

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 69
Sister Mary Ignatius Davies

(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 the 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 special selection of these stories here on the podcast.

We are pleased to be kicking off Season Seven of our podcast today, and to be able to wish you a happy International Women's Day. International Women's Day, March 8th, is an official holiday and day off from work here in Berlin, as it should be everywhere. If you want to learn a little bit more about it, go check out our episode on Alexandra Kolontai. I've got another international woman here with me today. It's DLS co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hello!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello, here I am, all international.

SUSAN STONE: Well, between us, we're kind of international.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We cover two whole countries, three whole countries, yeah.

SUSAN STONE: So Katy, to kick off our season, we're going to play a presentation from you, from one of our most recent Dead Ladies Shows. And it's about Sister Mary Ignatius Davies, who was a nun who played a surprisingly important role in musical history.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: She did indeed! She was a nun in Jamaica. And she basically taught several generations of Jamaican boys how to play musical instruments, from drums to piano to brass instruments. And they in turn brought us the wonderful music of Jamaica from jazz to ska to rock steady to reggae and beyond. She's been called the Mother Theresa of Reggae!

SUSAN STONE: It's funny because normally when you think about nuns and music, you think about someone like Hildegard von Bingen and choral history, music or hymns or what we call classical music, which is a pretty broad category. But nonetheless, Sister Mary Ignatius rocked.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, she certainly did. And she had a very broad musical palette and also was quite into sports as well. Though we can't relate quite so well to that part.

SUSAN STONE: No. All right, let's hear Katy from the stage in Berlin's ACUD.

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE FROM ACUD: We have never spoken about nuns before at the Berlin Dead Ladies Show.

The Americans, apparently in New York, they've done like several nuns, as they say. But I am — I don't have a personal affinity to nuns. Just this one. Sister Mary Ignatius Davies. We can see that, right? And here she is, herself, Sister Ignatius. Here she is with some young Black footballers at Jamaica's National Stadium in November 1968. She was a White Catholic nun with a taste for sport, but she also had a lasting influence on musical history. So I'm going to play you three tunes that might never have existed if it wasn't for Sister Ignatius.

MUSIC CLIP

That was *Adorable You* by Jackie Opel and Doreen Shaffer, recorded in 1965 at Studio One with the Skatalites as a studio band.

Here comes one you might know if you're from the UK.

MUSIC CLIP

That was Althea & Donna, *Uptown Top Ranking*, recorded in 1977, hit the top 20 in the UK in February 1978, that was them on Top of the Pops, as you might have guessed if you saw the pictures, featuring Tommy McCook on tenor saxophone and Vin Gordon on trombone.

The last one is quite recent-ish compared to the other two.

MUSIC CLIP

That was *Whole Lot of Love* by Kitty, Daisy & Lewis from 2017 featuring Edward "Tan Tan" Thornton on trumpet. If I had been in the mixing studio, I would have turned that trumpet up louder. personally. But there you go.

So all the musicians I mentioned — not the singers, but the musicians I mentioned by name — honed their talents under Sister Ignatius or Sister Iggy as she was known.

I'm gonna be drawing on two books here, *Alpha Boys School: Cradle of Jamaican Music* by Heather Augustyn and Adam Reeves and *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* by Lloyd Bradley. I recommend them both. And I'm a particular fan of Heather Augustyn. She's also written other books about women in reggae. A little bit of spoilers. Spoilers coming away the whole time here. Thanks to Heather Augustyn, we also have this. What you can see here

is the birth record for Sister Ignatius. She was born on the 18th of November, 1921 in the village of Innswood, St. Catherine Parish in Jamaica as Agnes Marjorie Reeves Davies. She was known as Marjorie, though.

And she had two older brothers. Her mother, Ethel, was born in Guyana, and her father, John Davies, is listed here as a planter. This is Spanish Town right near to Innswood, which was the capital of Jamaica, actually, from up until 1872. This is a picture from 1921 when she was born. So you can see it's pretty fancy, like fake classicism, except with palm trees. It looks very beautiful.

Jamaica was a British colony from 1655 to 1962. The Davies family might have been descended from White prisoners or indentured servants sent there in the 17th century, or from later arrivals, seeking to make money through the slave labour system.

Planter — it's not quite sure to me what that means. It probably means that he grew sugarcane, because there was a large sugar plantation, sugar estate in Innswood until actually fairly recently. So although slavery ended there in 1838, Jamaica was what's called a "plantocracy."

That means the plantation owners, the White property class, held the dominant position in every respect, and the vast majority of the Black population remained poor after slavery ended. And even after independence, that was replaced by a very rigid class system that didn't really benefit many people.

So it's difficult to know what kind of wealth Marjorie came from, but she definitely came from a position of privilege. Her mother died though in 1935, and she was sent to live with her Aunt Ivy when she was 14, who enrolled her at high school run by the Sisters of Mercy — not the 80s rock band. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I had to make that joke. I will only make it once. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So this school was called the Alpha Academy in Kingston, and I quote, it was "established originally as a small private high school in response to the need for educational and spiritual development of young women in Jamaica." And by the 1930s, it was "a secondary institution for upper and middle class children."

I imagine it actually is fairly idyllic, and the reason I do that is because of these photos from 2015, which show Jamaica's largest baobab tree right next to the art building at the Alpha Academy. And it's the biggest tree that I have seen in a long time. It has a four-tier bench all around it. And at the bottom, can you see that? It's got a ladder up into the branch. And what I love about it is that

it's got all these girls' names carved into the enormous trunk. There we are! Things you find on the internet.

This is, here we are, Marjorie in 1940. So she apparently excelled at high school in business classes, but of course it was a Catholic girls' school, so the business classes meant shorthand and typing. Anyway, yes. So she joined the Sisters of Mercy herself after graduating, and that meant that she swore vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service at the age of 17 in 1939.

She adopted her name after Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who was the founder of the Jesuit Order. She started work at the Alpha Boys School, which was different to the Academy. And you can see it here in its modern-day form. It's a beautiful bright yellow building with green trim and lots of very smartly uniformed Jamaican boys right out in front.

It was run by the same religious order, and Sister Ignatius spent her whole life there, apart from a very brief interruption when she went to set up another school somewhere else in Jamaica. She eventually became the head of the school. The motto, as you can see, is Upward and Onward!

So, it started as an orphanage in 1880. It was started by a Catholic philanthropist lady. Originally it was run by four women who funded it literally by going out and begging in the streets. Three of those four became nuns when they were joined by six Sisters of Mercy — not making the joke — from London a few years later.

So the orphanage evolved into a school for the poor teaching what they called “wayward boys” trades like tailoring, carpentry, printing, agriculture. They grew their own food. They sold the things they made in the workshops. And it still exists, as you can see in the picture.

I quote: “Today Alpha Institute is a non-profit vocational and general educational school for 150 at-risk boys and young men from Kingston's impoverished inner city communities.”

So there were plenty of at-risk boys in need of help during Sister Ignatius' time as well. So after the Depression and World War II, tourism and bauxite mining became the main industries in Jamaica. From 1950 to 1957, the country was the world's largest supplier of bauxite, which is used to make aluminum.

As you can see in these slightly horrific photos, they dig up the ground, take out the minerals and leave it again. That money from the bauxite went mainly to American and multinational companies, while it caused the mass migration from the countryside into cities as the rural population were displaced. Aside, of course, from the environmental and health problems involved. Add to that the intergenerational legacies of slavery, and you can see that things were,

you know, there was a lot of boys in need of help.

By independence in 1962, Lloyd Bradley writes that the economy was so weak and so much money was leaving the island that Jamaica just wasn't worth it anymore for the UK to hold on to, despite all the optimism involved in independence.

Here she is again, Sister Ignatius. It looks in this photo, doesn't it, like she's wearing eyeshadow. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I don't think nuns are allowed to wear eyeshadow. I think that's the reflection of her glasses. You know, any glasses wearers like I ought to be? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] You know, you get your photo taken, it reflects. Yes, that's what's going on here. She probably didn't wear that 70s eyeshadow look. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She did, as you can see, wear a lovely white habit. The nun's hat, I looked it up, I think it's called a wimple. Do we have any experts in the house? [AUDIENCE MEMBER AGREES IT IS A "WIMPLE"] A wimple, thank you. As I said, I'm not really au fait with nuns. That's what she's wearing in this picture.

So, what did she do at the school? She supervised the dormitories. She encouraged, taught and joined in with sports, football and cricket, table tennis, boxing. She would put on her boxing gloves with the rest of them and fight in her habit. She would show movies of boxing matches to teach the boys how to do it. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Apparently she was a penpal with Sugar Ray Robinson. There's no evidence that that's true, but it's a really great story. So, so far, so slightly unusual. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

This is my favourite photo. Obviously, you can get a t-shirt of Sister Ignatius playing the saxophone in her white habit against any colour of background, but I favor this beautiful red cushion. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She played the saxophone, obviously, also the flute and the piano, and she was extremely supportive, and here's where the music comes in, of the boys' music lessons and the Alpha Boys School band, which is a long-standing institution training boys to become professional musicians. I'm going to show you her talking about that work in a 1998 documentary.

SISTER MARY IGNATIUS IN FILM CLIP: "They came here in need of care and protection, some because their parents died, etc. Music is not the only group we have here, there are about seven others. The Alpha Boys School Band, first, it was a drum and fife, that's in 1892, and then about 1908, they got some brass instruments from the States, and there we started the Alpha Brass Band.

And of course, everybody wanted to go into the band, but after they're in the band, they see that it's not that easy, and they find out it's a lot of hard work, a

lot of practice. [BOYS PLAY MUSIC] We were very poor in those days, so they used to have the instruments tied up with a piece of string, or use brown soap and stop up the holes, etc. But they made it, and they made it, quite a number of them made it to the top in their profession.”

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Isn't she beautiful? How can you not, you know? She's talking about the 50s actually there. The boys learned percussion, brass instruments, piano, and bass, and obviously they learned to read music and to play professionally.

So many of her students became professional musicians, but probably the most influential were these people, the Skatalites.

Four of the founding members were Alpha Boys School graduates, Tommy McCook, Johnny “Dizzy” Moore, Lester Sterling, and Don Drummond. And in this photo you can also see Doreen Schaffer, who we heard at the very beginning, that first little musical clip I played you. So to tell you a little bit more about them, I've got this wonderful, wonderful footage from British TV in 1976, I think, which is just dripping with embarrassment as the presenter, Janet Street Porter, gets a pained introduction to Jamaican music and dance styles.

TV CLIP: JANET STREET PORTER: Now this is ska, isn't it?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it's a number called *The Guns of Navarone* by a group of musicians who dominated the Ska Era from the late 50s right through to the beginning of Rocksteady in 1965. They're called the Skatalites and were all proficient musicians with a jazz training. Artists like Roland Alphonso on sax, Don Drummond on trombone, and as well as making their own records, they backed almost every major act from Jamaica during this period.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It's great, huh? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] There's more. You can Google it. If you look on YouTube, the evolution of Jamaican music is about 15 minutes of this painfully embarrassing TV show, where apparently in the 70s, it was obligatory to wear at least one brown item of clothing. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Very influential, the Skatalites, as we just heard. There we are.

There she is again. Sister Ignatius, she provided this musical training for underprivileged boys, and she helped them to find work as musicians. Initially, that would have been in the Jamaican Army Marching Band, or working at hotels. A lot of musicians went abroad to work professionally. And she had all the context to get them into work, including the sound system men. And especially, she was especially well connected to this guy who's holding the guitar, Coxsone Dodd.

I don't know how many photos of nuns you look at in life, but this is the photo

of a nun with the most musical equipment around her I have ever seen. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] All these amplifiers and guitar cases and there's a keyboard and oh, God, I don't even know what all this is. But I love this photo.

So what happened was these local men ran dance nights around downtown Kingston. They would play records outside and they just gathered these huge, huge followings who would just go there to party, right?

So they started with American Rhythm and Blues records, which they imported from Miami and New Orleans. But then they gradually switched to making their own recordings with local artists, which people liked more. And they'd pay the musicians one or two pounds for the recordings, which apparently, according to the musicians, was lots of money back then.

So that style that started with Jamaican musicians covering rhythm and blues tunes melded with Jamaican traditional music of various kinds to become the ska that we heard earlier. And that evolved to become rock city, and that evolved to become reggae, and then dub and fusion and dancehall and ragga. And after that, I stopped following it.

But Jamaican music that emerged at the time when Sister Ignatius was at her most active has become really, really influential all around the world and has really made it smart. That's not all, though. What you can see here is one of those sound systems. Now, the size of these speakers, to me, it looks about the same size as one of those vending machines in the station. That's a pretty big speaker. You would not have it in your house, unless you had a really, really big house, because they were meant for playing outside, right?

So this sound system was actually built. It's called Mutt and Jeff Sound System. It was named after a comic strip. It was built in the workshop, carpentry workshop, at the Alpha Boys School, by this guy you can see here, whose name was Kenneth Davey. He built it in 1959, and he made a living from DJing around Kingston with it, until 1964, when he stopped doing it, so that he could spend more time with his wife and 11 kids. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] What a great dad! I love that. He's like, no, I'm going to spend time with you now. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

So, Sister Ignatius bought this sound system off him, and she also, I don't know what leverage his wife had, but he sold his record collection as well. But Sister Ignatius already had her own pretty big collection. She loved classical music, jazz, gospel, as you might have guessed, but also Jamaican music, and she bought the records that her former students were making and built up this really, really impressive collection.

She had kind of favourites, and she would send them out on errands around town. One of them was her former pupil, Floyd Lloyd Seivright, who

remembers, “Sister Ignatius was a special woman, very special, and she would call early in the morning and say, ‘We’re going to have showers and get ready, and I have a list for you.’ And I would get my pocket money and a list of songs to choose, whatever was happening at the time, for her parties. She used to put on parties to raise money.” I haven’t found a photo, sadly, so you’re just going to all have to imagine this nun in her white habit standing behind these enormous speakers using one record player, because they hadn’t had the idea to use two, so you just had to change the records really quickly, and playing tunes for her students at fundraisers, and just every Saturday, basically, for the boys to dance to. Apparently she would tell them not to heed the lyrics if they were particularly outrageous. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Speaking of outrageous, we’ve got here on the right, actually, is this dancehall DJ, Yellowman, with his daughter, Kareema, and on the left we’ve got the reggae selector, Ilawi Malawi, and his daughter, Hempres Sativa, both of whom learned their trade on Mutt and Jeff, that sound system, with Sister Iggy, and both of whom have passed on their love of reggae music and performance to their daughters, which I get to show some more pictures of women. There’s not a lot of women in Sister Iggy’s life. Maybe there are other nuns.

So Winston Foster, aka Yellowman, was not one of her favourites. He had a very, very difficult childhood, and I think that he needed more attention than he was getting, and he used to act up a lot. He’s spoken about being flogged and locked in a broom cupboard for long periods at Alpha Boys School. Which, you know, if you have any experience of being educated by nuns, it might not surprise you that discipline was writ large and was enforced using violence.

Nonetheless, despite that, Foster himself and many, many of the other boys have incredibly fond memories of Sister Iggy, and they invariably say if it hadn’t been for her and the school, they would be dead or in prison. A lot of them talk about her as a mother figure. She’s revered, here’s that saxophone photo again. She’s revered — here’s that saxophone photo again — beyond the old boys as well, though.

Her record collection and her record player are held in the Seattle Museum of Pop Culture. You can look through the catalogue, so she had at least two versions of *Guns of Navarone*, which we heard earlier, and at least one Boney M single.

My favourite is the 1973, I think it’s a cover version of a German song, *In Heaven There Is No Beer*, which I mean, it’s funny anyway, but if you think about a nun listening to it, obviously. It’s a Jamaican version backed with a song called Virginia Skank.

And she's now seen as an inspiring figure for women in Jamaica. You can see her here on, I don't think it's actually a CD sleeve, it's mocked up to be like one, I think it's just a playlist. *100% Female Reggae, Empowering Number Two, dedicated to the loving memory of Sister Mary Ignatius Davies for her great contribution to the Jamaican musical culture.*

Here's another version of that saxophone photo, because why wouldn't you have another version? All arted up, I like it a lot. A poster, I think, for the Alpha Boys School. And standing by it is the former Jamaican Poet Laureate Lorna Goodison.

So her collection, *Mother Muse*, includes the poem *The Near Noonday Dance of Sister Iggy*, in which she imagines Sister Iggy dancing with the Holy Spirit. And they have this conversation that goes like this:

“Spirit inquires, ‘Dear Sister, how are our charges?’
‘You mean our boys lost, abandoned, wayward?
Doing well. They carry the news of our home
grown music to audiences all over the known world.’”

She was very, very proud of her students. Sister Mary Ignatius Davies died of a heart attack at 81 in 2003. One of her favourite songs was *One Scotch, One Bourbon, One Beer*. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I couldn't find it in the catalogue, so I don't know which version was her favourite. There's a lot of versions out there. Her former student Edward “Tan Tan” Thornton, who we heard at the very beginning of that 2017 track with Kitty, Daisy & Lewis, he likes to sing it every time he visits her grave in St. Catherine.

For me, it's really important that through her care and her inspiration, several generations of Jamaican boys overcame incredibly difficult circumstances to become highly influential musicians, or indeed carpenters, printers, farmers.

If you want to hear the music for which she acted as a midwife, if you like, her artistic legacy, I'd say go to this fabulous website or your internet radio, alphaboysschool.com, where they play 24 hours a day, every day, of music involving graduates from the Alpha Boys School, right from the 50s when the Jamaican recording industry began until today. They also have an Etsy. They don't do the cushions though.

I have overcome my previous feelings about nuns to see that actually this woman, Sister Ignatius, loved what she did, she loved music, and she was able to pass that love on to all these different boys and made my listening life much more exciting.

So thank you for listening. Thank you, Sister Ignatius. [AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Oh, I just love that story, Katy. Thank you so much. Katy Derbyshire on Sister Mary Ignatius recorded live in Berlin's ACUD.

Thanks to Johannes Braun, Adomas Laurinaitus and Christian Becking at ACUD, and special thanks to Agata Lisiak for helping us out at the show.

We will be having another show there very soon, our very first Dead Ladies Show of the year, and that is on March 27th, which is a Wednesday.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It is indeed. It will be you and me and the lovely women from the Feminist Podcast, Ms. Informed. And if you are in New York, you can see a Dead Ladies Show regularly, too. Follow them on Instagram @DeadLadiesNYC to get the latest news and show dates. And they also have a newsletter, as do we.

So we'll put the links to both of those in our show notes.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, we will. You can also find us over on patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, where we have exclusive audio content for subscribers.

For example, in our February Dead Lady Book Club, Katy and I are talking about witches. The trials and tribulations, but mostly just the trials.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Mostly the trials, sadly, yes. And do check out our episode notes to see pictures of Sister Mary Ignatius, really worth having a look at, and learn more about her life and the music she loved at our website, deadladiesshow.com/podcast, plus on our social media channels @DeadLadiesShow.

SUSAN STONE: Do not miss those pictures.

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

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our theme tune is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. Thank you to everyone out there listening. We'll be back again next month with another Fabulous Dead Lady.

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