

The Sound of Futures Past

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Last month Bebe Barron, a pioneer of electronic music, passed away at the age of 82. Along with husband Louis, she translated the groundbreaking cybernetics work of mathematician Norbert Wiener in the late 1940's into one of, if not the, earliest experiments in using electronic circuits to produce sound. While Louis created the circuits, Bebe recorded and archived the sounds being created, a necessary documentation as, because of the crude nature of these early circuits, the act of using the devices physically destroyed them, making each effect unrepeatable except by recording on magnetic tape. Keep in mind that this was years before even the most primitive synthesizer existed, and these two were humble music students from the University of Chicago who had received a tape recorder as a wedding present. They had an interest in the burgeoning field of musique concrete, a soldering iron and a reel-to-reel; with this humble assortment, they essentially invented an entire genre of music.

While Louis Barron was the engineer of the duo, Bebe was the composer- tasked with delving through hours and hours of tape, she slowly assembled not necessarily "songs" by the traditional sense, but what would come to be known modernly as "soundscapes", piece by piece from what she herself described as "dirty noise". To provide rhythm to her compositions, Bebe invented the tape loop, years before Les Paul's multi track recording and other studio production concepts became a reality. Tape had to be physically cut and spliced by hand, individual sounds located and marked, in a laborious process that took months, and resulted in a product so ahead of its time it was almost assuredly commercially unviable.

This is not to say that the Barrons weren't successful in their time- in fact, it's very likely that they held a monopoly on publicly available electronic recording facilities in the United States for a brief period between 1952 and 1953. Using a connection at the 3M company (the same connection that had given them the then absolute rarity of a magnetic tape recorder for their wedding), the two opened the world's first commercial electronic recording studio. The small Greenwich Village facility catered mostly to fellow avant garde artists, at its pinnacle providing the resources for John Cage's groundbreaking "Williams Mix" and "Music for Magnetic Tape" (Cage, himself a maverick who held little regard for the average notion of what was and was not "music", was the first person to convince the young couple to call what they were experimenting with exactly that). This recording work was interspersed with the generation of sound effects for films, which would lead to their most recognizable (and ONLY readily available) work- the soundtrack for the 1956 sci-fi classic "Forbidden Planet".

Originally slated to just provide sound effects for the film, Louis and Bebe's work was so impressive that they were hired to provide the entire soundtrack. This was somewhat of a coup as not only would they be replacing the producers' first choice, the legendary avant garde composer Harry Partch, but the replacements were also not members of the musician's union. It was because of the

latter fact that the unions placed immense legal pressure on the makers of the film, forcing the Barrons' credit not to be listed as "Electronic Music by", but instead "Electronic Tonalities by". Though seemingly innocuous, this change had long lasting effects; because of it, neither the film nor its composers were considered for the Academy Awards in any category related to soundtrack or effects, despite stunned reviews and accolades by other members of the industry and audiences alike. The "Tonalities" credit eventually barred the Barrons from entry into the musician's union when they attempted to join, and the ongoing headache prompted Bebe and Louis Barron to never score another film.

The soundtrack to "Forbidden Planet" is, without a doubt, the first wholly electronic score for any film, and a watershed moment for two artistic mediums. Now formally available on CD release, it might not be for everyone, but for fans of classic scifi and music history buffs alike the "Electronic Tonalities" are a strangely reminiscent and lasting echo of the very earliest ancestors to modern electronic composition. That the couple who had waded through so much magnetic tape would finally be snared by the union's red variety is sadly telling of the commercialized industries of film and music, but Bebe and Louis Barron's contributions to both fields should nonetheless be acknowledged. Louis passed away in 1989, Bebe on the 20th of April, 2008. Thanks to them both for their work and their art.

"We design and construct electronic circuits which function electronically in a manner remarkably similar to the way that lower life-forms function psychologically... people tell us that the tonalities in Forbidden Planet remind them of what their dreams sound like." - Bebe Barron, 1925-2008