

Ada Lovelace Day: Delia Derbyshire – sound alchemist & bobmother of British electronica

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Today is Ada Lovelace Day, a pledge day to write about a favourite or inspirational woman in technology, set up by Suw Charman Anderson. I'm always wittering on about how we can encourage more women to be interested in careers in technology, I think this is a great idea – so here's my contribution!

Delia Derbyshire:

One of my earliest childhood memories is hiding behind the sofa when the Doctor Who theme tune came on the TV... The mesmeric sounds were a signal that scary monsters were about to invade my consciousness. I've grown to love the Doctor Theme tune in its own right because and of this special memory I got to hear about Delia Derbyshire and her pioneering work in music technology.

Fast forwarding from my childhood, I was made aware of Delia Derbyshire in 2002, via my on-going appreciation of Doctor Who, growing participation in the emerging digital arts and technology scene, and through an event called TV Swansong, which became a tribute to her. It was set in an Oxfordshire quarry with the contributions of several alumni of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop: Mark Ayres, Brian Hodgson, Peter Howell and Paddy Kingsland – they created a three day extravaganza of sounds and visuals inspired by Delia and her creations at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop.

So who was Delia?

Delia Ann Derbyshire, electronic music pioneer and sound synthesist, was born on 5th May 1937 and studied for a degree in mathematics and music at Girton College, Cambridge. In 1957, she applied for a job at Decca Records, but unbelievably, was turned away, as at the time they didn't employ women in their recording studios! She worked for the United Nations in Geneva and also Boosey & Hawkes before getting a job as a trainee studio manager at BBC Maida Vale Studios in 1960.

She joined the fledgling BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1966 after requesting an attachment. Whilst at the BBC, Delia created theme tunes and scores for over 200 radio and TV programmes where her expertise in electronic music would give an edge, such as: drama, historical, futuristic or emotive pieces,

but she didn't appear in personally in the credits for these as at the time the umbrella credit 'special sound by BBC Radiophonic Workshop' was used. Ahead of her time, the BBC apparently also rejected many of her compositions, claiming they were too bizarre, "too lascivious for 11 year olds" and "too sophisticated for the BBC2 audience". Outside the BBC, Delia set up Unit Delta Plus, an organisation to create and promote electronic music, they held a festival combining electronic music and visuals by Hornsey College of Art lecturers and was billed as the first concert of British electronic music. This eclectic event was attended by Sir John Betjeman, who apparently fell asleep in the front row!

Delia also went on to set up the Kaleidophon studio, producing electronic music for theatre productions and released an album with collaborators under the band name White Noise and in 1969 released an album called 'An Electric Storm'. She also worked under the name 'Russe Li (De La)' (anagram of Delia), contributing to the Standard Music Library, later used on rival 70s ITV sci-fi programmes, such as The Tomorrow People and Timeslip.

In 1963 Delia probably developed one of the most important pieces of early digital music and certainly one of the first pieces of electronic music used for television: the iconic Doctor Who theme tune. She created it by recording the individual notes from electronic sources one by one onto magnetic tape, cutting the tape with a razor blade to get individual notes on little pieces of tape and sticking all the pieces of tape back together individually to make up the track and the process took weeks to complete. This and her other work became an inspiration for generations of electronic artists including the likes of Stereolab, Broadcast, Sonic Boom, Aphex Twin, Sonic Arts Network and of course The Chemical Brothers who created their own mix of the Doctor Who tune.

In the 70s Delia became disillusioned with the apparent future of electronic music and withdrew from the scene, working in an art gallery museum and bookshop. Unfortunately, the Radiophonic Workshop was closed in 1998, a casualty of the Birtist rationalisation as it wasn't making enough revenue to cover its costs, but in the late 90s Delia Derbyshire was rediscovered by practitioner fans and her passion was re-invigorated. She started work on an album with Peter Kember, but Delia sadly passed away on 3rd July 2001 before it was finished of complications from breast cancer.

The legacy of this electronic wizard will live on though, she bequeathed her personal collection of work to Mark Ayres who, in collaboration with Manchester University, is working on digitising her works.

In 2002, a play about her work at the Radiophonic Workshop, 'Blue Veils and Golden Sands', was aired on Radio 4. Two years later, at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow another play about her, 'Standing Wave – Delia Derbyshire in the '60s' by Nicola McCartney.

Links:

For an in-depth overview of Delia Derbyshire's life, career and a 'Deliaography' visit
www.delia-derbyshire.org
delia-derbyshire.dyndns.org/

BBC Radiophonic Workshop:

www.mb21.co.uk/ether.net/radiophonics/index.shtml
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Radiophonic_Workshop
whitefiles.org/rwg/

Comments:

Cathy March 25, 2009 at 10:22 am

In 1957, she applied for a job at Decca Records, but unbelievably, was turned away, as at the time they didn't employ women in their recording studios! Wot!! It's amazing that norm has become absurdity in just 50 years time, thanks to all women and men alike who fought for equality. Hope we can eventually get rid of the glass ceiling for all...