

Ellen Fullman in her studio, Berkeley, California, January



## Invisible Jukebox

Each month we play a musician a series of records which they are asked to identify and comment on – with no prior knowledge of what they are about to hear. This month it's the turn of

### Ellen Fullman

Tested by **Geeta Dayal**. Photography by **Mark Mahaney**

**Ellen Fullman grew up** in the creative ferment of Memphis in the 1950s and 60s, which exposed her to a potent mix of soul, gospel, Delta blues and early rock 'n' roll. In the 70s, she moved to Kansas City to study sculpture; in 1978, she crafted a pleated skirt of sheet metal and guitar strings, designed to make sounds as she walked. She soon left Kansas City for Minneapolis. A turning point was attending the New Music America festival at the city's Walker Art Center in 1980, which featured Alvin Lucier's *Music On A Long Thin Wire* and many other major works, inspiring her to leave Minneapolis in pursuit of a new life as an experimental musician in New York.

In 1981, she began work on her signature creation, the long string instrument. This massive resonating device can range in size from around 13 to 30 metres, depending on the room. The groups of strings are tuned in just intonation and they're attached to wooden resonating boxes. When played with rosin-covered fingers, the instrument comes alive, creating a rich array of overtones. Over the years, Fullman has refined the long string instrument, as her understanding of it has deepened. She has collaborated with many major composers and improvisors, including Pauline Oliveros and The Deep Listening Band, Frances-Marie Uitti, Keiji Haino, Kronos Quartet and the choreographer Deborah Hay. She has recorded numerous albums, beginning in 1985, for labels including New Albion, Experimental Intermedia Foundation, Deep Listening and Important.

Despite the difficulty inherent in moving and installing the long string instrument, Fullman has travelled widely through the decades, playing the unique apparatus at festivals and venues all over the world. After living in many other cities – including Austin, Texas, where she spent several years studying North Indian classical music – she settled in California, becoming an integral part of the Bay Area's thriving experimental music community.

The Jukebox took place at Fullman's sun-filled loft in Berkeley, California. The entire bottom floor of the loft is taken up by the long string instrument, which stretches majestically from one end of the oblong room to the other.

### Elvis Presley "Blue Moon Of Kentucky"

From *The Sun Sessions* (RCA) 1976, rec 1954

Of course it's Elvis... That's very early Elvis.

It's "Blue Moon Of Kentucky".

When I was a child there was this ice cream joint [in Memphis] called The Tropical Freeze, we used to go get lime freezes there in the summer. When I was one, my parents went down there and had me with them. And Elvis was there; Elvis frequented a lot of the fast food joints in Memphis. He kissed my hand and said, 'Hiya, baby.' And I was a baby. That's my Elvis story [laughs].

I have kind of a mixed feeling about Elvis, because I think he ripped off the black style. He pulled it off because he put a white face to it. So it's not fair, what he did. But I think his heart was in it...

My uncle was [Elvis's] vet, because Elvis had a ranch with horses and cows. Down the street from us, a block away, was Dr Nichopoulos's house. Dr Nichopoulos [aka Dr Nick] was the one who gave [Elvis] the meds, and he was put in prison [actually he was acquitted on all counts in 1980]. He had a pink Cadillac in his driveway, and you would know that was someone who did something for Elvis. There were a lot of pink Cadillacs in the early 60s, driving around Memphis.

I didn't realise as a child the influence of Memphis on the world. I grew up listening to a fantastic soul music station. All races listened to WDIA – the first African-American station in the country, founded in Memphis. Rufus Thomas and BB King were DJs.

And "Woolly Bully", Sam The Sham And The Pharaohs, they were based in Memphis. They had this old 50s hearse; we would see that, driving around. So I got this tender spot in my heart for the Memphis sound.

I would check out these anthropology types of recordings, like Harry Smith's *Anthology [Of American Folk Music]* and just study this, and we just so loved the articulation and the sound of the guitars detuned. That sparked my interest in just intonation, hearing that. I so loved the kind of ornamentation of the Delta blues singing styles, and I would try to follow those shapes and practise over and over again. As a teenager, I had these recordings. I just so loved it, and that experience was repeated for me when I started studying Indian music.

### Geeshie Wiley "Skinny Leg Blues"

From Various *Mississippi Masters: Early American Blues*

*Classics 1927–1935* (Yazoo) 1994, rec 1930

It's not... Geeshie Wiley?

It is.

I love her voice. But ironically enough her music was introduced to me by David Harrington of Kronos Quartet [laughs]. That was in 95 or so, in Austin. He said that my sound sounded like the blues to him. And he told me to check out this album, this reissue of stuff called *Mississippi Masters*, and check out this song Geeshie Wiley did, which was "Last Kind Words".

It was so inspiring to me. It was so nice to think about composing like that as an inspiration. Such a haunting song – the whole situation down there [in the Deep South] is haunting. Just the whole social structure. And I revisited that very intensely through the caregiving process with my mom, because all the caregivers are black, and I hired people; just the close intimacy of that situation, getting to know people and seeing what they go through in their lives. It's still very much alive, the two classes kind of situation.

**What do you like about her voice?**

What is it in a voice that transmits emotion? I think that it comes down to a transmission of spirit, and I really don't know how to explain what that is. And if I talk about some things, it might sound esoteric or something, and I really engage with that in my study of Indian music as well. I was told things by my teacher about what it was, what's going on... It makes sense to me if I look at it through these contexts. It helps me get my work to a deeper level. What I learned through studying Indian music is that music moves through us, it's not generated from us. It moves through us and we transmit it. And I feel that it's like a train running along, and I could jump on a train.

**Karlheinz Stockhausen believed that as well. He thought these compositions came out of him; he was a conduit, transmitting it outwards.**

There's a level of humility that brings, which I feel prepares us or allows us to share our music with other people and have this ritual experience. What we need as humans is these rituals, where we can have a rich, deeper experience. When someone is really doing

that, a musician, there's a humility and a generosity of spirit. It's not an ego-driven thing. That's when I feel as an audience that we can receive it, and that's when you just really love a performer, when you see this humility, this richness. That was my ambition, going in that direction.

### Harry Partch "Exordium"

From *Delusion Of The Fury* (CBS Masterworks) 1966, rec 1969  
[Immediately] Partch. Is this [The] *Bewitched?*  
Close. *Delusion Of The Fury*.

When I moved to New York in 1981, I bought [Partch's 1947 book] *Genesis Of A Music* and devoured it. But not the music. I listened a little bit more. It was not till I moved to Seattle, and met Philip Arnautoff, who studied with Partch as a teenager. He connected with Partch as a teenager in Petaluma: he was basically living in a converted chicken coop. Philip loved Partch's music and showed me things that I ended up loving.

One of the quotes that he had, that I found so inspiring, was that Partch would say, 'Oh come here, listen to what I found.' It wasn't what I made, what I created, but what I discovered – what I found. That idea that music comes through you. The idea that music was pre-existing.

What about his self-built instruments – did they inspire your long string instrument?

In *Genesis Of A Music*, the way he explored and studied and documented, he wrote a user's manual in a sense. When I had this accidental discovery of this sound by rubbing the wire, I didn't want to just leave it at that; I wanted to create a body of work, tune this wire, take it to a level of sophistication. I was inspired by this universe, the world he created with these instruments.

### Woody Guthrie

"I Ain't Got No Home"

From *Dustbowl Ballads* (Sony) 1998, rec 1940

[Laughs] "I Ain't Got No Home". That's too easy. I thought your cover of "I Ain't Got No Home" was very moving; I don't often hear your voice in your music.

I was in Berlin, on my DAAD fellowship. It was very sweet to be able to reconnect with Arnold Dreyblatt. I got sick, I was seriously ill... I pretty much needed surgery. He was trying to cheer me up. He said listen, I've always wanted to do this Woody Guthrie song... he introduced me to Jörg Hiller, who was a young artist who was 23 at the time, and starting to do some sort of internship with Arnold. Arnold said, 'Why don't you record this?' He always liked my voice, and he knew that I sang, and he was kind of intrigued that I was from the South.

Woody Guthrie made that song about the suffering and the empathy and the way he could give voice to that suffering, but also the feeling of 'I ain't got no home'. I've wandered my whole life: I've gone from town to town; as an artist I've chosen to take risks. I had to just go off because my parents couldn't really offer me support, they didn't understand what I was doing. I've lived in poverty quite honestly my whole life. I've found ways to get by, but I relate to those words of not knowing where your next buck is going to come from and sleeping on someone's couch.

But I just found a way to cobble it together, basically. I can really relate to the feeling of suffering.

Woody Guthrie, 1940



And I don't know what it is, it has to do with also what I felt in Delta blues music, the suffering that can break open a heart and make music that is truly heartfelt. I empathise and I long for that kind of depth.

Did you connect with Harry Partch on that level as well, since he was nomadic, a travelling hobo for a while?

Yeah, I have – he would be camped out at a university and then kicked out, having to put his instruments in storage. Yeah, I made the choice to have this humongous instrument, and trying to perform, trying to find a studio, it's ridiculous, I could tell you so many crazy stories of trying to find a space for it. But I've also been strong-willed about wanting to do it. It's a privilege to live this kind of life and make these kinds of choices. I did raise my hand for difficulty: I didn't make an instrument I can just pack and play in a small space.

### Lou Harrison

"Avalokiteshvara"

From *Serenade* (New Albion) 1978, rec 2003

[Immediately] Lou Harrison. I don't know what it is, though.

I have a somewhat uneasy relationship with Lou Harrison and his music. I didn't come out to California to try to intern with what was going on here, like a lot of people that live here now did back in those days. So I never had any personal relationship with Lou Harrison. I was at the Other Minds Festival in 2002 to perform this piece I had written for Kronos... Other Minds has this symposium at Djerassi, for us to share our work before the festival. And Harrison, he would say, 'Very nice job, Pauline [Oliveros]', 'Good job, Richard [Teitelbaum]', and so on.

I had this feeling: here I am, walking in the footsteps of his pioneering work and I'm working in just intonation, and it's harmonic work I'm dealing with and I've invented an instrument and hoping he can mentor me and embrace my work, so I'm very nervous and I start to play this piece called *Train*. I start with a pattern, then I transposed it by a perfect fifth and juxtaposed those two, which creates some beating and complexity. And then I did the same thing where I took a chord and juxtaposed it with a harmonic seven which creates a 49 – seven times seven is 49, a

complex interval. I created these clouds that started to shimmer, shimmering clouds. For me that is what gets into expressivity, with gliss and Indian music, they're glissing in and out of tune, and the Delta blues music with the detuning, that's to me when the soul and expression comes through.

I was playing this piece for him, and he said, 'Your 3/2 is two cents flat.' And I was like, what? I don't know, whenever I record I check everything; I took him literally. I was just so disconcerted by that. And that was all he said. While the track was playing he had a CD in his hand, shooting rainbows, just looking distractedly around.

Later I was at a party. Susie [Allen] – she's a harpist at Cal Arts – said, 'Ah, Lou, whenever he's putting someone down, he says, "Your 3/2 is two cents flat"'. That's his standard comment to someone working in equal temperament.' Because in equal temperament 3/2 is two cents flat... Later I talked to Daniel Schmidt, who closely worked with Lou Harrison, and he said, 'Oh yeah, he was grouchy, don't take that seriously. He just felt threatened.'

Can you talk more about just intonation, and why you gravitated towards it?

I discovered this longitudinal mode thing; I was hot to move to NYC. I was in Minneapolis, Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives* played through the Walker Art Center, Laurie Anderson, and I thought, I want to move to New York. Minneapolis just felt kind of dead...

So I went to New York, met Arnold Dreyblatt at Phill Niblock's place. Arnold invited me to his studio. I had this wonderful experience, like what I imagined Harry Partch's studio would be like, with all these parts laying around, and Arnold is a walking encyclopedia of everything, especially music.

And then Arnold said, 'You know this long string thing has been done before?' And I said, 'Really?' And he said, 'Yeah, there's an artist, Terry Fox, and he attached a string to a door in sites in Europe and did a performance where he played one string and walked back and forth for hours...' I was crestfallen, I thought should I quit this? And then I thought, I'm not going to quit. Because, hokey as it might seem, I want to make a musical instrument and I want to compose music. Arnold helped me by introducing me to [sound designer] Bob Bielecki, I set up the first installation in Phill Niblock's loft when he was away for the summer.

This was in 1982. I got this initial technical thing from Bob Bielecki. From Arnold I was inspired to make it acoustic, to build a wooden box. I was working in equal temperament, and I had multiple strings and I was playing chords a little bit. When [Roulette co-founder] David Weinstein heard this, he said, 'No, no, you can't tune this in equal temperament, because you have so many overtones. It has to be in a natural tuning system so that the overtones don't clash with each other.' It was through David Weinstein that I learned about just intonation.

Just intonation is just another choice. It's a spectrum of choices. There has been great music done in equal temperament. I'm not militant about it. It just suits my instrument.

You were talking earlier about the blues and detuned guitars. Can you expand on that?

Well, I like the sound. I like the quirkiness; in just intonation you can find some quirky sounding chords, something that sparks the ear. I think emotion gets into particular intervals. I don't know what

the particular emotion is, I started to feel that and learn that through Indian music. It's such abstract music. You learn a particular raag scale – my teacher would hit a certain note, I just wanted to cry, it hit me so much. Then you wonder, what is that? What is the emotion? There's no word for that, but there's something very moving.

### Deep Listening Band "Phantom"

From *The Ready Made Boomerang* (New Albion) 1991  
[Immediately] Deep Listening Band. This is from the cistern [the Fort Worden cistern in Washington state, which has a 45 second reverb].

[Pauline Oliveros] was so generous and so open, and as a young artist I really needed some guidance. She's just been there my entire adult life. Not super-closely, but will dip in and dip out. I was in Austin, and got a postcard from her: 'Ellen, do you want to collaborate?' It was a dream come true. I wanted to take my instrument to a level of sophistication that I could actually play music and the dream would be to play with her. She really mentors people, she worked with me on fundraising our commissions...

Can you talk about going into the cistern?  
Yes, I loved that album *Deep Listening* on New Albion, that velvet texture they were able to create. Then I moved to Seattle in 1996, 97. I was able to get to know [trombonist] Stuart Dempster better, and Stuart was the one who actually discovered the cistern. He did a piece where he documented all these wonderful acoustic spaces in Washington State and that was one of them... Stuart Dempster made the arrangements for a group of us to go into the cistern. Have you ever brought your long string instrument outside, strung it up in an outdoor environment? I've done it successfully once. The problem is that I really need resonance in a space for the overtones to merge and interact and build up. When it's outdoors the sound just goes away and it's too naked. It really requires acoustic space to work, I feel. The only time it did work outdoors was in 96, I collaborated with Pat Graney, she worked with a composition of mine called *Change Of Direction*, which I performed with two other performers, and installed my instrument back to back over hundreds of feet. I had a double-sided resonator where two performers played... mounted on a hillside outdoors in Magnuson Park in Seattle. This recording engineer created a circular array on this hillside. We were playing, I had my two people playing, I walked into that circle... it sounded like I was in a room. It was so beautiful. It just surrounded me. He was a great engineer. It takes that to pull it off.  
It would be amazing to have it inside the cistern. The cistern is a very unpleasant space, there's water on the floor, there's dirt and graffiti and broken glass, it's cold, you really want to be bundled up in down. It's exhausting to be in that kind of wet cold, and it's dark. Besides, everything you do starts to sound like that Deep Listening Band recording.

### Arnold Dreyblatt And The Orchestra Of Excited Strings "Untitled"

From *Nodal Excitation* (Dexter's Cigar) 1998, rec 1982  
That's Arnold Dreyblatt's *Propellers In Love* [1986]? The track... That's an early one. Let me think, it's got the piano. Oh, that was really early.

### It's from *Nodal Excitation*.

Oh yeah... When he invited me to his studio, walking in there and he demoed each instrument for me... I had been around people doing experimental music a little bit, but you know when you find the thing that tells you, this is it, it was that moment. This is it. As a young artist trying to find what area you want to work in, when I walked into his place, I saw his notation, his scores, his altered instruments, the cuteness of his instruments too, the tiny little pipe organ, the little wood and metal pipes, the little piano. The richness of the sounds was so seductive. And the quirky, weird tuning of the chords, it inspired something in my ear, and the mechanics of it, the architecture of it, the musical instruments, and how fun and exciting it was to see a museum of musical instruments, and to see how instruments work. It was just a real defining moment.

### Giacinto Scelsi "Trilogia, Part 3"

From *Trilogia/Ko-Tha* (Etcetera) 1992  
[Cellist] Frances-Marie Uitti. Scelsi.

Alvin Lucier invited me to perform at Wesleyan in 1988. I installed my instrument in the old gym, this brick room, I was able to string it up between the two, and Maryanne Amacher was performing on the same evening...

Anyway, she came to my concert, and afterward she told me, this sounds like Giacinto Scelsi. I really wanted to hear it. I had an earlier connection with Frances-Marie Uitti... she came down to do a session with me and it didn't go anywhere really at the time. She came to Seattle and performed *Trilogia*, and it was the most beautiful thing, the most amazing thing, to see her live with two bows and chording and multiple strings... you can't believe it's one person doing that, it's very inspiring and beautiful.

### Can you talk about Alvin Lucier's *Music On A Long Thin Wire*?

*Music On A Long Thin Wire* was my inspiration. It was installed at the New Music America festival in downtown St Paul. I was cooking as a prep cook when I was in that festival. I was 23, I had this job, I didn't get out as much as I wanted to to see everything because

I was working on my performance. But then I was there slicing cheese or whatever, so I didn't actually see his installation, but it made me think what might happen. And since then I was installed in parallel with *Music On A Long Thin Wire* at a festival in Brussels, which was kind of cool. That was in 2005.

Alvin was a super-huge influence... I didn't study with him, I didn't go to graduate school, but through proxy, Arnold studied with him. I just loved his aesthetic, taking something that would be a science experiment, and takes it into an artwork. I've been really inspired by his aesthetic.

### Girija Devi with Zakir Hussain "Rag Puriya Kalyan"

From *Rag Puriya Kalyan* (Moment) 1991

### Can you talk a bit about female vocals in Indian music? You've talked about tuning the long string instrument in the key of A...

Because it's the female voice, the female vocal range. I also thought it would be convenient because if I ever wanted to sing I would know that range.

I learned about ten raag scales – I studied for four years. I really got so much out of the exchange there because of the style of teaching. Because it's so ancient; here are these melodies and tunings that are thousands of years old. The transmission from teacher to student is so powerful. When a teacher sings, and then the student, it's like a back and forth, the student repeats. The teacher sings a phrase, the student repeats... you get to this altered state of consciousness towards the end where it's like a mesh. I just get elevated by the process. I was really pushing myself to up my game through my study of Indian music.

There's something about generating music from your own body that's so amazing. You don't need anything, just your own body. I heard my voice develop and become richer. It didn't sound good when I started, and just through sticking with it, even though it didn't sound good, I could hear this transformation where you build an instrument out of your own body. It was such a great experience.

One thing Anita [Slawek] would say to me is that when you're really in tune the music plays itself. That advice has stuck with me and helped me. Sometimes I would get into a funk where I think things aren't working or don't sound good. And you have this feeling where you don't know what to do, but the sympathy in the tones can kind of lead you in a way.  
Do you feel that after all this time the long string instrument has become almost an extension of you in some way? You were talking about feeling music through your body – do you feel connected to it? I do, because it's so big that it defines a space. It occupies a space. It's like climbing inside of a piano. It surrounds me and it embraces me. I feel at home, going into it, with all the components of it. It's my friend. There's an attachment.

Is it time to stop? I've had people advise me, why don't you make a new instrument now? But I keep finding things that are new. I get into a funk with it, I've been in a funk for about a year, at least, and now I just had a breakthrough yesterday. I'm doing woodworking and designing new resonator boxes and I just installed a new resonator yesterday that has a much more beautiful tone. It is a leap forward and I feel very excited about it, and I see the way forward again. □

Frances-Marie Uitti performing  
Giacinto Scelsi's *Trilogia*

