

**EPISODE #15: Elizabeth A. Baker**

Listening to Ladies

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Interviewee: Elizabeth A. Baker (**EAB**)

**ECB:** This episode of Listening to Ladies is supported in part by the Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, in partnership with 102.1 WMUK.

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

[excerpt of **I'm still having waterbug problems** plays]

**ECB:** This is a recent piece by the Baker Barganier Duo. It's called I'm still having waterbug problems.

[excerpt of **I'm still having waterbug problems** plays]

**ECB:** Elizabeth A. Baker refers to herself as a new renaissance artist.

**EAB:** I don't know if you see them, but I have paintings and I used to do photography as well too.

**ECB:** She also does dance, choreography, improvisation, and she has written several books, including a toy piano method book and a book a personal and artistic musings. When she was in college majoring in classical guitar, she also took cello, voice, and piano as secondary instruments. So, although her work revolves primarily around space and sound, her overall artistic reach is broad and extremely multidisciplinary.

[excerpt of **I'm still having waterbug problems** plays]

**EAB:** I had a very odd childhood for like the average American child, because my mother is British. And because she is British, I was exposed to the arts at a very early age. I was pretty much encouraged in whatever artistic thing I wanted to do. I did acting and dance. I had a promising career as a track star, but I don't like to run, at least not when people tell me to. I like to run now, but like back then, I was like, it's Florida and it's hot and I don't want to deal with this. So I had a very well rounded childhood.

**ECB:** Her mom also had a massive music library of records.

**EAB:** We tried to catalogue them at one time and we stopped somewhere around 2,000. She had me listening to Rite of Spring at probably age 7, so that pretty much will screw over a child, in the best way possible. So then my dad, he was an ex-professional football player and he also is a business owner and entrepreneur, so I had a very unusual childhood. In that when most children were going to Disney in the middle of the school year, my parents were pulling me out to go to Dale Carnegie, successful public speaking courses, with Fortune 500 company executives. And I was lucky I got to meet Colin Powell and

Condoleezza Rice and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and talk to them about stuff, like that was just a normal childhood for me.

**ECB:** And as you might expect from this kind of childhood, she had a really wide array of musical influences.

**EAB:** I don't really come from the land of "I only listen to classical music" or "I only listen to jazz". I had friends that were math rock, like people that did crazy, the virtuosic tapping and all that sort of stuff. So I was always listening to different stuff. I mean, I was really big into L7 and Donita Sparks as a child, just because Donita Sparks had a giant like, "I'm not gonna take it" attitude, and I appreciated that.

**ECB:** Nina Simone was also an important role model for her.

**EAB:** Because, I don't know if you know the story of Nina Simone, but her struggles are very similar to mine, in that I mean, I am an African American Female doing weird music that is in no way RnB, jazz, or hip hop, which puts me at a disadvantage most times, because press people don't want to cover it because you don't fit a mold. And I don't know if you know that Nina Simone, she applied to Curtis Institute and was denied, because they told her that a black woman couldn't be a concert pianist. So she said, "Forget you", she got a recording contract, and if you listen to her arrangements, and particularly the way that she improvises, she improvises in a very Bach style. She loved Bach and it's there. It's there, people don't want to notice it, they want to count her as a jazz artist, but she really created a genre of her own. So many of these iconic Nina Simone recordings are not of her own music. But if you listen to her own music, there's all of these messages that like civil rights leaders were inspired by. Seeing how I kind of have that legacy in my hands really guides what I do in life.

**ECB:** She often works with children in schools.

**EAB:** I think that each one of us kind of has a place to pave the way so that other little black girls who are like, "I'm interested in making weird music" or "I'm interested in exploring things", that they have that opportunity, because I know in my heart of hearts that without Lillette Jenkins Wisner, without Jade Simmons, without Nina Simone, without Marion Anderson, without Pamela Z being there before me in life, that I probably couldn't do what I am doing today and have it be accepted.

[excerpt of **Serotonin** plays]

**ECB:** This is a piece called Serotonin. It was created using the actual chemical formula of serotonin.

[excerpt of **Serotonin** plays]

**ECB:** It's based on both the brain chemistry and the experience of falling in love.

**EAB:** So people who are in love initially have really low serotonin levels that are equal to those of people that have obsessive compulsive disorder and so that's why people who are newly in love are like always thinking of that special someone and that's why, because your serotonin levels have like dropped.

[excerpt of **Serotonin** plays]

**EAB:** It's super sciency and doesn't sound musicy at all.

[excerpt of **Serotonin** plays]

**ECB:** So as I mentioned earlier, when she went to college, her first major was classical guitar.

**EAB:** Which means that I was in a room full of men all day for performance class, in guitar ensemble. There are very few female classical guitarists. And then when I went to production school, there's very few female engineers. I had, in a program of probably like 300 students, 4 girls.

**ECB:** Apart from the fact that there were very few women in the classical guitar program, she found the culture congenial and had an overall positive experience.

**EAB:** But when I was in production school, it was definitely a different experience. So much so that I actually bought a swear jar and put it in the classroom, it was the swear and bad thought jar. Because there were so many things that were just like off colored language, just sexual innuendos, like things that people don't think of in a recording studio, because it's mostly men, but are really offensive if you are a woman and you are there and you are like, "Hey, I'm not ok with that". If you look at the main industry website for like asking questions, it's called Gear Sluts.

**ECB:** I asked her to speak about her perception of and her experience of gender within music composition specifically.

**EAB:** For me, it's just like, I look at the music and I kind of don't see the whole gender thing, and I guess part of that comes from the fact that I'm an African American woman so I'm already looking at things like, all of these are dead old white guys, like you know, that's where I come to. And even in music today, it's like you are Asian, you're white, and there are more female musicians, but I can't name for you off the top of my head like even five prominent female composers that are African American women, and that's a horrible, horrible place to be. You know, I did some engineering work for a friend at Julliard recently and I was there for ten days and saw one black person and she was not a part of the music department. And so then I look at things like, oh you know, the composers that are winning these competitions, they are coming from all of these different schools. But when I go to those schools and I participate in things with them, I don't see anyone that looks like me. So do I consider, well is it affecting me? Sometimes yes and sometimes no. I mean lately I've thought about a lot of toy pianists will tell you that they like the toy piano because it is removed from expectation compared to a regular piano, where a regular piano, the moment you sit down, there's over 200 years of expectation of what that instrument should sound like. I have another layer, that when I step out on stage, I have an expectation of what my music should sound like because I'm an African American female. So that means, that if I'm not playing Alicia Keys or I'm not playing Nina Simone or I'm not playing jazz or R&B or whatever, all of a sudden it's a jarring disconnect for many people, because there is this preconceived notion of what black music is in America and I try not to let that influence me. It does creep in sometimes, you know, we all have those low points, I mean, especially for touring musicians, like when you are home and you have nothing really to do and you are trying to readjust into normal life and society, you do have a lot of sort of depressive thoughts, where you are like, I don't really fit in at home and I kind of don't fit in at my job as a musician because I'm different, and also because I went to Catholic school and I was really in a very gentrified upbringing, I didn't experience hardcore racism until I got older and started realizing that it permeates so much of our society and so much of our industry. I won't name names, but I mean, I've had people that won't do news covers on me because I am not playing RnB so they don't feel like I have a demographic. I've had people tell me that instead of trying to get a gig at their venue, that I should try to go to the black venue. You know, these

are things, and I privately deal with them. I think it's you can't let those thoughts enter your headspace too much, because it hurts you in many ways as a musician and as an artist if you allow too much negativity to come in, however I find it as a source of inspiration. I mean, with one of my electronic projects that I do, I talked about racial preferences in dating and how that has really affected my life, because a composer and a woman in some sort of power is not appealing to men. And then you add the fact that you're an African American woman and it's just like, I get the speech all the time, "You're so awesome, you are so amazing, you are so talented, I like look up to you so much, but you know, you don't really fit my preference", and I'm like racial preference in dating is another form of racial prejudice and not a lot of people are aware of that. So the female aspect doesn't affect me so much as the totality of being an African American female affects me.

[excerpt of **Tweed Fantasy-Perpetual Dream** plays]

**ECB:** This is a piece called Tweed Fantasy-Perpetual Dream. She wrote it for the Saint Petersburg bicycle co-op, taking inspiration from their annual Tweed Ride.

**EAB:** And this is where, and I'm not exaggerating on numbers, over 200 people dress up in tweed and they ride their fixed gears bicycles through the city and then they end up at the St. Pete's Shuffleboard club where the St. Pete Bicycle Co-op is, and they have a big party at the St. Pete's Shuffleboard Club in tweed and drink craft beer.

**ECB:** So Elizabeth started thinking about using bicycle parts as musical instruments.

**EAB:** And so the St. Pete Bicycle Co-op very graciously let me go into their stores of like bicycle parts and I came out with three forks and they are basically like giant musical tuning forks so they ring when you hit them, but I also go a bunch of like chain things and I am not very bicycle savvy, so like half the things, I got things, I got handlebars and things and rims.

**ECB:** She also used toy piano and a guitar wound with chrome string and processed them electronically. The recording was played through speakers on bicycles, which were also themselves prepared with various objects that produced sounds and the whole piece was performed as a rolling sound installation.

[excerpt of **Tweed Fantasy-Perpetual Dream** plays]

**ECB:** Hey, Elisabeth here. If you want to support this podcast, but you don't have spare cash there are still great ways to do it. You can go to iTunes and leave a review, seriously, it would make a big difference to me. You can also mention the podcast to your friends, students, and colleagues. If you do have extra resources that you'd be willing to put toward the production of this podcast, just go to [www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies](http://www.patreon.com/listeningtoladies). I want to especially thank recent subscriber, Justin Houser. Ok, back to the episode.

Elizabeth organizes her busy schedule by making copious lists and by hanging index cards around her studio as reminders.

**EAB:** Another thing that I've started doing, taking those same blank index cards and when I perform or have a piece performed, I let the audience write notes on them, so then I get to keep those and then I kind of put them up as well too, so that everyday I'm kind of reminded of the impact that I can have on the world, and so that it's not just like an insular, I'm walking into a studio, I'm gonna go work on some stuff,

or I'm walking into my office and I'm gonna go work on some grants and I realize like what I do has some sort of value to, not just me, but to other people.

[excerpt of **On the Other Side** plays]

**ECB:** This is On the Other Side for toy piano and viola. The viola is in standard concert tuning.

**EAB:** And the toy piano is off in it's own land of weird never gonna be in standardized tuning, but they come together in this way that is delicate and it's beautiful, and then you hit the toy piano and it's kind of like a little jarring, but still cool at the same time.

[excerpt of **On the Other Side** plays]

**ECB:** The title On the Other Side is inspired in part by a song by The Strokes of the same name, which she was listening to on a particularly hard tour. She has to tour with her car because she needs to bring so much equipment and multiple toy pianos, and on this particular tour, she was also suffering from altitude sickness.

[excerpt of **On the Other Side** plays]

**EAB:** So I was listening to The Strokes, On the Other Side, and there's the line, it's like, "Nobody's waiting for me on the other side", and I don't know why that resonated with me.

[excerpt of **On the Other Side** plays]

**EAB:** It was kind of like a lonely place I guess that I was in.

[excerpt of **On the Other Side** plays]

**ECB:** When I asked her if she had any advice to offer, Elizabeth responded with some really helpful and hopeful thoughts and encouragement.

**EAB:** You have to allow yourself the freedom to create and that means to create without fear, without fear of what other people are going to say and you have to be open to being vulnerable, because part of us being artists means that we have to explore our vulnerabilities and it is crucial to be open to experiences outside of just the musical world. You should be a Renaissance person. You need to know about art history and you need to know about world history and you should study philosophy and you should have all of these understandings under your fingers and in your brain, because that's really the place that you're going to draw your inspiration from, is from your experience of the world.

[excerpt of **I'm still having waterbug problems** plays]

**EAB:** And realize that adversity will happen, but adversity is a tiny blip in your life, it doesn't last for forever and you can overcome it. And if somebody tells you no, there's always another way around it. You can achieve your dreams with some sort of ingenuity and research into different avenues.

[excerpt of **I'm still having waterbug problems** plays]

**ECB:** To find out more about Elizabeth 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](http://www.listeningtoladies.com)

And as ever, thank you for listening.