

EPISODE #2: Pamela Z
Listening to Ladies
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Interviewee: Pamela Z (**PZ**)

PZ: Ok, and all of this is, so there's gonna be a little fluffy sound, which will be, it's probably more like a [sound effect] sound, that....

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

PZ: Because you are not going for pristine studio, you are going for living space person...

ECB: I met Pamela Z at her studio in San Francisco, where she generously offered up, and—I have to say, enthusiastically—set up her own equipment to record us with, so I didn't have to schlep mine from Michigan.

PZ: So, I'm answering a question and I get, oh, it's such a funny thing, or you say, how would you sing that, and I go [sings a long note]. Ok, that looks like....

[excerpt of *Pop Titles 'You'* plays]

ECB: This is her piece, Pop Titles 'You', which features her reading a list of alphabetized song titles.

PZ: From the phonolog, and there was a couple of other things I have...

ECB: What's a phonolog?

PZ: Oh! Oh!

[excerpt of *Pop Titles 'You'* plays]

PZ: Phonolog is... Back in the days before computers were ubiquitous, there was a time when every record store had, at the center of the record store, a little sort of lectern, with this gigantic phone book-like book that was thousands of pages long, with these yellow, onion-skin, thin pages, and it was a list of every song that was currently in print.

[excerpt of *Pop Titles 'You'* plays]

PZ: Actually, what would happen is, people would walk up to a record clerk and they'd say, "Do you have that song, I can't remember who sings it, but it's kind of about love and it's goes blah blah, you know," and then they would walk them over to the phonolog, "Well, let's try to look it up, do you think it's Madonna? Let's look under Madonna, oh do you think the song is called such and such?" "Well they repeat this phrase, well maybe that's what it's called, look it up under that." So that's what it was for, to see whether that song is actually in print, and if it is, then it would make sense to go bother looking through the singles to find it.

[excerpt of *Pop Titles 'You'* plays]

PZ: So this piece, which is one of my most iconic pieces, I think, it was just a page out of the phonolog, and the song is only three and a half minutes long. It was 1986, and to this day, it's still one of my favorite pieces of mine, Pop Titles 'You'.

[excerpt of *Pop Titles 'You'* plays]

ECB: I asked Pamela about her childhood, and whether she had support from her family to pursue music. She immediately spoke of her mother, who was a single mom of four daughters and so very, very busy.

PZ: But when she was home, like washing dishes or doing whatever, she would be doing cooking, she would sing all the time. And when I was five, we sang in the school's talent show and we sang La Cucaracha and my sister and I knew how to sing it in Spanish, I don't know, and we had harmony, and my mother sewed us matching dresses to wear in that talent show. So I would say, as a start, my first public performance at five years old, and my mother sewed our costumes, I guess that is an indication that she was pretty supportive of us doing that.

ECB: Her mother also got her a viola and viola lessons.

PZ: Which, you know, at the time, I'm sure I was not aware, but that was probably a sacrifice for her to do that.

ECB: Her father sent two guitars to the four girls and they taught themselves, largely through watching lessons on public television.

PZ: And if you can imagine, in those days, we didn't have VCRs or any kind of, well now people are like, "What's a VCR?", but you know, we didn't have any like recording device for television, you just had to watch the time and turn the TV on when the show aired and you had to do the lesson in real time while the show aired, you couldn't like, "Go back, go back, I didn't get that," you know.

ECB: I asked her about the music she made as a child.

PZ: I started being a "sound artist" in childhood, I just didn't have the terms for it.

ECB: Her dad sent the sisters a cassette deck, when it was first produced by the Craig Corporation.

PZ: I immediately absconded it in my room and I was making recordings and learning how to record and playing with it. And then he sent a second one and we were supposed to share them, but I then had both of them and I had them side by side, and I learned how to do overdubbing. And I would record one part onto one machine and then I'd play it back out of that teeny little speaker and then sing the harmony part and then play it back and record it. And you know the signal to noise ratio would just keep getting, you know, shifting more and more to the noise side with each layer, but I would make these layered things and I would sing songs and I would also, I used to make pretend radio shows and I would do all the parts. So, I'd be the DJ and be the music, the songs that were being played, and then I'd also be the advertisements and the public service announcements and I'd do all of it and I'd make up all these crazy like radio shows and they were all like sort of imitating and parodying the like commercial pop radio stations that we would listen to.

ECB: Later, around junior high, she also had a friend named Bob, from the down the street, whom she made shows with, specifically episodes of the Avengers. She would be Emma Peel and he would be Steed.

So did you play them for anybody?

PZ: I don't think we did!

ECB: Did you ever perform them?

PZ: We just like played them for ourselves, you know, it's really funny, I guess that maybe that is the sign of an artist when you put a lot of work into making something and there is no thought that the goal is to then try to get people to listen to it or do something with it. The actual doing of it was enough for us. We didn't have any plans, it was just play, we were playing basically, you know, that was our way of playing.

ECB: Speaking of play, before we talk about the next piece, *Wunderkabinet*, Pamela is going to tell you a little story. She is going to describe to you the Museum of Jurassic Technology, which is a real place. I've never been, but it's definitely on my list.

PZ: It is this strange little cabinet of curiosities type place and it's in a store front in Culver City, California. It looks almost like a strip mall-y type area and the front of it, it seems like it would be very small inside and then you enter it seems much bigger inside then you think it would be from the outside, so it's almost already a little bit of like a through the looking glass kind of experience to go in there and then it's all really kind of dark and mysterious lighting. There are all these old oak vitrines, what do you call them, with the dioramas in them, with a glass top and you look inside and there's strange little objects and it's very hard to determine for a visitor, is this real, or is this somebody invented this. And there's always narration and it's always in the voice of that man who, when you were in elementary school and they would show, you know, those really bad scholastic movies that would be like, "The pupa develops into a caterpillar", you know, it would be this kind of stilted like old, sounds like from the 1950s man narrating it and all the narration is in like phone receivers that look like the old, the receivers that used to be on, with the coily wire, that used to be on like old rotary telephones, and you put that to your ear and then he describes what you are looking at.

[excerpt of *Dez Alemap* plays]

PZ: And my absolute favorite one was, it's a bat, and the bat is called the Deprong Mori, that's supposedly the genus name or whatever of the bat, and it has a whole diorama that shows the information about this bat and it shows diagrams of the bat, and information about it, and then you are listening to this thing on this phone receiver and the guy is telling you this is a bat that was found deep in the rain forest and it had this magical property that, the natives, it was like the savages, or whatever, said that this bat was seen to be able to fly through solid objects. And so the scientist from some place, decided that they would go and try to study this bat to see if it was for real that it could actually fly through solid objects, but then the problem is, they couldn't catch one, because they would put [? 11:44] and then the bat could get out because it could fly through...so finally they had to build this trap, which was this room that had eight inch thick lead walls and then this is how they caught the Deprong Mori, and the Deprong Mori tried to escape, but it only could get partway through. And so then you get to the end of this thing and the last image in this diorama is this block of lead and supposedly the bat's inside. [Laughs] And you are just looking at this block of lead and this voice is telling you, "The Deprong Mori is trapped inside of the wall, this is a segment of wall that the Deprong Mori flew through."

[excerpt of *Dez Alemap* plays]

PZ: And so, you know, Matthew and I just decided to make an opera based on this museum.

[excerpt of *Dez Alemap* plays]

ECB: You were just listening to clips of one piece from *Wunderkabinet*, called *Dez Alemap*. And the Matthew she referred to is Matthew Brubeck, with whom she co-composed the opera.

I invited Pamela to talk about her gender and how it might have affected her career and her life, and she started off by telling a story about a time when she and her sisters made their brother cry.

PZ: And we made him cry because we were being mean about sports. We were just dissing sports and saying that, I was particularly saying, "Oh, I hate sports and I hate that on the holiday you always have to hear the sound of a football game. I just think it's all stupid and it makes me so mad that you know, schools put all this money and emphasis into sports but they don't support the arts, you know, the world at large is supporting sports and I just think it's awful and I think sports are stupid, blah, blah, blah," I don't know, I was giving him a really hard time. And all of a sudden I realized, it was like all of us ganging up on it, and all of a sudden we looked over and he was crying and I realized, it was so unfair and so mean, because he likes sports, and I thought to myself, this is how women usually feel in the world at large, because the world is kind of set up for men in most ways, you know. And all the systems were designed by men and were designed to favor men and most of the time, up until recent years, women just stepped back, because they just weren't willing to fight against it, and it was just they felt outnumbered because if they were in a situation where women are not well represented, then all of the sudden, they are the only voice from that side of things, if they want to be strong and walk into these situations where they are not gonna get taken seriously, they first have to go up against that, they can't just do the part about being good at the thing, they also have to be good at the thing and go up against not being taken seriously.

ECB: She also spoke about a time when she was teaching sound classes at the lab gallery in San Francisco.

PZ: And I remember constantly being told by women, "Well, I tried in my music department, there was a recording engineering class, and I tried to be in that class, but the guys would never let me touch the gear." And it was like, you know, not in so many words, but don't worry your pretty little head about it, you know, kind of situation. And it was always shocking to me, because it was like, I had never allowed them to not allow me, I just had never like, I was just dense, like if they were trying to send me signals that I shouldn't ask questions or shouldn't get involved or shouldn't push my way to the front, I just ignored those signals, and so I didn't allow myself to feel intimidated and I feel like it's kind of, it worked out to my benefit that I was a little bit blind to that stuff.

ECB: She spoke about how many categories she and her work fit into and how this means she gets invited to a number of different opportunities. Some examples are festivals for new opera and for futurism, electronics, women in electronics, sound art, and poetry.

PZ: I think in my case, for some weird magical combination of ingredients, I have actually benefitted from fitting into all these different categories and I think for a person who's trying to make it as a person composing and performing experimental music, doing performance art, doing avant garde theatrical things, it's a very hard world to be successful in, and I have to say that it has helped me more than it has hurt me that I have all these strange categories that I fit in. I sometimes feel sorry for my white male friends who are making really beautiful and interesting work, but they are trying to apply for grants that I know that the grants that they are applying for are trying to fix the imbalance, and therefore, they are actually favoring people who are culturally diverse and who are genderally diverse and so therefore, now

it's suddenly like, ok, you've had your white male privilege all these years, and so you should be appreciative that you've had that, but yeah, it's probably gonna be harder for you to get some of these grants, than it is for somebody else. And so, you know, I'm sorry, but you know, just look at this way, if you wanted to conduct an orchestra, you'd be much more likely to get that job in the skin you are in than I would so, you have to take the bad with the good.

ECB: I'm going to pause this episode for just 60 seconds, to thank you for listening, and to humbly ask you to help support the podcast. You can do this in two main ways. First, by sharing it widely. Let your friends and colleagues know about it. Post it to social media. Give us props in an iTunes review. Every little bit helps.

The second way to help the podcast-if you're in a position to-is to donate money. You can become a subscriber with our crowdfunding platform of choice, Patreon, where donations start at just \$1 per month. Just go to Patreon.com/listeningtoladies. We are two people-a graduate student and a singer/songwriter-and we are not receiving support from any other source right now. I want to especially thank this week's donors Katie Call, Carole McCurdy and Sarah Baer. Okay-now back to the amazing Pamela Z.

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

ECB: You are listening to an excerpt of her piece *Gaijin*. It's about the idea of being foreign, and she wrote it after spending six months in Japan.

PZ: It was the first time I'd ever spent that much time living somewhere, where I was a foreigner in the place that I lived.

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

ECB: Like many of her works, *Gaijin*, is a piece made up of many smaller segments. In this case, each one having to do with a different aspect of being foreign.

PZ: In some way, everybody is a foreigner.

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

PZ: And I touched on a lot of different ways that you can be a foreigner, or an *other*, an alien.

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

PZ: Speaking different languages...

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

PZ: Being just a different kind of a person, like feeling other than the people that you are around.

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

PZ: Whether or not you speak with an accent...

[excerpt of *Gaijin* plays]

ECB: Since this is a podcast, you are actually only experiencing one dimension of this piece. It's a multimedia performance work, which includes Bhutto dancers and projections and I really encourage you to check out the video on our show notes page.

I invited Pamela to talk about the ways in which race has affected her career.

PZ: I find that people tend to listen to my work, or see my work through a different lens, not everyone, but certain people and reviewers and things like that, there have been, if you look through the quotes from the press, I've had more than one occasion, people say things like, "Pamela Z combines street smarts with soulful singing", you know, and it's like, uh, do I? I didn't think I did that. But you know, and so you'll see these kinds of things, like what does that mean? And it's like, I just don't, I've never read that kind of language about, like nobody has ever said, "You know, Laurie Anderson combines with street smarts with soulful singing", you know. Or no one has ever said that about Meredith Monk or about you know, but for some reason they say that about me, hmm, I wonder what that reason is. So, there's that kind of weird lens thing, where they are hearing and seeing things that I don't think are there, but they are assuming are there because they have a certain set view of how they are going to hear me, you know. I think the thing that I've come up against the most, is this expectation that you are gonna represent. You know, like I get invited to things where people are expecting me to do work that is about my "people". There's an actual funny story that I was actually invited by a curator at the Museum of African Diaspora that is here in San Francisco, and the curator called me up and said he'd be interested in meeting with me because he wanted to include some work of mine in a show. And I was like real excited, because I was like oh, I have done a lot of visual art in recent years, I've done sound art installations and things like that. It's nice to be recognized by a museum that wants to show my work, instead of just being recognized as a composer and a performer. And so then he said, "Well the name of the show that I'd like you to be in, the theme is "I do it for my people"." And I was like, you are not making a show that that's the theme, you know, I was sad to have to do this, but I said to him, "You know what, if you want to include work of mine in a show, like existing work that I've done or something like that, and you think it fits into a show that you are curating, I'd love it if you show my work," and I said, "But there's no way that I can make a piece of work for you that's around that theme, because that theme just does not resonate with me, and I just don't make work that way, that's not the kind of work I make."

[excerpt of *Bone Music* plays]

ECB: You're listening to her piece, *Bone Music*.

PZ: It's one of my earliest works for like sort of voice and processing and found object.

[excerpt of *Bone Music* plays]

PZ: And it involves a five gallon water bottle, which one typically finds inverted on the top of a cooler and I used to be able to just go to gigs, and there was always an empty somewhere and I could just use it. Well, I never realized that in Europe, you know, in other parts of the world, they don't have those. Amsterdam, that's when it happened, it happened in Amsterdam. I got to the gig and they handed me this little bottle of water and I'm like, "What's this?" and they are like, "You said you wanted a bottle of water", and I was like, "No, no, no!" So what I did was, I crunched the bottle and the whole sound bed, which is normally this big booming thump, was like [sound effect], and it actually sounded kind of interesting. It was a completely different piece, but it sounded kind of interesting.

[excerpt of *Bone Music* plays]

PZ: One of the things that I enjoy doing is this kind of like invented alien language that is like, it sounds like speech kind of language, but it's not, there's no real actual words in it. It maybe is like a language from another planet or something.

[excerpt of *Bone Music* plays]

ECB: The last question I asked Pamela, was whether she had any advice for women embarking on creative careers.

PZ: I think, I guess I've learned, that a little naivety goes a long way, of like forgetting to notice that you're not supposed to be able to do that. So like, you know, I think also just to put it in a more like sensible way, is just to make the work that you want to make. Don't pause and say, "Should I be able to make this or can I make this or is this what the audience wants." You know, just have a vision of what you want to make and just make it and do the steps that you have to do to make that happen. And lose the someday I'm gonna do blah, blah, blah language. You know, and just I am doing it now. I guess that's the best advice I can give. But I think the most important part of that is not just the doing of it, but it's the thing you want to do. Like don't like say, "Well, I've had a lot of advice from people and they say that I would probably get a lot further if I made this kind of work, but you have to have a desire and not just a desire but a drive to want to make certain kind of work, otherwise, it's kind of pointless to do it. You know, I've had people say, "Hmm, this might be a fun thing to do," and I'm like, "You know what, if you don't have to do this, then probably you have no business doing it." People who do this should be people who, they can't *not* do it. As an artist, that's the way you need to be, that you can't not do it.

[excerpt of *Bone Music* plays]

ECB: Show notes for this episode can be found on listeningtoladies.com, just click on the link to the podcast and there you'll find videos and music and links to things and people and places mentioned in this episode, as well as a few fun surprises. So definitely check it out. And thanks for listening.