

Memories of Susan Frykberg

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by Hildegard Westerkamp and Wendelin Bartley

Hildegard Westerkamp

Hearing her lively and bright voice over the phone from Toronto was my first encounter with Susan Frykberg. She was freelancing for the CBC's *Two New Hours* at the time and wanted to interview me about my piece *A Walk through the City*. It had been commissioned by the CBC and was to be broadcast for the first time. Susan's questions and her open and curious listening made this encounter particularly memorable. She herself may not have been aware to what extent her genuine support and enthusiasm was a real gift to me at that nervous moment of first public exposure on the national airwaves. This all-ears encounter happened in the early eighties and carried within it the seeds of our future friendship.

When I think of Susan, I immediately hear her expressive, ever-modulating voice. It could be full of infectious enthusiasm, have a good dose of seriousness and feet-on-the-ground realism, or a tone of curiosity, adventurism and free creative spirit. Her life was not easy, but far from ever complaining or giving up, she found strength and comfort in developing unceasingly her own version of creativity and spirituality, compositional action/activism, motherhood and caring for others. The multi-faceted quality of her voice is echoed in her varying compositional approaches. From early on – aside from composing for instruments - she was interested in computer and electroacoustic music, audio and recording technology, and in the ideas of soundscape. In addition she incorporated theatrical, non-musical elements into her compositional work. As she says herself, "I'm a sound artist and composer of electroacoustic, instrument and vocal music and chant. I like to try different approaches to sound and composition and so my output is an expression of the variety of my creative, intellectual and spiritual life."

While still in Toronto, she created *Machinewoman*, an inspired work, which contained most of the above elements even then - dance, movement, live saxophone as well as pre-recorded sound. The latter was diffused by a portable sound-system, which was part of the main character's - *Machinewoman's* -

costume. I never experienced it myself, but was struck by its inventive format, a sound installation in motion, which must have been an unusual sight and sound in 1984, performed a number of times at Harbourfront, an outdoor public space on Lake Ontario. Susan describes it as a work that “addresses issues of what it means to be human – and a woman, I might add - when we are being continually augmented by technology on so many levels.”

After the birth of her son Esha in 1985 Susan moved to Vancouver and brought her hunger for knowledge and learning, and of course her creative energy and spirit with her. We all benefitted. While initially she and I connected as mothers, focusing on settling her and her baby son in this new place, she eventually enrolled at Simon Fraser University to do an MA with Barry Truax. Here she immersed herself into learning additional computer and electroacoustic music techniques, including granular synthesis, which interested her very much. She also received a Minor in Theatre during this time, which deepened her interest in incorporating dramatic elements into her work. The result was a most ambitious project, *Woman and House*, a mixed media work dealing with feminist issues, which premiered at Vancouver’s Women in View Festival in 1991. It is written for singer, two actors, signal processed voice, live mixed tapes and diffusion and has a rather unusual line-up of characters, including a singing / talking house, an obsessive compulsive housewife, a Sumerian priestess, home appliances that have their own songs, the 'Great Mother' and a bag lady. It’s a work very much in tune with the stage of her life at that time, in which she grappled intensely with the life realities of being a woman and a single mother.

Another work, which she describes as being her most important large-scale work during this period, is *The Audio Birth Project*, funded by the Canada Council. “It is based on interviews with my sisters and mother on the process of labour and birth. The suite of four works explores the terrain of labour and birth from three different perspectives. The works contain spoken voice recordings, instruments - cello, violin and piano - soundscapes and a large variety of electroacoustic techniques including granular synthesis... Specific aspects of how concepts around birthing can be explicated in instrumental writing can be seen in the work for violin and electroacoustic track called *Astonishing Sense of Being Taken Over By Something Far Greater Than Me*. <https://earsaymusic.bandcamp.com/album/astonishing-sense>

During her years in Vancouver Susan became more and more interested in the ideas of soundscape. Not only did she take over the Acoustic Communications courses I had been teaching at SFU until 1990, she also got involved in the World

Forum for Acoustic Ecology after it was founded at the first International Conference on Acoustic Ecology in Banff in 1992. She says of this period, "I finally learnt to listen! It is a remarkable thing to learn to really hear everything round you, identifying rhythms, pitches, textures and the huge variety of acoustic relationships found in the simple sonic stuff of our lives. The experience of soundscape has had a major effect on many aspects of my life, from my relationship with others, to the environment and of course on my compositional approach."

In 1998, Susan decided to move back to New Zealand, partially for the sake of her then 13-year old son so he could get to know his New Zealand family. But she also wanted to re-acquaint herself with the country of her birth. However another major reason for this move had to do with her decision to attend to her "religious inclinations, which included serious study in theology, ancient languages, Gregorian chant, Christian spirituality and Christian notions of social justice." During this period of her life her music practice transformed into an increasingly spiritual one.

In the moving obituary by her supervisor Professor Cat Hope we find out more about her time in Melbourne, where she spent several years off and on, not only to be closer to her son Esha who had moved there, but also to pursue a number of compositional projects. Astonishingly she also started a PhD in Music Composition at Monash University in 2018, which she completed shortly before her passing. The focus of her dissertation was on spirituality and electronic music and Professor Cat Hope was her supervisor. I know that this research meant a great deal to Susan and somehow seemed to consolidate within her own being the seemingly disparate worlds of contemporary classical music, technology and spirituality.

See: <https://www.cutcommonmag.com/an-obituary-for-the-musical-life-of-susan-frykberg-10-october-1954-7-april-2023/>

All quotes are from: <https://sounz.org.nz/contributors/1043>

Wendelin Bartley

My initial encounters with Susan happened vicariously through others. In the spring of 1985, Musicworks 31 was published entitled *Women Voicing*. Despite outside resistance to publishing about women's creative work, MW editor Tina Pearson persevered to create this pivotal issue focusing on the contributions of

eleven women and Susan was one of them. At the time I was intrigued by the titles of the pieces she wrote about in the issue: *Saxarba: The Birth*, and *I am I am I am - Machine Woman* as my own interest in electronic music was burgeoning. She was an important influence and role model for me, especially as a woman working in the male world of music technology and the way she brought women's life experiences into her creative work. An excerpt from *Saxarba* was included on the MW cassette compiled by Hildegard Westerkamp. <https://www.discogs.com/it/release/1632503-Various-Women-Voicing>
Also now available as CD: <https://www.discogs.com/it/release/1632503-Various-Women-Voicing>

Her name popped up again that same year through my good friend and video artist bhYael who met Susan through Bentley Jarvis, one of Susan's composer colleagues and Yael's professor at Ontario College of Art. Yael and Susan collaborated together in a project entitled *Genesis Story* that was presented at a writers-in-performance event called *L'Affaire Pataphysique* at the Queen Street West art gallery Artculture Resource Centre (ARC). The piece re-imagined the *Genesis Story* where the earth was first populated by women who were impregnated from outer space and gave birth to men. Unfortunately I didn't see it as I was living in Montreal at the time, but gauging from the photo I came across of the event, it looked pretty wild with everyone dressed in eccentric costumes. Susan is identified in the photo credits as wearing sunglasses and giving a "Guppy" - a cupped hand gesture imitating a talking mouth. (Citations are taken from an essay by Brian Dedora in a collection edited by Mike Hoolboom, page 81.) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57c077d56a4963c168509632/t/6132a61079b4902040d5f887/1630709308435/BHYael-FamilyStates.pdf>).

I really got to know Susan first-hand when I arrived in Vancouver and on the Simon Fraser University campus in the fall of 1989. I had come to compose a piece in the computer music studio and specifically wanted to learn the granular synthesis software developed by Barry Truax. Barry however was away on sabbatical, and so it was Susan who showed me the ropes of this exciting new way of creating digital sound in the tiny and unassuming basement studio. It was an exciting time for me and Susan was always ready to help me navigate the software. I also got to know her personally during that time and met her young son Esha. I have a fun memory of him with spaghetti sauce all over his face. A few years later in the fall of 1992, Susan, Hildi and I did a joint concert at the Western Front as part of *New Music Across America*. In between those years there were lots of personal hangouts with conversations about computer music, life as female composers, and the challenges of motherhood.

After she moved back to New Zealand, we kept in touch sporadically and met a few times when she visited Toronto. One of my favourite memories is the last time I saw her around 2015. I had arrived at the Toronto Island ferry docks and was waiting in the holding area for the ferry to arrive. I did a double-take when I heard a familiar voice soaring above the crowd chatter. It was Susan, of course. We hugged enthusiastically and I invited her to join me for a concert that was happening at the St. Andrews church on the island. I was very glad that she and her accompanying friend accepted my invitation as part of her outing. It was special to attend the concert together with music by pianist, composer and improviser Lee Pui Ming. We kept exchanging smiling and knowing looks throughout the performance.

Susan's friendliness and enthusiasm was overflowing every time we met. She was a pioneer in computer music, and I was excited to read about her dissertation topic she recently completed about electronic music and spirituality, a topic I'm also interested in. I look forward to reading her thoughts when the thesis becomes available.

Tina Pearson adds the following memory about Susan's time in Toronto:

Susan was an important instigator in the Toronto new-electronic music world. She started a composer peer support-review group, meeting mostly, I believe, at the Canadian Electronic Ensemble studios. It was an opportunity for composers to present scores and works for feedback. She was a brave feisty woman and she changed things for the better by her example. She was also a fierce advocate of artists who are mothers and the importance of supporting them, especially solo mothers, and recognized the challenges of being a composer while mothering.