

“How’s 1988 Sounding?”: The Myths and Legendary Tapes of Delia Derbyshire

The debut feature film from actress and director Caroline Catz is hard to categorise, difficult to pin down into a specific form or type, and is all the better for this. It’s really exciting to behold a film like this at a time of abundance in music film and music documentary, that is so free and boundless and so spiritually in tune with its subject. *Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and Legendary Tapes* is part biopic, part experimental documentary and part poetic creative dialogue between Derbyshire and latter-day pioneering sound artist Cosey Fanni Tutti who wrote the score using an archive of 267 tapes recovered from an attic following Derbyshire’s death in 2001 as a sample base. She also appears in the film commenting on Derbyshire’s work and creating music. She appears alongside director Catz who plays a version of Derbyshire in visual congress with Tutti, recreating key moments from Derbyshire’s life and work and at times addressing the audience on the other side of the screen. If that sounds confusing to read, rest assured it’s not confusing to watch. The fluid blend of forms, styles and tones works wonderfully to create layers of time and meaning. If anything, the film’s weakest parts are when it rests into traditional modes. For most of the time it’s a cinematic fever dream that recalls Charlie Kaufman’s *Synecdoche, New York*, Peter Strickland’s *Berberian Sound Studio* - it was interesting to hear Catz mention, in the London Film Festival Q&A where the film is receiving its world premiere currently, that she approached producer Andy Starke because of his work with Strickland - and most tellingly, the groundbreaking late 1960s and early 1970s British television programmes that Derbyshire and her colleagues in the BBC’s Radiophonic Workshop scored and underscored so dramatically. The film is also a bittersweet reminder of the loss of artistry and innovation in mainstream British television craft.

Following a jittery symphonic opening act the film settles into its rhythm to focus on Derbyshire’s work for the workshop where she was both the leading light, responsible of course for maybe the most iconic theme tune of all time and a truly innovative one - for a certain time travelling doctor - but where as a woman she was subject to routine aggressions and degradations that the film proposes nagged away at an already troubled and anxious state of mind. The film spends a lot of time in this time. The majority of the film takes place in the same location, a studio containing Tutti working away on her score and also all the sets to represent different moments of Derbyshire’s life. The effect is to see the studio as playground, as artistic site rather than technological tool and this connection to Derbyshire’s work stops the film veering into stodgy theatricality. However, it may spend too long here temporally if not spatially, with the film lapsing into cliché as it explores the artist’s expansion into addiction, the hippie magnetism of the late 60s and a fractious but passionate relationship with fellow sonic traveller David Vorhaus, before moving back out into the outside world when Derbyshire leaves the workshop in 1973. Another blip is the ubiquitous and probably relevant but not quite sure why happenstance of the JFK assassination coming the day before the first airing of the first *Dr Who*. This moment doesn’t land at all. It feels too prosaic amidst a series of sequences that feel anything but that.

Indeed, the whole section watching Catz as Delia create the iconic theme tune is mesmerising. It’s knowing and self-aware too, so as not to be pompous and also to remind of the inherent collaborative nature of the workshop. The construction of the sequence artfully displays the relationship between banal, pragmatic fragments and the sublime whole of something, where all the pieces are visible but it’s still impossible to work out how they became such an incredible thing. It’s impossible despite seeing it happen to work out how it became that. It’s where the film wonderfully captures and communicates that whatever else Derbyshire was in her personal life, she was a genius, only now getting the recognition she deserves. It’s a fantastic debut and a jolt to the increasingly stale music documentary and biopic landscape as well as a subtle political account of the battle for electronic music and sound art to be taken seriously and a sad reminder of the gender battles still being fought in patriarchal workspaces. Ultimately, it’s a beautiful, innovative portrait of a woman in a lineage of women - the film directly places her there in an imagined dinner with Mary Wollstencraft and Ada Lovelace - who change culture with their incredible vision. It

never dwells on the tragedies but spends time celebrating and sharing the process and the work, the command of forms and technologies, the art that we are still only now slowly learning that she made.