picture on the left, he's sitting in the circle with a ritual *athame*, which is a sword and an icon. He publishes a lot of interviews, he publishes these pictures. He is a very public figure, and Doreen and a lot of other witches think this is a terrible thing. They're like, 'We are still a very small group. This is only recently legal, there's a lot of talk about re-instituting the Witchcraft Act,' so they think this is really dangerous.

So Doreen splits out from the Bricket Wood coven, takes another guy from the group called Ned Grove, and he becomes her high priest in her own coven, and she sends Gerald this list of proposed rules for the Craft. So these are really just sort of like, 'don't talk about Fight Club, keep everything

secret.' It's not trying to be anything like 'these are the way that this religion needs to operate on a theological level.' It's really just sort of business matters. But it is key that they say, 'no member of the Craft will give any information or interview unless other people say it's okay.' And Gerald takes a really long time to reply, takes about six months. And then he comes back and says, 'you know, thanks for the rules, but we don't need them. Turns out there were ancient Wiccan rules that I forgot to mention until right now when it was convenient for me to do so.' (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

He sends back the first Wiccan laws, which again are mixing this old and new style of language, and they sort of codify this misogyny that Gardener had practiced throughout his whole time leading the coven. So they say that the High Priest is more strong and more powerful than the High Priestess, High Priestess needs to retire when she becomes a little bit too old. So a lot of really fun there, and I do — I think that this is actually part of the reason why Doreen rose so quickly in Gerald's coven, and replaced Dafo, because Dafo was already very established, but much older than her. So Doreen did benefit from some of this ideology, but at the same time, she was very against it. And she and Gerald really did not talk for the rest of his life after this happened.

However, even in old age, Doreen really did support Gerald and think that he had good intentions, even if he didn't manifest them in the right way. So she gave a speech to the Pagan Federation in 1997, in which she said, "People today have no conception of how uptight and repressive society was back in the 1950s when Old Gerald first opened up the subject of Witchcraft as a surviving old religion. You could not go into a shop then and buy a pack of tarot cards or a book on the occult without getting curious looks, and usually a denial that they stocked any such things." So to Doreen, she really did feel that Gerald helped Wicca survive and helped bring Wicca into the modern day. But, after this happens, Doreen is like, I can do this on my own, It's okay. She has her own coven with Ned. And she starts publishing books, which is a little strange considering she was just breeding Gerald for being too public. So after her mother dies in 1962, she publishes her first book, which is *Where Witchcraft Lives*. And this book is important because it really is just a history book. It's again, sort of couching Wicca in folklore, and she says, "Oh, these are the folklore traditions of this neighborhood that I'm living in right now."

After Casimiro dies in 1972, she started publishing a lot more books, and these are much more overtly about witchcraft as a modern religion and witchcraft as modern faith. They all sort of started off very small, they don't have a huge publishing run, as would be imagined. But they're still in print today. And as the cult and religion grows, they become really seminal text and they become really She writes very excessively in a way that makes people sort of be like 'I can be a part of witchcraft too,' which is something that it was lacking. Previously, in 1971, she does take part in a documentary

for the BBC called *The Power of the Witch*, in which she participates in a ritual.

DOREEN VALIENTE IN TAPE CLIP: Diana of the rounded moon, the queen of all enchantments here, the wind is crying through the trees, and we invoke thee to appear!

BBC REPORTER IN FILM CLIP: In fact, no such manifestations did appear.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

CLAIRE CARROLL: So, this is really strange to me. Because, right — right after she's berating Gerald — granted, okay, it's like, 20 years after she's berating him — for doing too much publicity, she goes on this documentary. She gives a lot of interviews saying, 'witchcraft is not something you should take lightly,' like you really do need to ground it in earnest effort. And the only reason I can come up with why she has this change of heart is both because the conservative forces in her life — Casimiro and her mother — both pass away, so she no longer has to sort of keep herself closed off in this way. But also because Wicca is picking up pretty seriously at this point. So Doreen starts the Pagan Front in 1971, which then becomes the Pagan Federation International, which is a group that sort of is trying to purport Pagan rites and Neo-Pagan rites in England and abroad. She becomes really active in trying to support religious freedom, because even through the 90s in England, there was no protection for religious identity. So she talks to a lot of MPs about this and tries to say, hey, Witchcraft is a religion too, accept us. She ends up becoming friends with the Queen Mother, which is a strange thing. There's an incident where the Queen Mother flies her up to Balmoral to like, warn her about them trying to reintroduce the Witchcraft Act, and it's very dramatic.

But this is sort of part of where she becomes very politically active and trying to support Pagan rights. This gets a little messy, because she joins the National Front and the Northern League around the same time, which are far right political organizations. Which again, doesn't make a ton of sense for Doreen, because she has been pro choice, pro women's rights, pro LGBTQ rights for her whole life. This is something that she has supported pretty much the whole time. So joining this group is weird for her. A lot of historians and her friends think that maybe she was still working as a spy. And that this was part of her covert mission, was to infiltrate this group. There's, again, no evidence to support that but maybe? And she's only in the group — one of them she's in for a year, one of them, she's in for a year and a half. So it is a very strange moment for her, but a lot of the thought was that these groups were in their nascency, and that she thought that, hey, I have this pre-Christian, Celtic traditional religion, maybe we can get some rights for that as part of this nationalist ideal. But she does leave the group pretty quickly.

And through the 70s, 80s, and 90s, she's writing, she's speaking, she's trying to sort of advocate for Pagan rights again through the rest of her life. But she does pass away in 1999 of pancreatic cancer. She does get a New York Times obituary, which is a fun thing, and they call her "an advocate for positive witchcraft." And here's a picture of her actual coffin. She had a full Pagan funeral, which — here is a poem that was read, she wrote it originally for another witch who passed away. And something that I really liked from it is the idea that she says, "Farewell from this world, but not from the circle." So it's sort of this idea that the community of witches that you have created will still be here and will still support you, even after your passing. And her legacy is pretty strong. She was the first witch in England to get a blue plaque, sort of designating historical figures. She got that in 2013, two years before Gerald got his, so stick it, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) and this is also the first blue plaque that was ever put on public housing homes, which is really interesting because that's where Doreen lived for the end of her life.

And also I just wanted to touch on a little bit more of Doreen's legacy, because there's this great quote from Ashley Mortimer, who's the director of the Center for Pagan Studies, which Doreen started, saying, "It was Doreen who gave the craft its robust religious litany. Something that was an oral tradition, she wrote it down and enabled it to spread, which it did." Paganism and Wicca and witchcraft are now the seventh biggest religious faith group in Britain. So she sort of was the one that enabled this to grow. And the reason that I really like Doreen still, is that for her, this was all about love. And this was all about faith. And this was all about connecting with nature. So she felt that this was her access point into larger forces, and even though the religion started with Gerald being really strict about, "Oh, we can only have heterosexual covens. And, oh, there are these really strict rules," she really advocated for a spreading and a widening of that tradition to what it is today. Thank you. (AUDIENCE APPLAUDS)

SUSAN STONE: Claire Carroll on Doreen Valiente from show number four in New York. I have to say that for me, the scariest thing about Doreen is her brief membership in the National Front and the Northern League. I did a little research to make sure that she fits within our "no fascists" edict, and I think she's okay. Except for that blip, which Claire mentioned. And, and I've read a lot of articles where people are kind of puzzling over it and they think, yeah, it was -- it was a strange, it was a strange circumstance. So, and other than that, she looks like my granny.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That's reassuring, I hope, yeah. Onto our next spooky Dead Lady, this is certainly a first for the show. We've had writers talking about Dead Lady writers, and translators talking about Dead Lady translators. But what we've never had is a taxidermist talking about a Dead Lady taxidermist.

SUSAN STONE: Indeed, Divya Anantharaman is not any old taxidermist either. She is an award-winning taxidermist based in New York City. Divya has a passion for wildlife conservation and works with museums, galleries, celebrities, and more -- anybody who loves dead stuffed animals. Here she is to tell us all about American taxidermy pioneer and naturalist Martha Maxwell.

DIVYA ANANTHARAMAN: Many times when I say I work as a taxidermist, the first question most people ask me is, what it's like to be a woman in this male-dominated field. And it's such a weird and loaded question, especially in 2019. And it always makes me think of Martha Maxwell, because she was historically a badass even by today's standards. And you know, a lot of times people don't think of historic taxidermists being woman, but she was, and she was there, she existed. She was born in 1831 as Martha Ann Dartt, and to get an idea of the time, this was a few months before Nat Turner's infamous slave rebellion. So the world she came into, a lot like now, was pretty grim. But her escape was on long walks watching woodland creatures in her hometown of Tioga County, Pennsylvania. And learning to live off the land from her grandma, who was also probably real badass, but we don't know much about her. She grew to love nothing more than being at one with the great outdoors. She was relentlessly curious about nature and science.

She went to Oberlin, was in one of the first graduating classes there. But money ran out after a year because school was so expensive. She came back home to make a living teaching, doing what was seen as good and responsible and respectable woman's work. During that time, she met a guy named James Maxwell, who hired her to chaperone his two oldest kids in college. In exchange for chaperoning them, which is making sure they go to school, making sure they do their homework, um, even though they're in college she had to -- (LAUGHS) she had to make sure they did their homework.

In exchange, he covered her living expenses. So in 1854, they married and even though James was 20 years older than Martha, and had six kids from previous relationships, you know, she was still with him. She wanted to go to school, learn about history, language, science. And here was the rare guy that wasn't only okay with it, he even helped out a little and encouraged her. They did later have a child out of love named Mabel. Another thing they were both bonded over, which a lot of the progressive people of that time kind of were, was the temperance movement. Clearly here today, we're all enjoying our cocktails and you know, I personally do not prescribe to not-drinking, but back then a lot of the morals of the temperance movement overlapped with women's suffrage and abolitionism. And so, it appealed to Martha.

And I share this because the story about temperance that relates to Martha shows that she wasn't afraid to go in and go really hard for something she

wanted. Less than two months after her first temperance meetup, she and 50 other women raided a local bar and emptied barrels upon barrels of sweet delicious booze in the streets. She was arrested but she talked her way out of it and was freed the next day. After James's business failed due to the economic crash, they agreed to try their luck at the 1860 gold rush in Colorado. They left Mabel, their daughter, with her parents and they moved to Colorado where James took on mining. He wanted Martha to stay behind with Mabel, but she wanted adventure out West, and took on jobs as a seamstress, baking pies, and running a boarding house. Good old woman's work. Their home was destroyed by a fire in 1861. But Martha again, even though she was doing women's work, she controlled her own money and had a Plan B. Houses burned down all the time in Gold Country, and she had already bought a little log cabin in Denver. James would try farming in the Plains and Martha would work at another boarding house.

But on moving day, she found a claim jumper squatting in the cabin. And he was surrounded by what she called "very beautifully preserved animals." But as beautiful as they were, this was the house that she had bought with her money. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) And so she was really unhappy that this guy was there. Some people say that she was holding him at gunpoint to get the house back. Some people say she took him to court, but I think it probably went something like this. Teach me...(AUDIENCE LAUGHS AT SLIDE) For the podcast, this is a clip from the beautiful Rihanna video Bitch Better have my Money but with 'taxidermy' in the caption instead of 'money.' (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So I think she said, "Teach me how to do taxidermy or you'll never see your stuff again." I think she said that she was gonna empty him out like that barrel of whiskey back home. And either way he agreed, he got out of there, but of course not before teaching her what he knew. She practiced a lot of taxidermy after this point.

But word came from Wisconsin that Martha's mother was too sick to care for Mabel, the daughter that she left behind. Martha at this point was overworked and really exhausted, between the -- you know, day job of her boarding house between practicing taxidermy and of course dealing with all of James's failed businesses. So she went home to Wisconsin to get her daughter, spent a few months recovering her own health and sanity and taking more taxidermy lessons. In 1868, she and Mabel returned to Colorado, the decision was based more on wildlife than wild love. James did hire local teens to help collect specimens for Martha, but even 1800s teens were assholes. So she so she bought her own gun, and began to practice. And everyone was teasing her, including James until she surpassed them all in marksmanship.

She took trips into the Rockies to collect and observe everything. And though Martha was out hunting animals for the purpose of preserving them, we have to remember that this is a time before the internet, before photos, and before the widespread communication that we have today. So collection expeditions

were really important, you know, in spreading the understanding of animals, and important to their study. And a lot of the specimens are even used today, because they actually contain evidence of the carbon, soot, and the habitats of the time. So, you know, there's sort of a balance not to go killing things willy nilly, but also, you know, doing it mindfully. And Martha was a big advocate for conservation too. And these trips, also, unlike today, they weren't very fancy Instagram-able trips, like our lady over here who's very triumphant with her amazing gear and just a flannel shirt and you know, it's gonna be really cold. You need to check it. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Her socks aren't even thick enough. I don't know. This wasn't a good trip.

So Martha -- and you can see Martha here and her really thick, amazing, I mean, so really awesome outfit, but, but it's very practical, too. You can see she's got lots of layers on. And that's because it was not a fancy trip. These were long horseback rides up and down steep and slippery trails, really bad weather, meager rations. You know, you had to hunt what you ate, and you definitely couldn't eat the specimens. You know, it was just not -- just, just not the fun camping trips that we are all probably used to. Her family hated it. But Martha didn't care. She was too focused on science, loved nature, even if it wasn't kind to her. Only seven years later, Martha had over 100 specimens large and small, ranging from hummingbirds to eagles, chipmunks to foxes. The Colorado Agricultural Society asked her to display her work, and everyone went nuts.

So instead of animals -- at this time, instead of animals sitting on a plaque, or nailed to rods are looking really unnatural, this was the first time they had seen animals preserved and shown in a habitat. It gave the illusion that the animals were still alive, and presented them in a context really valuable to art and science. All that and all she got for this was \$50 and a diploma. Shaw's Garden in St. Louis offered her \$600 to buy all of her specimens. But even counting for inflation, this barely covered the labor and dedication. It's a shockingly shitty deal, but it was hard cash and her family needed it badly. So she took the deal, bought a new place in Boulder Creek, and began another collection. In this new place, she ignored food, dress, and family and anything that wasn't her woman's work. Aside from taxidermy, she amassed a huge collection of insects, fossils, bones, horns, and antlers, and of course, guns and ammo.

She opened the Rocky Mountain Museum in 1874, to display all these specimens for education and entertainment, in hopes she could make money to send her daughter to college and get the family out of the red. Despite all the press, it wasn't profitable, but she refused to give up. She contacted museums back East collecting animals like the black-footed ferret, which had been described by Audubon. But hers was the first specimen that anyone had actually seen. The Maxwell Owl was named in her honor by an ornithologist at the Smithsonian, since she collected it and sent the specimen

there. She had never seen it before, was curious, sends it over after preserving it. And that made her one of their regular science correspondents.

And again, unlike that stiff and unnatural taxidermy of the time, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) so this is what we're working with back then. Okay (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) -- so this is -- for those listening. This is the Lion of Gripsholm, which is, you know, was a little bit earlier than Martha Maxwell, but it's a very unnatural-looking lion. Know the person who made this had never seen a lion before, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) except for probably in drawings. And, you know, didn't put the amount of finesse that Martha Maxwell did, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) in her way of preserving animals with accuracy in their anatomy, paying respect to their natural beauty, and adding her own artistry as well. You see, taxidermy was, and still is, a very labor intensive process. The only thing original to the animal in taxidermy is the skin. Everything else is sculpted or fabricated. So after specimens are collected, the skin is carefully removed, keeping all the fur, feathers, and scales intact, the skin is cleaned, thinned and preserved to prevent decomposition. Then an anatomically accurate form is sculpted over which the skin is mounted, with glass eyes, replica horns, claws, and any other important touches based on the individual animal and the viewer. As late as 1873, the leading taxidermy schools in the East were still stuffing animal skins with straw.

But even back in the 1850s and 60s, so decades before, Martha was using welded iron frames and recreating detailed musculature with molded fabric and clay. The skins were sewn over this instead of being stuffed like pillows, and with all of that detail, along with her habitat, her work was totally unlike anything of the time. It's said to have influenced later taxidermists, like Carl Akeley. And this guy here from the AMNH. Word spread East about her incredible work, and in 1876, she was asked to bring her collection of over 1000 animals to the centennial exhibition in Philadelphia. She designed an elaborate display with mammals, birds, and reptiles all depicted in their natural Rocky Mountain habitat. She built a cave, had running water features, and even had a few live prairie dogs there just for fun. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

The visitors were amazed at the work. I mean, look at this. It's incredible, even by today's standards. Where else could you see a cougar leaping to kill a stag, a doe nuzzling her fawn, or a fox just staring at you from behind some bushes. They were also amazed that Martha. Under five feet tall, she had done it all herself. And it was taboo for women to even speak in public at the time, but she used this rare opportunity to make a statement, giving her exhibit the title, "Woman's Work." (AUDIENCE CHEERS AND CLAPS) Yes, Martha! She said, "My life is one of physical work and effort to prove the words spoken by more gifted women. The world demands proof of women's capacities. Without it, words are useless." She stressed the scientific value of her work, but the public still bombarded her with questions like, "How does a woman do it? Does she kill them all herself? Does she live in that cave? What

did she wear to hunt them?" Which is a question I have for her, too. But over 100 years later a lot of these questions resonate with me, because I get asked the same fucking things. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

And I think she would think it's pretty old. I do like all of her cool skirts though, and I think it is important to know what she wore to hunt them because we don't have skirts with pockets today, and I know she had pockets for like the dead squirrels and knives and all of that other stuff. And sadly, to answer the other question, she did live in that cave in the exhibit. (LAUGHS) I'd like to think that it's because she was eccentric and amazing, but it's because she was totally estranged from James. And trust me, I know it takes one type of partner to say you can, you know, you can go to school, but it's a whole other kind of person that can say you can keep dead stuff in the freezer. (LAUGHS)

It just wasn't working out with them. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) And as revolutionary as the Centennial was for giving her a platform to speak and show her work, they weren't revolutionary enough to actually pay her. People traveled internationally -- when it was a big deal to do it at the time -- they traveled internationally to see her work. And the fair's official photo firm couldn't even keep up with the demand for images of Martha and her work. But she wasn't getting her due. She was getting no profit off of those images. So she stole some bootleg copies, sold them to make some money, but the officials found out and forced her to stop. She had fame and national recognition, but exposure doesn't pay the bills. After the Centennial she moved to the Rockaways, you know, right here in New York City, hoping to combine all of her skills and open a Rocky Mountain-themed resort/museum/bathhouse, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) which I would definitely go to.

But before much progress was made, she lost the battle with ovarian cancer, and died at only 50 years old. Her sister Mary hired a guy in upstate New York to care for and exhibit the collection. He showed it a few times, but he got sick of maintaining it, and stuck it in a barn. So taxidermy is an organic matter, you know, it's all that skin sewn over that form. So, it all began to decay from exposure to the elements, and he refused to sell anything back to her. So Mary, being from Martha's very smart and sassy stock, waited until the guy died in 1920, and stole it all back. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) They were donated to the University of Colorado, but unfortunately it was too late. Nothing was worth restoring. This picture here is one of the few surviving specimens. As tragic of an end that Martha met. I'd like us all to remember her women's work, that it created the illusion of immortality, driven by insatiable curiosity and wonder. And I'll leave you with this quote from her: "All must die sometime. I only shorten the period of consciousness, that I may give their form perpetual memory."

(AUDIENCE CHEERS AND CLAPS)

SUSAN STONE: Divya Anantharaman on Martha Maxwell. You can find out more about Divya's work at gothamtaxidermy.com, and you can see photos of Martha Maxwell's 'women's work,' as well as some hilarious ones of bad taxidermy, including the Lion of Gripsholm Divya mentioned, which looks really like a cartoon made real -- you have to see this. And those we're going to put on our Instagram @deadladiesshow and on our website, where you'll also be able to check out some great pics of Doreen Valiente with the tools of her trade, and all of that is at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The talks in this episode of the podcast come from the New York Dead Ladies Show, which is hosted and curated by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper with support from Nicholas Kemper and Christopher Neil, as well as Lori Schwartz, general manager of the KGB Bar Red Room, where the next show will be held on November the 6th. In other Dead Ladies Show news, we can tell you more about another exciting sister project, the Belgian series coming up. The shows are going to be on December the 4th in Brussels, December the 5th in Ghent, and December the 14th in Ostend all in Flemish, so especially for Belgians. And they're doing three different versions of the same show, which will feature Annie Londonderry, who was the first woman to cycle around the world in 1894, the New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield, and the Berber warrior Queen Dihya from the seventh century. Plus, the 20th century composer Cathy Berberian, who will be presented with a special vocal and piano performance. We're really pleased and excited.

SUSAN STONE: That is lovely. Yes, if you are in Belgium or nearby, please come out and support these shows. You can also support us if you like. We have a Patreon that's allowing us to transcribe the show which brings it to more people. Thank you to our Patreon supporters out there, including LA Smith, you are the best! Yay! Our jaunty theme song is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me. Thanks to all of you for joining us. I'm Susan Stone.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS ON TAPE READING CREDIT: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senat.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

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