

Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 59

Delia Derbyshire

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon - plays for a moment, before morphing into the 'Doctor Who Theme')

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone.

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...then, we bring you a delightfully curated selection of these stories here on the podcast.

Hello everyone, welcome to the show, and welcome to Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens, nice to see you!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Nice to see you too! Hi Susan!

SUSAN STONE: In this episode, we're going to hear about a woman who is sometimes called "a sculptress of sound." You may have heard our Episode #43, about [Bebe Barron](#), the first lady of electronic music. Well, now, we are delighted to introduce you to "the unsung heroine of British electronic music," Delia Derbyshire.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And if that name sounds familiar, yes, she does share that with our dear co-founder Katy Derbyshire, who will be telling her story.

Here's Katy, from the stage of our Berlin's ACUD:

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So here we go, I'm going to start with an admission. And that is, my name is Katy Derbyshire and I'm not actually a fan of electronic music [INCRECULOUS AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]. But I am a fan of Delia Derbyshire, who has often been called a godmother of electronic music. And as she's become better known over the past decade or so, people have started asking me whether we're related. So it felt important to find out who she really was.

I'm just going to just relieve you of the tension now. We're not actually related. [DISAPPOINTED SOUND FROM AUDIENCE] Both of our families come from Coventry and my dad met her in the early 70s when they were both working in the BBC sound department, although not in the same place. They went for a drink in a pub; I tried to get my dad to give me juicy details, apparently she was very nice [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]. And they established that we are not related, so there we go.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

So here is Delia, at the said workplace which she is most associated with: the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. Delia worked there from 1962 to 1973, making sounds and music to order for radio and television. She used recorded and electronically produced sounds, her knowledge of mathematics and her analytical ingenuity and instinct, plus a lot of tape and razor blades, to create theme tunes, “special sounds” and incidental music. We’re going to hear her talking about her work on a radio show in the early 1960s. [AUDIO CLIP PLAYS]

PATRICIAN MALE VOICE IN CLIP: So in this workshop you can turn any sound into a form of music?

VOICE OF DELIA DERBYSHIRE: Yes, if we take the Greenwich pips for example, we can speed them up and slow them down and alter the quality, and we can, by mixing various types together, make a little piece like this. [A SERIES OF HIGH PITCHED BEEPING SOUNDS ARE REMIXED TO CREATE A SHIMMERING MUSICAL MOTIF]

PATRICIAN MALE VOICE: Well, that was a very nice arrangement, and I can distinctly recognise the theme of it, the ‘Oranges and Lemons’ theme. I’d never expected to hear it with the Greenwich pips as the instruments, as it were. Well, thank you very much for your explanations. And for the very interesting things you’ve shown me while I’ve been in your workshop, here [HIS VOICE BEGINS TO MORPH AND RIPPLE AS IF HE IS UNDERWATER]. Hey, what are you doing to my voice Miss Derbyshire?

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: I’ve turned you into a fish.

PATRICIAN MALE VOICE: Thank you very much indeed Miss Derbyshire.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Very well, so you can tell she has a slightly playful sense of humor. The Greenwich pips by the way, which they were talking about, are six short tones or pips, broadcasts at one second intervals by many BBC radio stations to mark the exact start of each hour and the joke if you will, is that she made ‘Oranges and Lemons’ out of pips [SHOWS SLIDE].

So this is Delia’s very own reel-to-reel tape recorder, which is now in the Coventry Music Museum. And she now also has a street named after her in the city, Derbyshire Way - they were going to call it Derbyshire Road but that seemed too boring for Delia. So yes, her hometown, the town of her birth, is very proud of her. Most famously, Delia Derbyshire put together the theme to the BBC’s long-running science-fiction series, *Doctor Who*. In 1963 the composer Ron Grainer gave the workshop a one-page score and some annotations and went away on holiday.

Fast forward to the year 2000, and the sound researcher Jo Hutton was writing an article called “Radiophonic Ladies,” and Delia told her, referring to Grainer: “He expected to hire a band to play it, but when he heard what I had done electronically, he’d never imagined it would be so good. He offered me half of the royalties, but the BBC wouldn’t allow it. I was just on an assistant studio manager’s salary and that was it.... and we got a free *Radio Times* (which is the TV and radio listings magazine). The boss wouldn’t let anybody have any sort of credit.” So it

was official policy for the workshop to be treated as a single entity, rather than as a collection of creative individuals, no matter what they contributed to the music.

We'll hear more about *Doctor Who* later, but right now I want to play you something very different, part of a series called *Inventions for Radio* that Delia worked on with the dramatist Barry Bermange. I think it shows her enthusiasm for sound went beyond the pragmatic creation of useful music, towards something that both documented her times and I hope might remain timeless. It's about two minutes long, so do sit back and listen. From 1965, it's called "The Evenings of Certain Lives," and it's a collage of voice recordings with electronic sound. Here we go, I hope. [AUDIO RECORDING PLAYS]

MALE VOICE IN RECORDING: My present age seems to go very slowly [QUIET AND SLOW ELECTRONIC HUMS IN BACKGROUND]. And when I look back over the years, it seemed to have jumped very quickly. I can remember things that happened to me when I was 14 years of age [A QUIET PULSING HEARTBEAT CAN BE HEARD WHICH GETS GRADUALLY LOUDER AND FASTER] when I was 24, 34, 44. And I used to dread being 54. Now it comes to 64, and over, and it seems to get longer as the years go by. Time seems to spread out...

SECOND RECORDED MALE VOICE: ...It seems to be going pretty fast with me. Maybe it's according to the condition that I'm in, how I feel at the time, but that's how it appears to me...

OVERLAPPING FEMALE VOICE: ... It seems to go very much quicker...

SECOND OVERLAPPING FEMALE VOICE: I find time goes very very fast...

FIRST MALE VOICE: ... It's going too quick...

FIRST FEMALE VOICE: ... Very very fast indeed...

SECOND FEMALE VOICE: ... I don't seem to get enough hours in the day to do all I want to do, I've never got time to do all my things... [AS NEW VOICES ENTER THEY CONTINUE TO OVERLAP IN A COLLAGE]

ANOTHER MALE VOICE: ... I find time moves around quick since I've retired. I thought I was going to have a lazy time but it's going too quick...

A FURTHER MALE VOICE: ... Weeks simply fly by...

FEMALE VOICE: ... Time passes very very quickly...

MALE VOICE: ...Time never worries me at all...

FEMALE VOICE: ...I don't seem no older now than I was 60 years ago...

MALE VOICE: ...Time passes away from me, as long as I've got something to do, to occupy my mind, then I keep going at it...

FEMALE VOICE: ...The weeks go, from Monday morning, you don't realize it, then it's Saturday again. Time never hangs on for me, and it never has done...

ANOTHER FEMALE VOICE: ... Some days it's a bit boring, but I don't think the time drags, not at all...

SECOND MALE VOICE REPEATS: ...Maybe it's according to the condition that I'm in, how I feel at the time... It seems to be going pretty fast with me...

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I'm just so moved by it. I love it so much. It's also symptomatic of what happened to Delia's material. There is a ten minute section that has survived, after the BBC got rid of the 40 minute original, and those ten minutes are one of 267 reel-to-reel tapes, found in Delia's attic after she died. And they're now part of her archive at the University of Manchester. A lot of radio listeners at the time objected to hearing normal people's voices and their accents and especially their opinions. So only four of these pieces were made. But a lot of that material is available online. So do seek out those *Inventions For Radio*. I mean, if you'd like that you'll love the rest.

Anyway, who was Delia Derbyshire? She was born in a working class Catholic family in 1937. Coventry at the time was a thriving industrial city [SHOWS SLIDE]. As you can see, there are old and new buildings, a really busy street in the center of town with trams and buses and cars and bustling with pedestrians. In 1940, the Nazis launched the Coventry Blitz, razing the inner city to the ground with a series of intense bombings. As you can see, not a lot was left standing and it became very difficult to live in the city after that. Delia was evacuated to Preston, where her parents came from. Later, she talked about her formative experience of electronic sound... the air-raid siren. I'm going to play you a little bit of that now.

[WAILING RECORDED SOUND OF AIR RAID SIREN PLAYS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So you can hear this wailing in B minor and D minor, which was followed by her mother counting between bombs, almost like counting between thunder and lightning perhaps, and then the relief of the all-clear signal, which is a single steady tone.

At school, she was an excellent student. Her archive actually holds some of her school exercise books, since she hid them up the chimney of her childhood bedroom and they were found a few years after her death and are now in the archive. She was interested in mathematics and physics and she taught herself harmonics, also learning the piano to professional level. The family didn't have many books at home, so she really discovered the outside world through the radio, which she really loved.

Quite impressively for a working-class girl, she got a place at Girton College, Cambridge [SHOWS SLIDE], which you can see here looking very fancy. I think it's a colourised photo, but you can see this very impressive red brick building. She studied mathematics and music. As well as piano, she played the violin, the spinet – [SHOWS SLIDE] which you can see here on the left is a kind of harpsichord – and the double bass. Apparently Delia didn't really like the violin. I think she might have enjoyed the feel of controlling a really big instrument. After

graduating, she tried to get a job at Decca Records but was told they only employed women in administrative and secretarial roles [AUDIENCE BOOS QUIETLY] not working with sound, which was really her major ambition.

In the end she went to Geneva, where she was employed by the UN to teach maths and piano to diplomats' children, and then moved into its International Telecommunications Union, so working with radio in a way. So from there, she sort of bombarded the BBC with applications. Eventually they took her. Once she was there in another post, she found out about Radiophonic Workshop and asked to be transferred there. This was unusual, as men and women tended to be seconded there for three months involuntarily and then moved on. Here you can see her in this kind of iconic setting surrounded by more big electronic instruments.

Delia also used smaller instruments from everyday life, famously her green Coolicon-brand lampshade [SHOWS SLIDE] which you can see here, which when struck with a beater made a beautiful bell-like sound. Academic David Butler writes about her love of music found "in the sounds around or within us, whether that was a knock on the door, a clap of thunder, a metal lampshade, or one's own voice and breath." She preferred to work at night when the workshop was empty, usually with a bottle of wine; her consumption increased and became an addiction. And she also tried snuff tobacco to help rid her of sniffles, and she quickly got hooked on that too.

Nonetheless, the 60s were a very productive period for Delia. Outside of the BBC she formed Unit Delta Plus with two others, to make electronic music and to market it to advertisers, maybe to top up that manager's salary I guess [SHOWS SLIDE]. So you can see here their impressive studio on the left. I cannot identify a single one of these gadgets but they look fabulous. And on the right I've got a page from a 1966 event programme, showing really how clear they were about giving credit to the composer. So they staged this event, organized it themselves. And you can see on the left the name of the titles - 'Moogies Bloogies', 'Fragments', 'Potpourri', and on the right, pretty much the most important thing, in all caps, is the name of the composer. So they played this pre-recorded music, and they also had light projections by art students using coloured oils and water, they also had paintings on display by the 5-year-old daughter of one of them, and of course moving electro-magnetic sculpture, because it was the 60s — what else would you do!

After Delia and her colleague Brian Hodgson left that formation they set up White Noise with David Vorhaus, another double bass-player, who had met them at a lecture they'd given. So she always had outside things going on. They recorded this album, *An Electric Storm*, in their Kaleidophon studios. The original version you can see on the left sells for about €60. We listened to it last night, and we think you can safely file it under: experimental psychedelic rock. Florian loves it. You know! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

But I have to say, this re-release from a couple of years ago has some fantastic copy on the CD sleeve: "Welcome to the world of the frequency shifter, signal generator and azimuth coordinator. A world that existed before the dawn of the synthesizer, when a 'sample' was a length of recording tape deliberately and skillfully spliced in place. The 1968..." [It actually came

out in 1969] "...*White Noise: An Electric Storm* LP became the holy grail amongst collectors of 'Science Dimension' music, a staple ingredient for lovers of cosmic electronic space rock." [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] It really makes you want to listen to it! And you can do that on the internet.

Delia moved in with this guy David Vorhaus and they had, shall we say, an adventurous time of it in Swinging London [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER AND WHOOPS]. Yes! She talked later about working with Yoko Ono on a soundtrack for Ono's film *Bottoms*, while Yoko slept on her floor, and she then segued into sort of starting to talk about an orgy that started, but then she stopped talking... [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER AND A BOO]. Yes, why?! Why would you stop there?

So she continued working on soundtracks for art projects freelance outside of and alongside her BBC work into the 70s, alongside the Dutch visual artists... Oh no, I'm going to mangle some Dutch again... Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas. Florian is... That may not be the correct pronunciation! [SHOWS SLIDE] This is a still from their film *One of These Days*. Delia clearly enjoyed collaborating with artists from other fields.

By the 70s though, despite going for a drink with my dad in the pub, as Delia said later, the world around her fell out of tune. She'd had enough of the commercial pressures of her freelance and BBC work, her personal life was difficult. She wasn't very enthusiastic about the rise of the synthesizer, and she left London in 1973, out of "self-preservation," she said. She moved to the far north of England and worked as a bilingual radio operator for a gas pipeline being laid by an Anglo-French company. [SHOWS SLIDE] So you can see her here, on the radio and at the telephone at the same time, possibly a staged photo. It's hard to say but she is certainly wearing her hard hat, very important when on the radio in a small hut [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. She needed a rest, she said, but unfortunately she also had a short-lived marriage to a colleague up in Cumbria.

But she also got involved with the nearby LYC Museum and Art Gallery, and moved in with its founder, the Chinese artist Li Yuan-chia. I'm mangling another language for you! There you are. It was a very open place in a large former farmhouse [SHOWS SLIDE] which you can see here, that displayed art by Li Yuan-chia – who did painting, sculpture, poetry, calligraphy and videography – and by other artists, and it involved local people in its work, and I think it was a very progressive space. Not progressive enough though, apparently, for Delia and Li to ever stop hiding their relationship from the neighbors, so who knows. But still, she was around creative people in a largely positive environment. Her job, which I believe she enjoyed, was as an assistant, and she helped arrange exhibitions, she was dealing with the artists and keeping them entertained during their stay.

In 1978 she moved away. She left her cat behind though, it may have been a sudden departure. She had moved back to London, and then to Northampton, from where she could visit her mother in Coventry. Her mother never visited her. She lived in Northampton with a new partner, Clive Blackburn, who eventually moved out because she was quite particular about keeping particular things in particular places. I imagine she was a difficult person to live with – later on she talked about having eliminated all need to wash dishes [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] which for

cohabitation is maybe not great. I mean if you live on your own, go for it, yes! Anyway she and Clive remained together and they supported each other, and she went on working on occasional collaborations with artists, and on her own private music projects with her partner.

Delia survived breast cancer and a double mastectomy in the year 2000, but died of liver failure in July 2001, with friends by her side. But before that though, she was actually rediscovered to some extent by electronic music enthusiasts, so thank you for that, and her work on the *Doctor Who* theme tune began to be recognized. So here she is, around about that time, talking about the process of making the track, with additions from her colleague Dick Mills.

VOICE OF DELIA DERBYSHIRE ON RECORDING: I saw the graphics at the same time that Rob Grainer did [*DOCTOR WHO* THEME PLAYS IN BACKGROUND] and then I was given his score.

DICK MILLS: So Ron actually wrote the tune, on a piece of paper, a single piece of paper, and then left us to it.

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: When I saw Rob Grainer's score, there were some swoops indicated, and I assumed this was sound waves.

DICK MILLS: The bassline that everyone thinks they know, are actually made of two tracks within themselves.

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: I think he may have described it as guitar, plus a, I don't know, something like a bass bassoon or something.

DICK: We did a whole string of "mee mee mee", which when we played with the "dundedundundundun..." I can't sing it! They went as a pair.

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: But then, apart from that, to fit in with the graphics, he used words like clouds and wind bubble. Clouds, obviously one thinks sort of as filtered white noise and for the wind bubble, I think we used a wobulator.

DICK MILLS: Delia and I got to work using sound generating equipment. There are no musicians, there are no synthesizers. And in those days, we didn't even have a two track or a stereo tape machine. It was always mono.

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: It was constructed, literally, on a quarter inch mono tape, inch by inch by inch.

DICK MILLS: And literally, we built up the orchestra with individual notes, and Delia would say I think we need about 64 B flats and 25 Es and Bs, and things like that, and we cut them all out physically.

DELIA DERBYSHIRE: What I'd like to say is that hardly anything was done in real time, it was done at either half speed or chopped together in little bits of tape. For example, the swoops at

the beginning, they were done on the old valve oscillators [ELECTRONIC HONKING SOUND PLAYS].

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There you go, isn't she marvelous? I love that little spark in her eye. She comes across as quite a shy person which I think she was, but also very proud of her achievements. I'm glad to be able to talk about them. A wobulator, by the way, I've tried quite hard to find out what that is. The definition that came closest to me being able to understand it is the following: a testing device for radio sets in which the frequency is varied periodically and automatically over a predetermined range. But it made a noise, so she used it!

Some of the material produced after Delia's death by the BBC seems to me a little self-congratulatory I have to say. And it often assumed that Delia's creative life ended after she left the BBC. And for some contemporary musicians, although not at all all of them, she seems little more than a canvas to project their own work onto. In later life she was wary of being exploited, and I think she had good reason to be. But recently, the narrative about her life has changed. I'm grateful to David Butler, who I quoted earlier, for his long 2019 article "Whatever Happened to Delia Derbyshire? Delia Derbyshire, Visual Art, and the Myth of her Post-BBC Activity" which you can find online with lots of clips.

But also for these two works of art [SHOWS SLIDE], on the left you can see the poster for the creative documentary *Delia: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes* by Caroline Catz, who directs it and also plays Delia in the dramatized parts. It's very good fun, and you can also watch it online. So the soundtrack, which is great, was made by electronic musician Cosey Fanni Tutti, who also wrote the book that you can see here on the right: *Re-Sisters*, a triple biography, if you like, of herself, Delia Derbyshire and 13th-century mystic Margery Kempe. You were wondering about that, yeah! All is revealed in the book, they do fit together quite nicely. We also had a show about [Margery Kempe](#) in New York City in January 2020. So there may one day be a podcast about Margery Kempe in our series!

I am super impressed by Delia Derbyshire's achievements, at the BBC and outside of it. She continued to find creative outlets after she left, but they weren't necessarily for entertainment or profit purposes, and I like to hope she was happy with that.

I'm going to end with a quote from the interview I mentioned earlier, with Jo Hutton. Hutton asks about Delia's plans for the future, and the answer is this:

"Several people wanted to do a compilation of my little things, they appeal to different people. So I asked the BBC how much it will be to license certain tracks – half a minute long – and they just say 'All tracks are £500 each!' So, I've put it all behind me. It's the doing of it that was the pleasure really. I can still hear beautiful things in my mind, and I know how I can make more beautiful things too, that's the important thing."

I want to say, let's all keep training to make beautiful things with Delia Derbyshire in mind. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Katy Derbyshire, recorded live with assistance from ACUD's Thomas Beckmann and Johannes Braun of ACUD. Do have a look at our episode notes, you can follow the link in your very podcast app, or pop by deadladiesshow.com/podcast. Whatever strikes your fancy, both work! We have collected some fascinating pictures and info about Delia and her work, so do stop by. And you'll also find a link to the episode about [Bebe Barron](#) that we mentioned. So you can quickly zip through and just listen along. Why not? We'll be sharing some of these treats on our social media channels @deadladiesshow, too.

SUSAN STONE: Yes! Now Florian, you may recall that when Katy did this talk at our last live show, I just couldn't contain myself...and I had to come up on stage to make a couple of comments...

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes you did.

SUSAN STONE: I did! Because Katy says at the beginning that she doesn't really like electronic music. Which, you know, it's her right, but she's wrong! [BOTH LAUGH] It's wonderful stuff...or it can be. Not only that, but Katy happened to have translated a book about electronic music that came out fairly recently, not about a Dead Lady, but a live man...or maybe a live robot...

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes, she translated the book *The Sound of the Machine* by Karl Bartos, a long time member of the legendary German electronic group Kraftwerk, one of them not named Florian. The English version came out last summer, published by Omnibus Press, and was voted a Rough Trade Book of the Year, and any fans of 'Autobahn' or... what's it called... 'The Modell' Oh my god, deathless! *The Man Machine*. It's one of the best albums of all time, go check it out.

SUSAN STONE: 'Computer Love!'

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: 'Computer Love!'

SUSAN STONE: I love it, I cannot wait to read this book, really. And speaking of reading, if you are looking for some great literary recommendations, we have them over on our Patreon in the Dead Lady Book Club, where our patrons get exclusive monthly audio reviews, interviews, and book chats, and you can find that at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. Thanks to Katy for sharing the story of Delia Derbyshire, and thanks to you Florian, for sharing the sofa and microphone with me today!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And thanks to all of you listeners, fans and friends out there. We love it when you share our show with your friends, share it on social media, when you just click, we all feel a little warm inside, and we like feeling a little warm inside, especially when it's cold outside. We'll be back next month with another fabulous Dead Lady out here in this podcast space. But in the real world, If you're in the New York State area or New York area or Manhattan or maybe

lower Manhattan, you can come see the [Dead Ladies Show](#) on the 22nd February. There's going to be three dead ladies presented. I'll give you a few names. Maybe? There's Leonor Fini, the wonderful surrealist painter and close friend of...

SUSAN STONE: ... Yeah, [Leonora Carrington](#).

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We have an episode about it, it has a number, you can find it on our website! And two other amazing people. One is the presenter's mother? Grandmother? Mother? Mother?

SUSAN STONE: Grandmother? I thought.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: A close relation, Angelina Katz, so that'll be interesting, it's a real first for us, a relation who is that close. And the other one is Inji Aflatoun, a pioneering painter and feminist from mid-20th century Egypt who I'd never heard of, and I'm very excited to hear more about! Check out [our website](#) where you can buy tickets, where you can sign up for their mailing list, sign up for our mailing list, you know, get some emails.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, that sounds fun. And it's going to be in the KGB Bar Red Room in New York City, so if you're there, check it out. The Dead Ladies Show co-founders are Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme song is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. See you next time!

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