

Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 56

Mae West

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

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women – both overlooked and iconic – who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage – here in Berlin and beyond... and then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I am joined across the continents by Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens. Hello there!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hello, Susan. I'm on the West Coast!

SUSAN STONE: Oh, how fabulous. And just a few months ago, though, you were in New York with our sister show DLS NYC, right?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I know, I'm a little bicoastal sometimes. I was lucky enough to be in town when they returned to their live show. In New York, the show is curated and hosted by our friend Molly O'Laughlin Kemper, and held – very excitingly – at the KGB Bar's Red Room on the Lower East Side. It's very exciting to me, specifically, and to the Dead Ladies Show in general because it used to be the headquarters of legendary anarchist Emma Goldman –

SUSAN STONE: Woo-hoo!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: – whom I talked about many moons ago on this very pod. At this particular show in June in New York, I presented blues legend Memphis Minnie (which you can hear in a previous episode), and there were several other delightful talks.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, and we will be hearing one of them this episode! Our featured lady of the half-hour is none other than the legendary Mae West. And the very week we're releasing this episode, it's her birthday! She would have been 129 years old, we think?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And she would be cracking wise still, I think, even in the grave she's still cracking wise.

SUSAN STONE: She would! And she would be lying about her age, and she would be wearing amazing corsets and making everyone laugh and looking fabulous. I mean you can kinda – I wouldn't call her the *first* sex symbol, but she's definitely the iconic sex

symbol.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And maybe the first *meta* sex symbol? Like, she was very self-aware, and it was the performance of a sex symbol, right? That's, I think, the joy of watching her play with being a sex symbol.

SUSAN STONE: I mean, even if you don't know who she is or haven't seen her, you have definitely seen someone who was inspired by or influenced by Mae West. And even just that very stereotypical person making an hourglass shape with their hands to describe a woman, I'm afraid that would Mae West in a nutshell – in a bombshell!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Oh! Exactly. Any Warner Bros. cartoon version of a woman is basically Mae West. Any drag queen, you gotta start with Mae West.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, you certainly do. Well, we don't want to tell you too much in advance of our talk so Florian, please would you introduce our presenter?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Very gladly. J.R. Pepper is a Brooklyn born-and-raised artist, lecturer, researcher, and self described 'professional eccentric'. She has collaborated with a variety of museums and galleries and currently works at the gorgeous Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn – when you're in the neighborhood, do go and visit the Suffragists there!

SUSAN STONE: Tell them we said "Hi."

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. And at the Burns Archive of Photography. Here she is from New York's KGB Bar Red Room, to give us the lowdown on Mae West:

J. R. PEPPER: My name is J.R. Pepper and the lovely Dead Lady (that sounds weird) that I'm presenting tonight is Miss Mae West.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She's known for her set of double Bs, for brazen and bawdy; her double Cs for curvy and crass; and of course her double Ds being dynamic and daring. But let's not forget, she was also famous for one big F word: fierce as fuck.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Woo!

J. R. PEPPER: Mae West was born in Bushwick Brooklyn to "Battling Jack" West and Tillie Delker. She was born on August 17 of 1893. Or 1894, or 1900. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] We're not sure, because apparently the record keeping wasn't great, and

Mae used this very much to her advantage over the course of her career to make herself seem younger.

Mae's mother Tillie was a corset designer (surprising no one) and she had a daughter originally that she lost at a very young age. And as a result, she doted on Mae constantly and pushed her toward the spotlight – although it seems Mae didn't need much pushing. Her father by contrast, Battling Jack, was known essentially as a prize fighter at the early age of 11 years old. He was a bare boxer known for being a tough guy, in addition to essentially setting up his own kind of “secret police” – which is essentially just being a gangster...sure.

Both of these fit very well, and between being a corset designer and her father being so rough and grumble – basically would influence her throughout her life. One of the main influences though, as you can imagine, is her allure towards large, sweaty, muscly men, because her father would take her to the gym to watch the boxers practice. And this is a theme we will see again and again with her.

She described it as [READS IN A LUSTY, OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT]: "When I was a little girl I would sit on the floor and watch all the beautiful men and their magnificent muscles rippling, and their foreheads dripping with sweat. Mmm, and I felt I learned a lot about men as a little girl just sitting on the floor."

But more than anything she loved showbiz. She would mention later that she “danced [her] way across the Brooklyn Bridge when most girls [her] age were playing with dolls.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] West's mother encouraged this, in fact she adored it. West said in an interview with *News of the World* that she started her stage life as early as five, and that she convinced her parents that it would be the right thing to do to let her stay up late enough to watch the shows with them.

Tillie took her to so many shows that also included the *Ziegfeld Follies*, and would dress her daughter up like one of the first stage moms. Tillie had even placed her in a variety of different talent shows, and by the age of five, she had started winning competitions.

Her fierceness started at a very early age. For example, when she was seven years old, she performed at the Royal Theater in Brooklyn on Fulton Street (probably a condo

now), and her mother dressed her in a pink and green satin dress with a white lace picture hat. And when the orchestra struck up, she hadn't forgotten her lines, but she refused to move. She had been promised a spotlight, and there was none to be had. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So she stopped the performance and stamped her foot on the ground until the light followed her to the stage. At five. She stamped her foot again and the spotlight moved across the stage right onto her and it caught her, as she describes, "in the act of demanding [her] light." She got the loudest applause of the night.

[READS IN SULTY OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT] "The rest of America could ask for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but I'd gladly take the spotlight."

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] She began her career around 5 to 8 years old, took a bit of a break being a teenager (because why wouldn't you?). And she would continue to perform on the vaudeville circuit until 1911, when she got the call from Broadway by none other than Al Jolson. And she would appear in a show titled *A la Broadway*.

[SHOWS SLIDE] It seemed that the men, though, were very focused on Mae and a reviewer for the *New York Times* wrote [READS IN AN OLD-FASHIONED BROADCASTER VOICE]: "A girl named Mae West, hitherto unknown, pleased by her grotesquery and snappy way of singing and dancing." With reviews like that, she seems to have wiggled her way into the heart of a performer and casting directors and she dazzled with her performances of a new dance called the Shimmy.

[SHOWS SLIDE] And I have this one up here. Actually she was a model for the music for the Shimmy, so that's actually her on the sheet music. It's basically a dance where you keep your body in one place and [SPEAKS IN SULTRY, OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT] wiggle your shoulders from side to side to show the men what you got.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

After a brief stint at the New Amsterdam Theater, she was cast in a two-part cabaret at the Folies-Bergere. And she was very, very unhappy with the lyrics, but she would rehearse them as is, then get on the stage and do something completely else. Mae was often accused of being obscene, profane, and even coarse. In one incident, she was told to tone down her performance on the basis of "audience complaints." She said there was nothing wrong with her performance and that she would be happy to perform it in private for the producer. Using the same words and muted mannerisms (I

doubt that), she performed the same show as the night before but she decided to change it so that it was lily white. She said, "If you don't like my peaches, why do you shake my tree?" [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

After proving her point, she would go back to the stage and be bawdy and wiggly as she had been in the previous performances, and she received – once again – the fierce applause that she wanted.

She was invited later to perform *Sometime* by Arthur Hammerstein, as a wise-cracking showgirl (imagine that!) for over 283 performances, and was described as "a beautiful ball of fire who performed as a speciality dancer. And she was a tasty tornado." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] Little did people know that in addition to her buxom and bawdy personality, she was also a writer. Mae West wrote a play and called it *Sex*. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

The comedy-drama performed on April 26 of 1926, at Daly's 63rd Street Theater here in none other than New York City. It received many scathing reviews from a variety of critics because of the play's [SPEAKS IN SARCASTIC, SCANDALIZED TONE] *moral implications*, because the play was largely about sex workers and pimps.

The basic storyline is this: Mae's character, Margy LaMont is a sharp-witted sex worker who struggles to find a better life during the 1920s. She is torn between two men: one is rich, who has good intentions, but who basically means ownership to her; or another man who loves her and will take her as she is.

The play was slammed by critics and she was accused of corrupting the youth and "morals," however the public frankly didn't care. And it played to full houses nearly every night. *Sex*, it seems, was the only play on Broadway that season to stay open through the summer and into the following year. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] "I became a writer by accident," she said.

There were rumors that the play had been banned from being advertised in the newspapers, but it turns out that this was false and this was once again one of those things that Mae kind of exaggerated a little bit. However she did understand that sex, in fact, sells. And so does controversy. When advertising for the play, some newspapers

wouldn't even print the word "Sex" and just put it as "that play by Mae West."
[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] If anything struck up their interest more, especially the boys in the Navy, Mae West sashaying and shimmying across the stage in this play definitely won their hearts.

[SHOWS SLIDE] But as a result of her writing, Mae West went to prison. There were 375 performances before the New York Police Department raided the show. She was charged with obscenity after thousands of people had watched the play, including some of the police department, and their wives, and the judges, and seven members of the district attorney.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She attended court at what is now the Jefferson Market Library. And she was sentenced to 10 days in a workhouse on Roosevelt Island and fined a whopping \$500. The resulting publicity however, it turned out, was worth its weight in gold. She requested to take a limo to jail [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], she wore her own silk underwear and had dinner with the warden. She was surprisingly given three days off her sentence for – oddly enough – good behavior. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But when asked about her experience, she said [READS IN OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT]: "It wasn't so bad. The inmates were very interesting. I'll have enough for 10 shows, but I really didn't think too much of the bed."

[SHOWS SLIDE] She continued to write and came out with another play. Oddly enough, that also got her in jail – or at least, kind of yelled at by the authorities? And it was called *Drag*.

West was a woman writing about sex and sexuality and, in this case, writing about gay male sexuality. It was subtitled, "A Homosexual Comedy in Three Acts" and written under the pseudonym Jane Mast, and it was about the cost of living a secret life. The hero is a closeted gay socialite, who comes "from one of the finest families" and is trapped in a loveless marriage. His father is homophobic, and his father-in-law is a therapist who specialises in what would be the equivalent of gay conversion therapy. And the play culminates in an elaborate drag ball. It was banned after ten shows.

West's casting, however, was most controversial, in that she went to the West Village and cast gay men to perform in the show. Likewise in the manner of which she auditioned them in the gay bars in Greenwich Village. In her autobiography, she claims

to have helped a lot of them along by casting them at a time when producers wouldn't cast gay men. When it opened in Connecticut, it was a success with audiences but criticized as "an inexpressibly brutal and vulgar attempt to capitalize on a dirty matter for profit." It remained in New York for ten shows and was shut down because it "[struck] at the heart of decency."

Her take was that audiences were too childlike to face grownups problems like the homosexuals that the community had. It was too risqué for mainstream, so she rewrote it, tweaked it a little bit, and called it instead – because this name is better! – *The Pleasure Man*. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] And in doing so, the lead character was no longer a gay man but, in fact, a gay man. So she thought maybe this would kind of convert it a little bit and they'd stop giving her so much shit about it.

However, it did not prevent another shutdown. It had its Broadway debut in October of 1928, and as the curtain fell, the entire cast was arrested. Once more the police flooded the theater, and the drag queen performing managed to squeeze in a speech about police oppression and then, uh, the arrests started up again. As the cast were dragged away, the police were met with a wave of 'boos' (but no 'boos' tonight!) – and a crowd formed outside. However, once again, Mae's controversy had landed her a gold mine.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She went on to pursue another project which would determine the course of her entire career: Little *Diamond Lil*. The arrest and court cases did the exact opposite of what anybody hoped it would do, and she created the character of Diamond Lil in 1928. Which would effectively solidify the character of Mae West.

It's about a racy woman in the 1890s – she seems to have a theme; she likes herself quite a bit – was her first major Broadway success, and was the basis for her character *Lady Lou* in her film in 1933 entitled *She Done Him Wrong*.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Her controversial plays and her time in prison got her the attention of none other than Hollywood, and she would star in her first film called *Night After Night* at the ripe-old age of 38 in 1931. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Paramount Pictures offered her a contract at \$5,000 a week (over \$80,000 by today's standards). But they also let her rewrite her lines. In fact, in *Night After Night*, it sets the tone for her persona when she talks to a hatcheck girl.

[PLAYS CLIP FROM THE FILM *NIGHT AFTER NIGHT*]

MAUDIE: Aw, why don't you guys be good and go home to your wives?

PATSY [THROUGH A PEEPHOLE]: Who is it?

MAUDIE: The fairy princess, ya mug! Haha!

[MAUDIE ENTERS]

MAUDIE: Don't let those guys in, they'll wreck the joint. Hey, Gorilla! Come here.

GORILLA: Hello, Maudie!

MAUDIE: Where's Joe? I gotta see that little rat.

GORILLA: Aw, well he's pretty busy.

MAUDIE: Don't give me that – you give it to me twice over the phone. No sale, no sale, I'm gonna see him tonight.

GORILLA: Well you wait right here, I'll go upstairs and see if he's there.

MAUDIE: And I'll be right up after ya.

[MAUDIE TAKES OFF FUR COAT AT COAT CHECK]

MAUDIE: Hello honey, how's business?

HATCHECK GIRL: Fine!

MAUDIE: Been insulted lately?

HATCHECK GIRL: Goodness, what beautiful diamonds!

MAUDIE: Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie.

[FILM CLIP ENDS]

J. R. PEPPER: That's one of my favorite lines in any film ever. She goes to the hatchcheck girl, gives her her coat, and she notices the amazingly large diamonds that she has and she says, "Oh my goodness, what beautiful diamonds!" and Mae just goes, "Goodness had nothing to do with it." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

By this time, the persona of Mae West had reached perfection. This is essentially what you think of when you see Mae West: the curves, the hips, the bosom, the feather boas, the elaborate, very large hats that could double as lampshades essentially, glitter, glamor, gold. Again, at age 38 she's doing this.

She wasn't actually that tall, though. She seemed to think she was. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] One of the things about Mae West is that she had shoes specifically designed for her that would lift her up higher, because she felt that she needed to compete with all the lanky, tall chorus girls. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is actually one of the shoes that they have on display at the Fashion Institute of Design, that it's a shoe inside of a shoe, basically, to give her a little bit more *oomph*, as it were.

But regardless of these weird-looking shoes, she stood taller than anyone else in the industry. She would renegotiate her contracts for over \$300,000 per picture, including a share of the profits for all of her writing and rewriting services. But she was also smart enough to make sure that she had her name on the writing credits, as well. She would boldly insist on doing her own costume design, or at least being involved in it. And she had one of the highest paid incomes of any woman in Hollywood.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She would move forward with another film called *She Done Him Wrong* in 1933, which was an adaptation of her script *Diamond Lil*. And she even discovered her own leading man – a stunning and tall man with a wicked jaw, an unknown actor named Cary Grant. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[READS IN AN OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT] “I saw a sensational-looking young man walking around the studio street... He was the best thing I'd seen out there. ‘Who's that?’ I asked. Kaufman recognized him. ‘Cary Grant,’ he said. ‘He'll do for my leading man.’ ‘But,’ Kaufman protested, ‘he hasn't made a picture yet.’ ‘Call him over,’ I said. ‘If he can talk, I'll take him.’” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She would work with Grant again on another film entitled *I'm No Angel*. But her career would skyrocket and she would become one of the most famous looks in all of Hollywood. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's another still of this, again with the dynamic diamonds and the trademark eyebrows and curvature as well. Again with the glitter and all the sequins, and she would design most of these. And some of them are incredibly risque even by, like, *Rupaul's Drag Race* standards, where essentially it's just very well-placed sequins. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

One of the most controversial parts of her career, and that's saying a lot, is that she became so involved in Hollywood and so important as far as her contracts – she did this film with W. C. Fields, who was a notorious alcoholic. In fact it was in her contract

that if he kinda screwed up and showed up drunk one day, she was just going to tell him to leave the set. Three weeks into production, he showed up quite drunk and she kicked him out.

She was incredibly open as well about her sexuality and her multiple lovers, in addition to being enamored with the large, oiled-down boxers from her father's gym. [SHOWS SLIDE] This was a trademark look for her through the majority of her life, and we'll get to that a little bit later.

One of her possible lovers was William Jones a.k.a. Gorilla Jones. And when the management of her apartment building in Hollywood wouldn't let him in because he was an African American, she's rumored to have bought the building. She exuded sexuality even into old age and was never shy about her antics.

[PLAYS CLIP OF DICK CAVETT'S BACKLOT USA FROM MARCH 1976]

Dick Cavett: "Some years ago you gave an interview that was going to be shown on this network, but we decided it was too racy, mostly because of the question the man asked you: 'Why do you have mirrors on her bedroom ceiling?' Do you remember your answer?"

Mae West: "Yeah, I like to see how I'm doing."

[CLIP ENDS]

J. R. PEPPER: That's an interview she did with Dick Cavett, she's in her seventies when this interview happens. You can find it, and it's honestly quite amazing because Dick Cavett is just blushing the *entire* time. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She's in her *seventies* when she does this.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She becomes nothing short of a pop icon and lovingly parodied in Disney and Warner Bros. cartoons and short films due to her trademark wiggle. She also becomes chalkware dolls that you would get at Coney Island when you play the carnival games, designs for her would be seen in Betty Boop cartoons, different caricatures – immediately identifiable. Al Hirschfield also does illustrations of her at a certain point in time. She exudes the same characteristics that we see in her younger

films into her later pop icon status.

[SHOWS SLIDE] But she also becomes an art icon, as well, and a muse for a lot of different artists, particularly for photographers and the surrealists. Here she is being photographed by Diane Arbus, in what was probably her Hollywood bedroom, which, again, the lingerie, the big eye makeup, the hair, the everything all together.

[SHOWS SLIDE] And then there she is with Richard Avedon, with Mr. America, as photographed in 1954. Once again, Mae being surrounded by these oiled-up muscle men.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is one of my favorite Salvador Dali pieces which is Mae West as an apartment, where using her hair as the curtains and her lips as a couch. And there's actually a real, real couch that Salvador Dali designed strictly based on her lips.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] There are various different copies of this, one of which in the museum in Florida, and this was made for a private designer.

So, her characteristics, her characterization of herself, her persona becomes more than she could ever hope to be – and immortalized not only in her films, her writing, and her artwork that is represented from various huge names in art history.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Oh and she is also really popular in the military! They designed a Mae West life vest because when it puffed up, it looked like boobs. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] That's a thing that's real.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She continues to create, to write, to make music, to perform music, way into the later years of her career in her seventies. This is one of her albums, you can still find it on vinyl. It's honestly one of the most bizarre things you could possibly ever hope. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] In addition to writing, she was a recording artist, releasing records as late as 1966. And she would never concede defeat, continued her career throughout her life.

After 1949, she opens up as Diamond Lil again on Broadway and would perform as this role until 1951, despite the fact that Diamond Lil was supposed to be in her twenties...

[SHOWS SLIDE] Never one to be outdone, she kind of adapts to all the different trends, and she opens up her own show in Las Vegas. 1954, her Vegas show: she invites the

women to ogle at the men in the show. So it's basically Mae being surrounded, once again, by these oily muscle men. She said, "The wives and sweethearts have had to sit bored, while their men applauded female semi-nudity. I was going to give the women something to look at."

[SHOWS SLIDE] This is a kind of idea of what Mae had in mind for her Las Vegas show. This is her show at the Sahara – again, all the trademark Mae West accoutrement, in addition to these attractive, muscly men that surrounded her, almost like an own private fan club. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She's in her sixties at this point. Paul Novak, who was in her show, became her life partner and would stay with her until her death.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She also did numerous TV cameos, of which there are frankly too many to actually show. There's another example from her show. I love the terrible sandals on these men. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] And there she is with Mr. Ed, once again with wet men! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Always surrounded by these men, it's kind of almost a caricature at this point in time. This is just funny, and I like to show it.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She continues her career even much later in life and, unlike many starlets at the time, embraces her role as a cult icon with a film, *Myra Breckinridge*.

[PLAYS MONTAGE CLIP FROM *MYRA BRECKINRIDGE*]

LETICIA VAN ALLEN: I'll be right with you, boys. Get your resumes out.

LETICIA VAN ALLEN: Actions speak louder than words, and I'm a boo with great experience. I know you had you another, but I can love you better than any other. Take my hand, come with me, I wanna prove every word I said. I wanna love you baby, I'm gonna have you every day.

LETICIA VAN ALLEN: Well, I don't care about your credits as long as you're oversexed.

STUD: Oh, that's one of my credits!

[CURTAIN GOES UP BEHIND LETICIA, REVEALING A BED]

STUD: A bed! I never did see a bed in an office before.

LETICIA VAN ALLEN: Yeah, see, I uh – I do a lot of night work sometimes.

[CLIP ENDS]

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

J. R. PEPPER: I just don't know how this really got made or why they thought it was a good idea. Anyway, the film is an absolute bomb. She's 70 years old and receives the best reviews out of anyone in the cast. It doesn't do very well, but what it does is it revitalizes interest in her career.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Then she also writes what is going to be her last movie, which is *Sextette*. And when I describe this to you, it's one of the most bizarre things imaginable. She plays a much younger woman with multiple ex-husbands. That's not so strange. What's strange is who her ex-husbands are: Ringo Starr, for example. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Timothy Dalton. For some reason, Alice Cooper is in this. Dom DeLuise. And many more half-naked men. As many as you can put on a celluloid screen, without it being *Rocky Horror*. She creates this film. Again, doesn't do very well – Oh! Tony Curtis is also in this, because why not? Regis Philbin is in this? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Because who cares, you're Mae West, you're in your seventies. Hollywood just kinda let her do shit.

It's from 1978, and she wrote this when she was 80 years old and starred as the lead in this. It bombs, but it's become a cult classic and it's continued to be played in gay bars around the world.

As Julia Marchesi, director of the *Dirty Blonde Mae West* documentary, states, "She was still wearing her corsets and low-cut dresses, asking 25-year-old men, 'Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?' Some might find this depressing, but Mae frankly didn't care. This was her final act of defiance against social norms."

[SHOWS SLIDE] Diamonds were her best friend before Marilyn. Male backup dancers strutted with her before Madonna. (I love that one.) Muscle men and innuendos were hers before Elvira. And she is the inspiration to drag performers everywhere. The incomparable Mae West took control of stage, screen, and not to mention her own writing credits – and somehow managed to take over in a world that wanted the

demure, silent female. Silent was the furthest thing that she was gonna allow herself to be.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Working in show business since she was a child, producing work well into her seventies, she made a career breaking boundaries with innuendo and sexual independence and a husky voice, which made her legendary. She died in 1980 at the age of 87, and posthumously was voted the 15th greatest female screen legend of American classic cinema.

In her 1970 autobiography, she writes [READS IN OLD-SCHOOL NEW YORK ACCENT]: “The letter ‘I’ appears very often on these pages. That is because I have been given the liberty, or have taken it, of telling my own story in my own way—and I like a story that takes its time.”

[APPLAUSE]

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: J. R. Pepper on Mae West, recorded by Jennifer Nulsen at the Red Room in New York’s KGB Bar! If you were not that familiar with the works and charms of Mae West before this episode, I highly recommend checking out our episode notes, where we will have photos and videos and links to some of her most scandalous moments. You can find that over at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

SUSAN STONE: And we’ll be sure to share some of those links and pics and videos on our social media accounts, @deadladiesshow – and that’s also where you can get information on advance tickets to upcoming events. Next month, you can see the Dead Ladies Show in New York on September 7th, and here in Berlin on September 27th. On the podcast, well, we’re gonna take a short break, but will return very soon with a fun-filled Season Six!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Season Six? Wow!

SUSAN STONE: Yeah!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Please do share our show with anyone you think could use more Dead Ladies in their lives – this is episode 56, so there are 55 other episodes you can catch up on while we’re having a break! You can find us on all the podcatchers and on Spotify, of course. And we also have beautiful transcripts of many episodes available for your reading pleasure over on our website, on the episode pages.

SUSAN STONE: They are beautiful. Thank you so much to Florian, and to Molly and Jennifer in New York, and to all the lovely people who came out to see their show at the Red Room, under the auspices of the fabulous Lori Schwarz.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

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

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thank you, Susan! Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. Thanks to everybody out there listening! We'll be back soon with another fabulous Dead Lady!
