

Episode 21: Judith Shatin

Listening to Ladies

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I'm Elisabeth Blair and this is Listening to Ladies.

[excerpt of **My Head and Stay** plays]

ECB: This is a piece called My Head & Stay, and it's from a project composer Judith Shatin created, called "Coal," which featured

JS: Appalachian band, consisting of fiddle, banjo, hammer dulcimer, guitar, two singers, including Ginny Hawker, who is just fantastic, and Tracy Schwarz, and chorus, electronics and a synthesizer.

[excerpt of **My Head and Stay** plays]

JS: And it was really fascinating, because of course these musicians are folk musicians and they had never worked in any kind of situation like this and I think to begin with, they were skeptical, I guess is the word, and skeptical of me.

[excerpt of **My Head and Stay** plays]

JS: I really wanted the words to be clear, and I wanted these folk musicians to be comfortable, so it was a very different kind of project and I tried to honor that aspect of it in my composing.

[excerpt of **My Head and Stay** plays]

[excerpt of **Damn Min'ral Hunters** plays]

ECB: This is another piece from Coal. It's called "Damn Min'ral Hunters."

I'm a former folk singer and songwriter, and at the time of this interview I was in a music composition grad program, really struggling with insecurity about my musicianship and my capabilities, since I had almost no background in written music. So I was especially curious to hear about Judith's experiences working within these two very different worlds of music-making.

JS: There was so much distrust and dislike on both sides. So I remember Ginny commenting on paper trained musicians, ie musicians who don't know how to improvise and don't know this kind of style. And

then when I told some of my classically trained musician friends what I was doing, they sort of looked down their nose at it and thought that it was slumming, because you know, what do fiddlers know, and I just found that on both sides, really ashamed, because there's incredible musicianship in both of those domains, and I would like to see each of them able to recognize it in the other.

[excerpt of **Damn Min'ral Hunters** plays]

ECB: When she was composing Coal, she went into a working coal mine to record sounds. I asked her what it was like.

JS: Well, it was very strange, I mean, it's hard to imagine the total sense of darkness and the grit in the air, and of course I had a little moment of pause when we were given a three hour training session before I went down and then we were given dog tags, just in case anything happened while we were down there. It took about a week to just get all the grit off of me and I could only imagine if you are working down there, day after day, year after year, in fact, we gave the proceeds from the performance to the Black Lung Association of America, because black lung is still an issue for miners.

ECB: So, let's go back now to the very beginning of Judith's music career. When she was a child, her father was a clinical psychologist, and at one point he was working with some musicians.

JS: And they suggested to him that since he had four daughters, he should get a piano. So we got us this old upright and I really gravitated towards it, I loved it. And he offered all of us piano lessons, so I took advantage of that and in addition, I was living in Albany, New York at the time, and they had very good music in the schools, as they also did when I moved to South Orange, New Jersey, where I played flute in the band and the orchestra and sang in the chorus, and basically did every musical thing I could find.

ECB: Her mother had a PhD in microbiology, so...

JS: They were both very scientifically oriented and not so much musically oriented, however they also loved art, so that was always important, as was education. So there was a lot of support in the family.

ECB: Although she started composing here and there when she was in junior high, she didn't decide music was something she wanted to seriously pursue until she was a bit older. Then when she was an undergraduate at Douglass College, she convinced her professors to let her have a composition recital for her senior recital, even though there was no composition major at the college.

I asked Judith when she first knew of the existence of women who composed music.

JS: Well, when I was a graduate student at Princeton, there had been a couple of women ahead of me, who were composers, but was I aware of, you know, Dame Ethel Smyth and various other historical composers, no, I was not. In fact, it really was not until I was already a faculty member at the University of Virginia, that James Wye, at BMI, put me in touch with Tommy Carl, the president of American Women Composers, that I really became aware of the vast resources of women composers, both historical and contemporary, and became very fascinated by them.

ECB: So, in the absence of role models, what gave her the confidence to continue forward?

JS: You know, it's a very interesting question. I think, for one, the support of Robert Moevs at Rutgers and then when I was at Juilliard, I studied with Otto Luening, who was very encouraging, and then with Milton Babbitt, who was also encouraging, and I'll return to that.

ECB: Just a quick note-the conversation about Milton Babbitt that she mentions here did not make the final cut when I was editing this episode. However, you can listen to it if you go to the show notes page at www.listeningtoladies.com. It's one of the extra features! Okay, back to Judith.

JS: But another turning point for me, was going to the Aspen Music Festival and working with performers, who were my cohort, they were very encouraging and very helpful and I loved the collaborative process with them and it just was something I wanted to do. In addition, I guess I've just always had a strong determination to do what I chose and so I wasn't really so much thinking in terms of role models, as I was thinking about what I love to do, for better or worse.

ECB: While she emphasized that most of her fellow graduate students and the faculty she studied with were very supportive, she did experience some sexism and discouragement along the way.

JS: When I was in graduate school at Princeton and I was about to get married for the first time, from my fellow graduate students, the first question was, "When are you quitting?" My answer, which I didn't say to them, but was, "Not in your lifetime."

ECB: And part of that confidence came from following her mother's example.

JS: When she defended her PHD, she had one child, who was, gee, she was maybe 14 months older than I am and she was seven months pregnant with me when she defended her dissertation, so she had a lot of determination herself.

[excerpt of **Fantasy on St. Cecilia** plays]

JS: I mean, there are many paths that people take, and I certainly understand anyone giving up in the field of composition, it's a very difficult one for any number of different reasons. I feel very fortunate that I've been able to maintain both the possibility to do it and my love for it for this long, it's really a great joy.

[excerpt of **Fantasy on St. Cecilia** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt from **Fantasy on St. Cecilia**.

[excerpt of **Fantasy on St. Cecilia** plays]

JS: Cecilia, one of the things that fascinated me was that she was associated with music and, you know, the patron saint of music, and there's all this artwork devoted to Cecilia, however, that all appears to be based on a mistranslation unclear whether intentional or not in the Fifteenth Century, and the story of Saint Cecilia is that, she refused to abandon her faith, this was during the time of the Romans, and they tried several times to kill her and eventually killed her with three blows with an ax.

[excerpt of **Fantasy on St. Cecilia** plays]

JS: So I guess there's a bit of a feminist twist here because I was drawn to the fact that she was a female martyr, that there was this connection to music even though it appears to be, shall we say, a tenuous one, but there was all this art and music that had been created in her honor.

[excerpt of **Fantasy on St. Cecilia** plays]

ECB: When Judith became a faculty member at the University of Virginia, another woman had been on faculty there in the past, though she had since left.

JS: So I wasn't the first, I didn't have to fight whatever that battle was going to be. It's been really a mixed bag. At this point, it's quite a supportive department, but when I came here, my attitude was and has stayed, that I want to treat others the way I wish I had been treated. So, I have certainly done my best with all of our students, this is not just a gendered issue, because I think in general, that in graduate school, you know, there's all kinds of issues of power between faculty and students, and so I'm really careful as much as I can be, to think of graduate students as young colleagues and not as you know, students, who I am trying to turn into a clone of myself or who I am embodying some kind of power relationship to them.

ECB: Judith founded the Virginia Center for Computer Music at the University of Virginia, and I asked her how she got started working with computer music.

JS: My very first experience was not a happy one. It was when I was an undergraduate, in the dark ages when we had magnetic tape that you had to cut with razor blades and then tape together. And I have to say that I don't know Mario Davidovsky did it, because the idea of keeping track of a bunch of little pieces of tape was totally unappealing to me. I'm not that organized. So, then when I was at Princeton, it was the age of the mainframe computer and you had to type up tons of these cardboard cards and then get them transposed onto magnetic tape and then put that through a digital analogue converter and go to the engineering school in the middle of the night to hear what you did. And that was not exactly the most satisfying either. So, I somehow told myself that down the road it was going to get better and I should wait until it did. So, I did.

ECB: And in the late 80s she got a grant to start the Virginia Center for Computer music, and she continued to get funding for that.

JS: I just became very fascinated by the ways in which you could play with sound as although it was something in your hands that you could manipulate. I've never found that it was something separate from other ways of dealing with and interacting with sound. I think I've always been interested in different timbral characters.

[excerpt of **Gregor's Dream** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called "Gregor's Dream".

JS: Inspired by the anxious dream that Gregor Samsa, the sort of antihero of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, has before he wakes up as a bug.

[excerpt of **Gregor's Dream** plays]

ECB: It's for piano trio and electronics.

JS: And for the electronics, I approached some bio-acousticians, who worked with beetles, and I explained the project and asked if they might share some recordings, which they did.

[excerpt of **Gregor's Dream** plays]

ECB: During a rehearsal in Chicago,

JS: We were trying to think about how to get the idea of the music beyond the notes and all the other indications on the page, and the pianist Howard Shelley said, "Well, maybe we should think of think of this as Brahms having a conversation with Kafka." And I thought that was just such a beautiful way to capture the kind of late Nineteenth Century romantic meets this, you know, dark metamorphosis and metaphorical way of thinking about fractured community on the other.

[excerpt of **Gregor's Dream** plays]

ECB: Hey, Elisabeth here. I want to take a quick moment and thank all of my Patreon supporters, including new subscriber Celine Thackston, for their generosity and their support. If you have extra resources that you would be willing to put toward the production of this podcast, you can go to www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies and you can see there that subscription donations will start at just \$1 a month. Since I make this podcast entirely on my own, every single dollar makes a big difference to me. Okay, back to the episode.

At one point in our conversation, Judith spoke about emotional responses to music.

JS: I guess just because of my own experiences of music, I'm well aware of its ability to move us individually in group settings, I mean, I think of the power of the music in social movements and as a way of binding people together, of helping create sense of community, so I think it has a very strong interactive power with people, and I, again, having had those experiences, it's something that's important to me and that I'm hopeful that my music can give to others.

ECB: She mentioned a performance of a piece of hers called Tape Music Infinity...

JS: Which is for any number of performers, who each have roll of tape, a box, and a blunt pencil, and electronics made from myself ripping different types of tape and putting it on boxes and doing different things. And anyhow, what was so fascinating is just seeing the audience smiling and having a good time and that was just really kind of great. So I like experiencing audience reaction and knowing that in some way or another it's reached them. I think of music as something to share. I also know that no matter what I create, some people will think that it's way far out and they can't possibly ever grasp it, and some people will say it's so conservative they can't stand it, and some people will say, "Oh, this is great and I really love it." So, I really don't pay too much attention to that, I'm more interested in creating the design elements that, you know, conceptually work for me and doing that to the best of my ability and then seeing what happens.

[excerpt of **Khamisa** plays]

ECB: This is an excerpt of a piece called...

JS: Khamsa. Khamsa is the symbol of the hand with the eye and it's both the symbol of hospitality and in many mid eastern cultures, keeping away the evil eye. And it also means the number five in Arabic, Hamesh five in Hebrew and it's a quintet, so I was thinking of it as both the gesture of invitation and also, you know, a sort of hope of keeping the evil away.

[excerpt of **Khamsa** plays]

ECB: As always, I asked for advice.

JS: I guess the advice that I have first of all, is for any young composer, I think it's important to do both acoustic and digital music. I still meet young composers who say they are not interested in exploring the digital world, and I just think that to live now and use so much technology in our daily life and not explore that, is to miss out on a very exciting opportunity.

[excerpt of **Khamsa** plays]

JS: You know, join whatever organizations you can that will enable you to work with wonderful performers. Bloom where you're planted, that is, look for opportunities that are local as well as national. Find people that you like collaborating with. Focus on that as much as you can.

[excerpt of **Khamsa** plays]

JS: For women, are there any particular things? Yes, I would strongly urge you to join the International Alliance for Women in Music, because you'll meet all kinds of interesting women just doing an amazing range of types of music and activities, scholars, performers, you know, all kinds of different people, and there are also men that belong to that organization and have been really incredible in helping move women's music into the mainstream. So, I think it's a fantastic opportunity to find out what's going on and to find role models and support, so yes, I would strongly urge young women to do that.

[excerpt of **Khamsa** plays]

ECB: To find out more about Judith, 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 **Khamsa** plays]

ECB: And as ever, thank you for listening.