

# Delia Derbyshire's Obituary

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HER body wrecked by alcoholism, her good looks all but obliterated, Delia Derbyshire slipped almost unnoticed from coma to death in a Northamptonshire hospital.

To the intensive care nurses she was, no doubt, just another unfortunate patient who had died far too young; at 64, a victim of her own excess and weakness, her liver diseased, her kidneys collapsed.

But this wasted woman was, in fact, an unsung heroine to generations of British children. She was the musical genius who created the weird and wonderful signature tune to Dr Who, a sound so spooky that every Saturday night it sent youngsters scuttling behind the sofa even before the dreaded Daleks or Cybermen appeared.

The tune, with its futuristic electronic whoops and wails, has become part of British popular culture and is one of the most instantly recognisable TV themes, but the woman who put it all together remains a virtual unknown.

Now, with a new H series starring Christopher Eccleston as the ninth incarnation of Dr Who starting on Saturday, The Mail on Sunday can reveal her tragic and extraordinary story, as the man who knew her best speaks for the first time about the spiral of depression that led to the demise of this pioneer of British music.

Delia was an inspired musical innovator whose experiments with sound on the basic equipment at the BBC in the early Sixties were years ahead of their time.

Her genius would be recognised in collaborations with artists such as Paul McCartney and Jimi Hendrix and can still be traced today in the work of several chart acts.

But she felt ignored by the BBC. And the lack of credit she received for her early work including the Dr Who theme prompted disillusionment, an alcohol-fuelled decline and an early death.

Clive Blackburn, an electronics technician and her partner of 21 years, says: 'She was badly treated by the BBC, repeatedly turned down for promotions that should have been hers. Her name was never recognised on recordings of her works because that was BBC policy and, as an employee, she never received a penny in royalties for Dr Who.'

'The money was never the issue with Delia so long as she had enough to live on, but the lack of recognition was.' Delia, the only child of a Coventry panel-beater, quickly outpaced her working-class background. She went to grammar school and won a scholarship to study mathematics at Girton College, Cambridge. As talented on the piano as she was at maths, she persuaded her tutors to allow her to switch to music.

Clive says: 'She had a brilliant ability to combine mathematics with sound she could even look at an LP record and tell by the grooves exactly where a piece of music was.' On graduating, Delia made for Decca Records but was told, curtly, that women were not employed in the recording studio. She spent a short time in Geneva as a tutor her nights spent listening to experimental music and returned to London in 1960 as a trainee studio manager at the BBC, applying successfully for an attachment to the Radiophonic Workshop.

'Suddenly everything she had ever wanted and dreamed of was here,' says Clive. 'She had found her heaven.' Within a matter of months she had completed the theme for a new children's science-fiction show to be called Dr Who.

Ron Grainer had composed the melody and scribbled words such as wind, bubble and clouds to describe the effects he wanted. Using oscillators, tuning the results, combining sounds and rerecording over and over again, Delia finally got the result she sought.

Hearing it before its debut in November 1963, Grainer said with some wonder: 'Did I really write that?' 'Most of it,' was Delia's caustic reply. They both knew the tune was simple enough: it was her treatment that really made it extraordinary.

DELIA soon had a burgeoning reputation as an innovator in sound and recording techniques at a time when groups and composers who were at the forefront of psychedelia were beginning to experiment in similar ways. She was feted by musicians and artists from all over the world, including McCartney, Hendrix, Brian Jones, Pink Floyd and Yoko Ono. Friends and collaborators included prolific British orchestral composer Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and avant-garde German musician Karlheinz Stockhausen, another pioneer of electronic music.

Working from the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop and moonlighting in studios with like-minded musicians, Delia wrote for 200 programmes and produced a formidable volume of work.

But her ambitions were not matched by the BBC. Clive says: 'The BBC accountants, as she called them, said her music was too sophisticated. They wanted her to work with the new synthesisers churning out TV tunes, but she found them crude, producing nothing like the sounds she could create.'

Professionally frustrated and fuelled by increasing amounts of alcohol, Delia plunged into the party scene of Swinging Sixties London. Tall, stick-thin and elegant, she had the sharp beauty of the era. Always dressed from Biba or in the latest Mary Quant, her Vidal Sassoon-D inspired auburn bob topped by a baker-boy cap, she was an often intimidating, argumentative figure in the corner of the party, glass in hand.

Even her penchant for snuff didn't deter her admirers. Dazzled by her talent and her beauty, men and women found her irresistible.

With the casual morality of the time, she had a string of lovers, many of them younger. Some lasted a night, some longer. She had a tantalising encounter with Yoko Ono before Yoko's relationship with John Lennon who approached her to produce sounds to accompany her artwork.

'Yoko was sleeping on her studio floor,' recalls Clive. 'I don't know who else was there and the idea of having an orgy came up. They were all egging each other on but in the end Yoko backed out of it. Would Delia have done it?

Nothing would surprise me about her. I wish I'd seen her in those days she was magnetic.' When it all became too much, Delia fled London for Cumbria which she had loved since childhood. She got work as a radio operator in charge of communication for the men laying natural gas mains. In a rare interview she described it as a 'crazy, crazy time' but she found herself isolated, cutting an odd metropolitan figure in her trendy clothes at the local bars.

It seemed logical to her to blend in more by marrying. She chose the labourer son of a miner, 40-year-old David Hunter from Haltwhistle in Northumberland.

'She told me she did it to make her socially acceptable,' says Clive with a laugh. The women were wary of her on her own and she wanted to join the darts team. 'To her, it was a marriage of convenience she thought it would be a friendship. 'But they quickly discovered they weren't compatible and had a huge row.

That was the end of that but she never divorced him. After she died we advertised for him to come forward but he never did.' In 1980, Delia moved to Northampton to be close to her elderly, widowed mother in Coventry.

Delia got a job in a bookshop. It was the start of a semblance of stability for her, with Clive, 13 years her junior, providing a buffer for her occasional rages and tempering her worst excesses.

'You'd never see her drunk,' he says. 'She just sipped away from early morning onwards, probably getting through a couple of bottles of wine. She had gone on to rum and brandy but I weaned her off that as it made her too volatile.

'She had what she called her magic mittens gloves in her bag with a small bottle of rum in one and brandy in another.

'When she went off drink she was manic, never sleeping, just writing music. Wine calmed her and I felt it was better for her.' Clive gives a revealing insight into what it was like to live with a tortured genius to whom everyday life was often an inconvenience, with music the only thing driving her on.

He says: 'At first the house she bought was fine. Gradually it filled up with furniture and packing cases from Cumbria. I don't think she ever unpacked from her first move.

'Newspapers would pile up but I couldn't touch them because she'd scribbled notes and music on them.

'We couldn't invite people in the place was a mess but she would spend hours on the phone to musician friends.

'She didn't clean, didn't throw anything out. She did cook, but at bizarre times. Dinner would be 3.30 in the morning and she'd wake me to have it.

'Eventually I bought a house nearby. I couldn't stand it any more but we were still a couple, still together. Even at the worst of times, there was nobody like her.' UT Delia was becoming increasingly suspicious of people, convinced that those in the music business were still trying to rip her off.

'From the day she walked away from composing until she died she never published another piece of work,' says Clive. 'But in private, she never stopped writing music either.

She simply refused to compromise her integrity in any way.

'And ultimately, she couldn't cope. She just burnt herself out. An obsessive need for perfection destroyed her.' Ironically, before her death Delia had become something of a cult figure to a new generation of musicians experimenting with sound.

Websites sprang up devoted to her and she met artists fronting a new B wave of psychedelia who reawoke her interest with the possibilities of digital sound. Among the artists was Pete Kember, known as Sonic Boom, part of the band Spaceman 3 which would later evolve into the dance act Spiritualized.

She wrote at the time: 'It has reinvigorated me. He (Kember) is from a later generation but has always had an affinity with the music of the Sixties.

'Now, without the constraints of doing "applied music" my mind can fly free and pick up where I left off.' But unknown to Clive she was having secret tests which confirmed her body was in alcoholic breakdown.

Within two weeks of admittance to hospital in Northampton, she was dead.

Many have called Delia the mother of electronic music, a genius who created futuristic sound before synthesisers were invented. Her innovations would eventually influence modernday experimental bands such as Orbital, Portishead and The Chemical Brothers.

Five months ago in Glasgow's Tron Theatre, a play about her life, Standing Wave / Caged Heat, was performed to rave reviews.

A BBC documentary is in production, although Clive has refused to take part in it, believing it will consist of interviews with those claiming to be best friends whom she rarely saw.

Now, more than 30 years after Delia created the original Dr Who 'sound', a new series, starring Eccleston and Billie Piper as his assistant Rose, is about to start. And tucked away in the revamped theme tune will be a core of her original work.

'Oh, how she would have loved it all,' says Clive. 'Recognition at last. 'She would have roared with laughter.

'She always used to say no one would remember her and I would tell her how wrong she was.

'Her final tragedy is that she isn't here to see all this, after fighting the world for so long.' . The new series of Dr Who starts next Saturday at 7pm on BBC1.

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