

In Praise of Delia Derbyshire

Last week's news that lots of Derbyshire tapes had been found and digitised marked the latest stage in her recovery as a musical, and feminist, icon.



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Last week came news that burbled and bleeped deliciously through the electronic music community: 267 lost tapes by the late Delia Derbyshire, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop pioneer who turned Ron Grainer's sketches for the Dr Who theme tune into the modern, spooky masterpiece we all know today, had been found and digitised. For electronic music-lovers like me, it was amazing to find out that such an archive exists. For those less aware of her work, it marked the latest stage in the recovery of a lost musical, and feminist, icon.

Derbyshire had to fight to achieve her ambitions. But, oh, how this brilliant lady fought. Born in working class Coventry in 1937, she beat all the odds to study mathematics and music at Cambridge University. In 1959, she applied for a job at Decca Records and was told women were not employed in their studios. She joined the BBC in 1960 as a trainee studio manager, before asking to be moved to the Radiophonic Workshop. Her employers were confused, but she was delighted: she had cleverly got herself exactly where she wanted.

But Derbyshire still faced obstructions. When Grainer demanded she get a credit as a co-composer for Dr Who, her contribution was ignored. When the BBC said her music was "too lascivious for 11 year olds", she set up new studios outside its doors, making adventurous library music and the sexually explicit Love Without Sound as a member of White Noise with Brian Hodgson and David Vorhaus. Dismayed with what she perceived as falling standards in composition and the advance of modern synthesisers, she fell out of love with

the form in the 1970s, before returning to composition in the late 1990s with artists like Sonic Boom. Sadly, Derbyshire died of renal failure, aged 64, in 2001, long before the wider world recognised her legacy.

It's a myth that electronic music is a world populated by stiff-suited, horn-spectacled men, then – especially as Derbyshire wasn't the only female pioneer. Take Daphne Oram, who set up the Radiophonic Workshop in 1958. Last month, Goldsmiths College opened up a public archive of her music, and held a day celebrating her work at the South Bank. Then there's Maddalena Fagandini, who recorded under the fabulous pseudonym, Ray Cathode, and whose work was adored by Beatles producer George Martin. Later on, Glynis Jones created space soundtracks for the Workshop in the 1970s, and Elizabeth Parker was the last composer to leave it when it closed in 1998.

In 2008, contemporary female electronic musicians thankfully don't face the same struggles as Derbyshire once did. From the laptop to the studio to the dance-floor, women such as Andrea Parker, Ellen Allien and Mira Calix are recognised, and praised, as pioneers. The only tragedy is that the feisty, committed musician that paved the way for them isn't around to see the fruits of her labours.