

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 68
June Tarpé Mills

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

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to 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 the very best of those stories here on the podcast.

We are part of a lively and lovely podcast scene in Berlin, and once a year we get to come together with our friends old and new for PodFest Berlin. It was a lovely weekend full of workshops, events, networking, free ice cream, and live tapings from podcasts in various languages, including one from us.

Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire joined me in front of a small but perfectly formed audience to introduce two wonderful ladies, one in English, which you'll be hearing in this episode, and one in German.

Katy was kind enough to introduce my presentation. Here she is live from PodFest Berlin, held at the wonderfully named Noisy Rooms:

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE FROM PODFEST BERLIN: Susan Stone is a long-time radio journalist and audio producer who has worked for most of the big news initials, including BBC and NPR.

SUSAN STONE ON TAPE FROM PODFEST BERLIN: But not the bad ones. Not the F-O-X.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: F-O-X, right.

She is also an editorial and podcast consultant, in case you need any consulting, working with nonprofits and creatives. Today, she'll be talking about a groundbreaking and long-forgotten woman from the Golden Age of comics.

Take it away, Susan!

SUSAN STONE: You can clap now.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND CHEERS]

So, let's see a show of hands, or maybe you should just say 'yes.' How many people here know Wonder Woman?

[AUDIENCE YELLS "YES" VERY LOUDLY]

Not personally, of course. Ok. Catwoman?

[AUDIENCE YELLS "YES" LOUDLY]

Black Widow?

[AUDIENCE YELLS "YES" MORE QUIETLY]

Black Panther?

[AUDIENCE YELLS "YES" QUIETLY]

Nick Fury?

[A COUPLE AUDIENCE MEMBERS YELL "YES"]

What about Miss Fury?

[AUDIENCE IS QUIET]

June Tarpé Mills was the first woman to create a female superhero. Miss Fury put the cat in catsuit, and the strip in comic strip. [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] She punched Nazis and wore fabulous clothes doing it. Miss Fury was never a damsel in distress. To some she was a distressing damsel. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Her love interests pined after her, instead of the other way round. She inspired the design of characters we know well, from Wonder Woman to Black Widow to Catwoman, and enjoyed global fame. And then, she, like her creator, disappeared.

Miss Fury was exquisitely drawn. But the details of June Mills's life remain more roughly sketched.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

She was born Genevieve Mills (we think) in Brooklyn, New York, on February 25th, in 1912, or 1918 to Margaret and Charles Mills. Her early life was not easy. There were two other siblings,

Margaret and Thomas, who spent some time in orphanages, so they didn't always live with the family. A working widow, June's mother headed the household on the modest income she made as a hairdresser, supporting her kids as well as Helen and Frank, the two orphaned children of her sister Elizabeth, who died in 1922.

Young June was slight and petite. She later recalled she was "one of the imaginative kids who hangs around the house reading books, instead of running around outside playing hopscotch."

[SHOWS SLIDE]

After taking an art course at Erasmus Hall High, June's creative ambitions led her to the prestigious Pratt Institute. But art school cost money. June was a promising sculptor and an elegant beauty. She became an artist's model to pay her way and support the family, posing for portrait painters and photographers. Sculpting was unlikely to pay the bills, so she did some animation work, creating cat cartoons. She later said, "I was carried out of the joint with a nervous breakdown." [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] So I guess that wasn't a very good job. Fashion illustration supplemented the modeling, but a broken foot put her out of action for a while, so she turned her hand to a popular new medium — comic books. Later on, she liked to tell people she 'stumbled' into comics.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Comic books started in the 1930s, when superheroes were in their infancy. Superman flew on to the scene in 1938, the same year June Mills dropped her first name, turning a family name, Tarpey, into the frenchified Tarpé (complete with acute accent) [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] and had a male acquaintance deliver some comic book samples to a publisher. June was in her mid-twenties at the time.

So, here's some of her early work.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Tarpé Mills did a bit of everything for comics publishers, but action was really her game. Mills drew adventure comics with explorers in exotic lands, brave heroes fighting mad scientists, early horror comics like *The Ivy Menace* and *The Vampire*, and Hollywood-inspired strips like *Fantastic Feature Films*. She worked like crazy, turning out four or five strips at a time.

Sometimes she published work under the names Nella or Edgar Allen Jr. She learned fast, and developed a signature style.

She later said to the *New York Post* of her name change, "It would have been a major let-down to the kids if they found out that the author of such virile and awesome characters was a gal." [AUDIENCE BOOS AND LAUGHS]

This gal's tough guys included the Purple Zombie, and the Daredevil Barry Finn, named for the young son of her cousin Helen, who had married a news photographer, Bill Finn, known as Red. They had two boys, Barry and Bill Jr. Helen and the kids would often go visit June over the years, and while the two ladies chatted, the boys would be put to work with a heap of loose tobacco and a cigarette rolling machine, making hundreds of cigarettes for their chain smoking aunt. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Barry would also provide her with technical and mechanical details about things like train car couplings, so she could make her artwork as accurate as possible.

But these comic books were really kid stuff. The more sophisticated work was done in the cartoon pages of newspapers, which had been printing comics since 1895. Tarpé Mills made her way there, possibly through connections from Red Finn, who was sort of her protector and confidante.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

She introduces a new action heroine called Marla Drake, in the series Black Fury in April 1941, in full-color in the Sunday comics pages. Marla is a beautiful, raven-haired socialite immediately thrown into a world of danger and intrigue from the very first page of her story.

Getting ready for a costume party, she finds out another woman is planning to attend in the same Southern Bell-style hoop-skirted gown. Horrors! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Her French maid Francine suggests she put on a black leopard skin left to her by her explorer uncle. Why not? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Marla objects on the grounds it once belonged to a "African Witch Doctor" (hmm) who used it for rituals, but Francine assures her she will look gorgeous in it.

Clad in the fur suit, complete with claws, she races out to the party in her car, and runs right into trouble. From there, a fast-paced rollicking tale takes her around the world fighting evil (primarily Nazis) and getting into scrapes.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

The strip is a hit with both kids and adults, for its combination of adventure, stunning fashion, and doomed romance. By the end of 1941, it has been renamed Miss Fury. And I just love how Mills even uses her title panel creatively, inking the words to match Marla's splotchy flowered dress pattern, or filling the background with paranoid eyes to set up the story.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Marla Drake fights both men and women, brawling in her lingerie or attacking in her leopard leotard, which surely added to her popularity. [AUDIENCE GIGGLES] There's a bit of a fetish vibe here. She even battled an imposter, a man who stole her catsuit and managed to look surprisingly like Batman in it [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Batman had actually been on the scene since 1939.

Our heroine isn't always the focus; the villains and the side characters get their share of screen time. And in fact, she rarely wears the catsuit — when she does, bad things often happen. It's even unclear whether or not the suit has powers. Certainly the leopard claws help her scale a building, and scratch an enemy. But mostly, Marla is a scrappy fighter who uses her wits, including blowing powder from her compact into a baddie's face to get away. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She flies a fighter plane, and parachutes out in a slinky gown, conveniently landing knickers up.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Her nemesis is — so great — Baroness Erica von Kampf. Yes, von Kampf! Erica, or the Baroness, I should say, a gold-digging Nazi spy whose carefully combed bangs hid a forehead branded with a swastika.

[AUDIENCE GASPS AND LAUGHS]

Erica steals Marla's fiance Gary Hale, [AUDIENCE GASPS AND LAUGHS] has a child they abandon to an evil scientist [AUDIENCE GASPS, SOMEONE YELLS 'SCANDAL!'] who Marla rescues and later adopts as a single mother (you can cheer now) [AUDIENCE CHEERS]. A huge fan favorite, Erica von Kampf sometimes received more fan mail than Miss Fury, and she even had her own paper doll set. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Then there's General Bruno Beitz, a cruel strategist who tapes a bomb to Marla's cat [AUDIENCE GASPS AND LAUGHS] — terrible! — in an attempt to assassinate a South American ambassador. Poor Kitty! General Bruno thinks Hitler is an idiot (he's not wrong), and wants to do away with him and the Nazi Party so he can lead Germany himself.

Other notables in the strip include small-time crook Fingers Martin, feisty resistance leader Era, police detective-turned soldier Dan Carey, and the unfortunately named Albino Jo, a Harvard-educated native Brazilian who rarely wears a shirt [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and warns Marla of the curse attached to her black leopard suit.

In her heyday, Miss Fury's Sunday strip was syndicated in 100 newspapers across North America, including the *Boston Globe*, *Washington Evening Star*, the *New York Post*, and the *Montreal Photo-Journal*, as well as read by global readers in Europe, Australia, and South America)

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Starting in 1942, these weekly strips were collected in comic book form by Timely Comics (later Marvel Comics — anybody?) and sold more than a million copies. It would probably have been much more but the print runs were limited due to wartime paper rationing.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

There had been other women in comics, both on and off the page, but none had created quite such a stir. In fact, the first female cartoon artist published in a US newspaper was back in 1896. From 1935-1938, Sandra of the Secret Service was a regular character in the *New Fun* comic book, though she was drawn by a man.

And in 1940, Fantomah “mystery woman of the jungle,” who could be considered a superhero, came on the scene. She turns from a lovely blonde lady into a scary-looking angry blonde blue skull lady when she’s angry and wants to combat evil. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

On the artist side, there’s Dalia Messick — better known as Dale Messick after being advised to change her name — who created Brenda Starr, Reporter. This strip about a glam female journalist started in 1940 and ran until 2011. It was even name-checked in a Blondie song. Anybody? Anybody? *Rip her to Shreds*. And, made into a feature film in 1989 starring Brooke Shields (and Timothy Dalton in an eyepatch). [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

And there was publisher Grace Jacquet who ran Funnies Inc with her husband and hired Tarpé Mills amongst other talented artists...and writers including another notable, if difficult, Dead Lady, Patricia Highsmith, [AUDIENCE REACTS] author of the *Talented Mr Ripley* and *Strangers on a Train* (who you might hear about in the next season of our podcast, thanks to our friends at Dead Ladies NYC). Although when Highsmith became a sought-after novelist and screenwriter she hated to acknowledge her time in the comic book world.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Tarpé Mills may have started as a woman hiding behind an ambiguous name, but once the press got wind of the elegant creator who used herself as a model for the luscious Miss Fury, she became a sensation. She was interviewed by the *New York Post* and the *Miami Daily News*.

She seems to have moved to Florida for a few years during this period, living in the pink-tinged Granada Apartments in Miami. Also - I love that the story in the *Miami Daily News* refers to “Molla Drake” M-O-L-L-A instead of Marla Drake, and I’m thinking maybe June’s Brooklyn accent was a bit much for them? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She told the newspapers she drew from her mirror image. She also sketched her cat quite a lot - a white fluffy Persian appears not just in Miss Fury, but many of her older cartoon series.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Six months after Miss Fury debuted, another black-coiffed superheroine with more lasting power hit the scene — Wonder Woman, created and drawn by men. Artist Harry Peter was told to make her “as powerful as Superman, as sexy as Miss Fury, as scantily clad as Sheena the Jungle Queen, and as patriotic as Captain America.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] When you look at them side by side, the hair’s the same, the face is really very similar.

But with a war in full swing, heroes were in hot demand.

The stylishly seductive Miss Fury, with her blend of wit, ingenuity, and righteous determination to kick Nazi butt was a big favorite of American troops.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

During World War II, at least four B-24 and B-14 bombers were bedecked with Miss Fury’s name and image. When soldiers wrote fan letters to Tarpé, she sent them a sexy pinup of Marla Drake changing out of her costume.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

[AUDIENCE REACTS, SHOCKED]

I’ll let you enjoy that while I take a sip of water. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Mills even donated her beloved 8-year-old cat to the war effort. Again, poor Kitty! Perri-Purr, who appeared in the strip as Marla Drake’s pet, became an unofficial mascot on an Allied warship, renamed Sir Admiral Purr. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Months after the end of World War II in 1945, Tarpé Mills, Dale Messick, and a host of other female cartoon artists got together for a special feature in *Editor & Publisher*. Tarpé tells the reporter that if all the women of the world got together there wouldn’t be any more wars. Optimistic!

Of her sexy comic series, she says “We’d lose our public if we didn’t put in the curves.”

But as we know...curves can be dangerous.

A newspaper story from a few months after that event reports that catholic school kids in Wisconsin were burning “undesirable comics” including Miss Fury in bonfires during Catholic Book Week (whatever that is).

[SHOWS SLIDE]

And in 1947, an image of the character Era in a leafy bikini was censored by outraged newspapers — 37 of them drop Miss Fury in protest. Others clumsily cover her up with a slash of ink. I'm not quite sure what got to them. Certainly Miss Fury has always been filled with boudoir costume changes, bubble bath scenes and lacy lingerie. Perhaps it was the Eve -in-the-Garden-of-Eden theme? Or maybe because the orange leaves look a bit like pubic hair at first glance?

Anyway, a few years after that controversy, the Miss Fury strip is cancelled in 1951. Superheroes were falling out of fashion in the postwar period. Besides, Marla Drake's greatest foes had been the Nazis. Now, they were defeated, and the world had moved on. Plus, with men returning from war and taking back the jobs women held while they were serving overseas, maybe strong women held less appeal for some. Brenda Starr, the girl reporter strip I mentioned before, was the only adventure comic with a female lead to survive the decade.

The mood of the county had become increasingly moralistic. Mills' later strips definitely have fewer lingerie shots and sexy catfights, and lack the pizzazz of her early work. She was also having health issues. (maybe all those cigarettes were catching up with her)

[SHOWS SLIDE]

June had become less dependable; at times ghost artists had to be called in to pick up the slack, though she would manage to finish writing the stories. In this 1951 strip, Marla Drake is almost unrecognizable in some panels, compared to the originals.

It wasn't a great time to be in the cartoon business anyway. Starting in the late 40s, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham had been campaigning against comic books and their characters, citing violence, misogyny, racism, and homoerotic undertones.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

His 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* said they were dangerous to children. There were protests, book burnings, and congressional hearings. In response, the comics industry decided to self-censor these violent and so-called salacious images to avoid government oversight, and the industry went into decline. It's said that within two years of the publication of Wertham's best-selling book, numerous publishers closed down and hundreds of cartoon artists had to seek other work.

As Albino Jo tells Marla Drake in the comics, with every favor gained through black magic come two misfortunes. Another devastation was yet to come.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

In 1958, photographer Red Finn is killed in the line-of-duty while on assignment for the *New York Journal-American*. A petroleum tanker and a steamship collided near the Manhattan

Bridge, spreading flaming fuel across the East River. And this is actually the picture he took on his last assignment. Red had supported June emotionally and at times financially.

From the 1950s on, we really don't know much about June's life. It's likely that she's doing commercial artwork during this time, but she really seems to have dropped out of the public eye.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

But in the early 1970s, she pops up again, briefly, doing some artwork for Marvel romance comics. Check out these groovy pages for *Our Love Story* from 1971, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] with the credit going to one J.T. Mills. She portrays the style transformation of heroine Sandy, a shy secretary from a headband and Peter Pan-collared mouse into a sultry fur stole-draped vamp for a date with the boss that goes bad. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

The story, called *Model With a Broken Heart*, was notably not written by Mills, but by Gary Friedrich. The film noir 40s vibe looks wonderfully retro to the modern eye, and while it might feel classic now, at the time it was just a bit dated; the fashions don't really look fresh.

Sometime after 1972, Miss Fury enters the public domain, and is no longer protected by copyright.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

In 1979, Mills published a collection of Miss Fury strips - in paperback and a hardcover limited edition priced at \$10.95, close to \$50 adjusted for inflation, and I really hope she saw a good bit of that. The cover illustration is dated 1979, so she was still drawing - this is actually a gorgeous painting, of Miss Fury up in a tree being chased by dogs.

She started working on a graphic novel called "Albino Jo, the Man With the Tiger Eyes," bringing back one of Miss Fury's sidekicks. But she couldn't get anyone interested, and never finished it. She never married, and never had kids, and was independent but isolated.

In 1988, Mills invited her nephew and his wife over to visit. She showed them where her original artwork was kept, in a large metal cabinet. Her health was on the decline, she had congestive heart failure and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and they were really taking a toll. She was homebound and oxygen dependent, but she still smoked like a fiend. That was the last time her family saw her.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

About six months later, at the age of 70, June Tarpé Mills died alone in her apartment. The Finns don't seem to have been informed, and her body went to the Brooklyn Morgue. She was buried in an unmarked grave in a New Jersey cemetery. Her art and belongings disappeared, and have never been found.

But her legacy is being restored. Mills' great-nephew Bill Finn, son of the namesake of Mills' Daredevil Barry Finn comic series, has been on an over-20-year journey to get his great-aunt the recognition she deserves.

He was able to get information on the settlement of her estate, the name of the funeral home that processed her body, and where her remains were laid to rest. In 2018, a headstone was put in place to commemorate her.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Miss Fury can also once again be found in the pages of contemporary comics.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Here she is on the cover of 2007's *The Twelve* from Marvel, storming Berlin (recognize it?) behind Captain America, the Human Torch, Namor, and others, though you'll have to look hard to make out her pointy ears in the crowd. So I've helpfully highlighted her for you with a pink arrow.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

And Miss Fury's had a couple makeovers, too. In a 1991 four-issue mini-series published by Adventure Comics, the new Miss Fury, a young woman named Marlene Hale, is the granddaughter of the original, Marla Drake.

In a 2013 series, Dynamite Comics sent 1940s Miss Fury traveling through time. They also released the graphic (accent on the graphic) novel *Miss Fury: Joy Division* in 2022, which sees a bloodthirsty Marla Drake leading a team to save Jewish women forced to work in concentration camp brothels. I'm going to skip that one.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

In 2011 and 2013, The Library of American Comics released beautiful collections of the original Miss Fury Sunday series, with an introduction by comics historian Trina Robbins, herself an important cartoon artist, and the first woman to draw Wonder Woman. They marked the first reprints of Miss Fury since 1979.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

Fashion remembered Tarpé Mills, too. Prada Spring/Summer 2018 — shown in September 2017 — cited her as one of several female comic artists to inspire the collection. And there's a huge print of Marla Drake's face adorning the runway in Milan.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

And in 2019, June Tarpé Mills was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards at San Diego Comic-Con International, a long overdue accolade.

That year, Bill Finn also donated the family's remaining pieces of his great-aunt's work to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at Ohio State University, which holds the world's largest collection of materials related to cartoons and comics.

A whole new generation is discovering and embracing the self-reliance and style of Miss Fury, Marla Drake, and Tarpé Mills.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

If you'd like to learn more about June Tarpé Mills and other women comic artists, a lot of fun articles came out about her after she was inducted into the Comics Hall of Fame. And there are several great books that comics historian Trina Robbins has written or contributed to, like *A Century of Women Cartoonists*, which I used. Also good is *Comic Book Women* by Peyton Brunet and Blair Davis which takes a revisionist approach to women's role in the Golden Age of comics. And definitely track down the beautiful Library of Comics reprints; they are really glorious, and heavy. [SHOWS BOOK] [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

A documentary called "Miss Fury and the Lost Legacy of Tarpé Mills" by Chelsea Stone (no relation) [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] will be coming out in the next year or so, including interviews with Trina Robbins, Bill Finn, and others. Chelsea has also written a series pilot about June Tarpé Mills and Miss Fury, too, and was kind enough to answer some of my queries about June's early life.

I also want to say thanks, somehow, to my friend and friend of the Dead Ladies Show Andy Horn. Back in 2016, he said to me after one of the live shows, "Hey, have you ever heard of Tarpé Mills? She was really cool." And, he was right. We added her to our list of future ladies, but sadly Andy died before we could get him to tell her story for us. So I'm sharing Tarpé Mills' story for him, for her, and for all of us.

Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan! Woo! And you can find out more about Miss Fury and Tarpé Mills over on our website at deadladiesshow.com/podcast and on social media @deadladiesshow

SUSAN STONE: I'm just going to tell you now that the Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me,

Susan Stone. Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. This is the final episode of Season Six, but we have 66 other episodes for you to enjoy, wherever you like to listen.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you to everyone here at PodFest Berlin including Daniel Stern, Ina Moana, and Anaïs Engler for welcoming us here today, and to our fantastic sound engineer Grace, Grace Hamdan, for the audio support. [AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

And thanks to all of you for coming!

SUSAN STONE: And thanks to everyone out there listening. We'll be back again soon with another fabulous Dead Lady!

BOTH: Bye bye!

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

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

PODFEST BERLIN FUNDING CREDIT WITH MUSIC, THEN VOICE OF DANIEL STERN:
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