

EPISODE #22: Jenn Kirby
Listening to Ladies
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I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

JK: I just got the strangest memories floating back with that question.

ECB: That's composer Jenn Kirby. I had just asked her when she first started writing music, and she said that as a teenager, she had a tape recorder.

JK: And so I started to try and make up lots of songs and I recorded for that, but I was really terrible, I actually have recently found those tapes and I am terrified to listen to them. So I used to get some of my sisters, I've got three sisters, I used to try and get them to come in and sing while I was playing and just make up some songs and every once in awhile they would indulge, so that was kind of the earliest I suppose I did song writing or music making creation that I was trying to do.

ECB: Then, she started using a computer to record.

JK: A friend of mine showed me, he said, "Like just play like some chords and record them". So I just played a few chords and recorded them. And then he said, "Now do the exact same thing again and record those again." So I did it and we played it back, obviously we know that now it's double tracking, I didn't know what it was, and I just went, "Wow, it sounds amazing!" I was really excited, so then after that it was just like put on some really terrible vocals and just soloed everywhere, had no idea really what I was doing, just recorded all this nonsense, but I just found it so exciting to do it. And the first time, you know, of burning, after when I got away from tapes and burning a CD, and like having a song that I made on it, I just found that so exciting.

[excerpt of *Phonetics* plays]

JK: When I was going into the University, I wasn't really sure if I wanted to do music or do kind of computer science and programming.

ECB: She settled on the latter, but made her projects mostly to do with music.

JK: Like one of my projects was, I built this kind of real time tab writer, so you would play guitar into it and there was a microphone there and it would analyze what you were playing and draw like a tab for what you were doing. I thought it was really cool at the time, it turns out things like Melodyne exists, which did it in so much more of a sophisticated manner than I did, but I was happy enough at it at the time.

[excerpt of *Phonetics* plays]

ECB: Then, just like when she was applying for her bachelor's she found herself with another decision to make, when choosing what to study in her master's degree.

JK: I was really interested in cryptography as well. I have the most bizarre interests, I'm just realizing when I say them now. But yeah, so I was really interested in cryptography and really interested in music technology and I didn't really know what to do. So, I did what I did last time, I chose one and incorporated the other where I could. So I chose music technology, but I incorporated cryptography in the project that I did. So I built this thing called "Secure Composer", which allowed you to create algorithmic composition based on encrypted messages, so you could type in your message, you could encrypt it, you could generate music and embed that encrypted text within the file and then you would send someone a piece of music that's just a WAV file and they could upload it back into this piece of software and put in the password and get back the message, but also listen to the music that you've made out of it, it was quite a bizarre concept. I'm surprised they allowed me to do it actually.

[excerpt of *Phonetics* plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt of a piece called *Phonetics*.

Having gotten a non-music bachelor's degree meant that she had a gap in her knowledge of music and music theory, going into her master's in Music Technology. So, in the summer between undergrad and grad school, she set about fixing that.

JK: I actually went to, it's quite funny and a little embarrassing really, but I found this kind of music teacher, who did kind of grading for kids, and I just bought all the workbooks and said, "Will you mark my workbooks," and she said, "I really only work with kids, but ok." So I'd like go out for a lesson with her, but I think if you are learning, you are doing the right thing, you know, and if you are embarrassed by it, it's probably just your ego being embarrassed, you can just ignore it, you know, because you are learning, it's fine. So, yeah, I felt a little bit silly going out to this woman who teaches grading to kids and going, "Will you mark my kiddy workbook?" that I filled in, but it didn't matter, that was how I learned and it was great.

ECB: The masters program was thrilling for her. She described being exposed to so much new music.

JK: I had never heard before, didn't even know was possible and I was so excited by it after I got over my initial resistance to what is this, this isn't music, that kind of stuff, I was just really excited by it. Even a lot of stuff I was playing, I would really get bored of playing in the same key signature or playing 4/4 and it just kind of bored me a lot, so when I realized, oh you don't have to do that, I was just making these assumptions, but other people have decided for you already that you don't have to, so I thought that was really cool, you can do whatever you want.

[excerpt of *Gliche* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *Gliche*, for laptop orchestra. It's being performed here by the Dublin laptop orchestra.

JK: I was so quite fond of that piece, because it was the first one that I wrote that was I think successful in some way, in that I had tried out a bunch of things up until then and none of them really worked all that well, so I was quite happy about that one.

[excerpt of *Gliche* plays]

JK: It's physically strenuous at points and sometimes I am out of breath and sometimes you feel quite tired and I'm gonna be really stiff the next day, you feel like you've done something I suppose.

[excerpt of *Gliche* plays]

ECB: I asked Jenn to talk about her experiences with sexism in school, and she recounted an incident in which it was suggested that a male student had done the work for her on a project.

JK: In actual fact, I had helped him do the work, because he couldn't do it and that's fine, we were friends, no one thought of it, we just helped each other, that's what you do. So I guess I found it, if it had been the case, where he had helped me and I was struggling, then it would have discouraged me I would imagine, but it was just quite amusing, because it was the opposite way around, for him to make that assumption based on nothing, we just kind of laughed and laughed you know. I found it discouraging enough to not want to enter that class anymore I suppose, but maybe my tendency is probably, if someone says, "You can't do that", I immediately want to prove them wrong.

ECB: She says she does still experience sexism in her daily life, especially in the form of assumptions and comments.

JK: Oh all the time, it's one of those things that kind of catches me off guard and I might come up with an idea of how I could have responded three days later, but at the time, I don't know how to deal with it, because I consider it so obviously inappropriate that I'm more shocked that no one else seems to have noticed either, so you just don't want to be the only person fighting that all the time. So yeah, it's something that I am still trying to learn I think and still trying to figure out. And some days I am gonna be better at that than others I suppose.

ECB: She says that while she herself has never been discouraged from her path by the sexism she's experienced, she's well aware that not everyone responds to it in the same way, and when she talks to students and when she visits schools, she makes every effort to emphasize that any of them can be a composer, a sound engineer, a music technologist.

JK: Because sometimes people aren't told they can do these things or worse, sometimes they are told that they cannot. And actually no one can tell you if you can or can't do something, because you don't even know yourself, so someone else certainly doesn't know. The only way you can find out is if you try it and see how you get on. So the idea that someone says, "Oh you can't possibly do this because you are of this age or you are of this gender or you are of whatever", it's just nonsense.

ECB: Hey, Elisabeth here. I want to take a moment and thank new Patreon subscriber Jennifer Seeto. I really want to give all love and appreciation to my Patreon subscribers. You all help make this podcast possible. Genuinely you do. For anyone interested in becoming a subscriber, just go to www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies. Subscription donations start at just \$1/month. Ok, back to the episode.

I asked Jenn about her process-how she begins a piece, and what her priorities are while writing a piece.

JK: I'll spend a long time thinking about music before I start writing anything. So I'll write down as many ideas as I can think of, you know, and I'll sketch out what the people look like on stage, which is probably a really daft thing to do, but it kind of helps me to visualize the end product and then I can figure out how to get there, but if I start visualizing how they are all performing together, I can begin to hear it, I

suppose. And then I can start with ideas, so that's better than just opening up this blank page, I suppose. That might work for some people, I am just saying it doesn't work for me, that's all.

One of the things that's really important to me, is that while I would consider myself very serious about the music that I make, I don't think the music I make has to be serious. So, I really like putting humor in music and in some strange ways that I kind of look at, it's all leading up to this gag at one point, or there's a punch line in there with a lot of the music that I make. And it might just be funny to me, but I think there's certain, it's great that there's a lot of etiquette around classical music performance, but there is some that I'm a little less comfortable with. There's certain expectations from the audience, like they are expected to applaud and be quiet and all these things, but I thought, if you make them laugh, I think they are not expected to laugh, so I like the idea of doing that, or just making them smile, because I did a bit of research into you know, what makes someone smile and that, and sometimes it's rewarding the brain telling you, whatever you are receiving is good for you, so you smile because of it. And I thought that that was kind of exciting. I thought, you know, I can do something nice for the people who are listening, which is I don't know, it is a bit of a strange one. Other things, I like to use subversion quite a lot. So, the humor in theater is kind of linked to that a lot of the time, it's kind of leading people down one path and then twisting it around a little bit.

ECB: She also thinks a lot about the performers when she's working on a piece.

JK: I worry that, oh do you think that this is really crap, but you won't tell me because you are really nice and you have to play it now anyways, so you don't want to turn around and go, "By the way, I hate your music." You know, which is fair enough, you would not say that, but I am always kind of worried, like thinking, are they getting bored at this point, you know? Maybe they are playing this and at this point going, "I wish they wrote a more interesting part for me." So then I sometimes get inspired to write some more theatrical elements then to it when I start thinking about what they might be thinking in different parts of pieces. For example, *Dopamine*.

[excerpt of *Dopamine* plays]

JK: There's one part that they first guitarist is playing quite a lot and then he is just not playing for a bit, and I think, well maybe he is sitting there going, "I would like to be playing", you know, or he's quite bored or whatever, so I thought, actually, it might be kind of interesting if he just like takes his phone out of his pocket to check the time. I remember when we did it first in rehearsal, I mean, he took out his phone with an arm stretched out while looking at it, and I thought, no one looks at the time like that, just gently, just slightly take it a couple of inches out of your pocket and just look at the time.

[excerpt of *Dopamine* plays]

JK: It's this kind of subtly that I am interested in, that maybe only the people in the front row will actually see that, or maybe no one will see it at all, or maybe everyone will see it, I don't know. But I think that kind of playing with those subtle elements is really quite interesting.

[excerpt of *Dopamine* plays]

JK: One of the other reasons why I really like humor and theater, because it's breaking down that barrier between the performer and the audience. That kind of barrier, it's a way of closing off a connection actually that you could have with the audience, that you get when you are in more intimate settings. So by doing some of those things, you see something else I think, beyond the music, that the personality of the performer, the personality as the composer, or maybe their personality of the audience as well, who finds

it funny, who is disgusted at the idea that someone might check the time during a performance, I think that kind of loosens everything up a little bit. I think that's what really excites me about it.

[excerpt of *Dopamine* plays]

JK: Maybe it's a sneaky way of trying to get the audience to pay attention. Maybe I am just that egotistical, and I am like, you are not paying attention, so I am going to put something else silly in here and now you are definitely going to be listening.

[excerpt of *Dopamine* plays]

ECB: That was an excerpt of her piece *Dopamine*.

JK: The whole accessibility thing it really goes down to, well who is your audience? I think, you know, something doesn't have to be pleasing to be good, you know, it doesn't have to be nice to be liked. In the same sense though, I'm never looking to make an audience uncomfortable in any way. I think people can embrace noise a little bit more. You know, noise doesn't have to be loud. I hate loud things, I like everything to be quiet, so for me, that's a big challenge then, it's how do you make it, how do you create noise music without having it loud. Yeah, I guess I haven't fully figured out the accessibility. There's different ways I suppose of making it accessible, or there's different approaches and different parameters I guess that you can focus on. It's not just sound, you know, the instrumentation can make it more accessible, the environment can make it more accessible. And actually, I would find a lot of classical music environments, I mean I find them accessible for me, but I think they are not as accessible for maybe other people in their twenties and thirties and things, because they are surrounded by tradition, and if you don't know that tradition and you are coming into to it, you have everyone clapping between movements and feeling really embarrassed or someone rustles their jacket and they get told off for it and things like that, yeah I'd rather get rid of that, so I'd rather change things to make them more accessible, rather than work within the traditions I suppose.

ECB: She also pointed out that to have a good experience at a concert, you don't necessarily need to love what you hear.

JK: You know, I am always really excited when I hate things, because I rarely hate things, but when I do, I am like, why do I hate this and then I have to spend a long time figuring it out. Or if I think, I don't like that kind of music, I am like, why don't I like it? So I have to listen to loads of it to figure it out and I probably will eventually end up liking it, but you know, it's just more exciting to see why you are being challenged and that it is ok to be challenged in whatever capacity that is. And it's ok not to like things.

[excerpt of *one to N* plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called *one to N*.

JK: So, one-space-to-space-N.

[excerpt of *one to N* plays]

JK: It's kind of a programming term, so you can go from one to any other number. The piece is in kind of ten sections and the idea is that the performers choose which sections to perform and what order to perform them and how many etcetera.

[excerpt of *one to N* plays]

JK: I worked it out that, because there are ten different sections and they can be performed in any order, then it could be performed like in, it's something like almost ten million different ways, so depending on the order in which you do it, so it's really unlikely that it would ever be performed in the same way twice, you know, statistically speaking. However, since, it's being judged by performers that look at music, then it's actually more likely that it would be performed in the same way, because they might make the same decisions. And I think having that open and just seeing what people do is quite exciting actually. It doesn't matter at all what people choose to me, I'm just excited to see how they choose and why they choose.

ECB: In the course of our conversation, Jenn shared many thoughts on creating that could be super helpful to any creative person:
She spoke about the danger of harshly judging your own work while you're still making it.

JK: You are judging what you are doing while it's in progress and that's not really helpful, because the only stuff that you see and hear in progress is your own stuff, but you are judging it against all these finished works, so you have to shut that part of you up that starts criticizing while you are trying to work and then you separate those sections of now is my time to be working on it and later I am going to review it and then I can be as critical as I want then, but right now, that is not helpful. I think that just realizing and listening, or just getting to turn that part of you off that says, "This is a bit shit", you know, it's quite helpful I think.

ECB: She pointed out that failure itself is a valuable part of the learning process.

JK: You know, I've done some things where I've thought I've completely failed at that and now when I look back at it, I just think, oh, it's always been a learning experience, or I've always learned something more from it and I think that's what's really important, just to try things and it doesn't matter if it doesn't work out, just consider you are just learning. You have to always learn and get better and be better than you were yesterday and if it's useful to compare yourself to someone else, because let's say for instance, you are trying to get to their standard, then do that, but if it's not useful, then don't do it.

ECB: And learning to love the process is essential.

JK: Because if you are only ever after the outcome then you've spent so much time creating and you spend all this time that you are not enjoying and then you have this little bit of time at the end that you enjoy and then you start again. But actually, if you try to learn to enjoy the process of writing or the process of whatever it is that you are creating, that you can enjoy the 95 percent of your life that you are actually occupying, as opposed to the five percent rewards at the end.

[excerpt of *one to N* plays]

ECB: To find out more about Jenn, or anything mentioned in this episode, and to listen to full streaming tracks of the music excerpted here, just visit the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com.

[excerpt of *one to N* plays]

ECB: As ever, thank you for listening.