

## Interview with Professor Sherrie Tucker: Pauline Oliveros' Adaptive Use Musical Instrument

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This interview focuses on the influence of Pauline Oliveros' (1932-2016) work and an academic's wellbeing. Oliveros is considered one of electronic music's most important early figures. She was an original member and the first director of the pioneering San Francisco Tape Music Center. Also, the founder of the Deep Listening Institute, she conveyed the message that sound and its effects are powerful equalisers. Dr Sherrie Tucker, Professor, American Studies, University of Kansas, shares with Professor Ruth Falzon how Oliveros's work changed her philosophical perspective, professional and personal life.

### **Sherrie Tucker Narrates:**

I met Pauline Oliveros as fellow members of a big research project called Improvisation, Community and Social Practice, initiated in Guelph, Ontario Canada. I had been a fan of her music for a long time. I loved her music, but I had never met her before. There is so much to say about her as a composer, a humanitarian, an innovator - somebody who was always working on something new, always creating; and whose many projects live on. She was a developer of a very important philosophy of listening - Deep Listening, which lives on. So many aspects of her are not only remembered, but are continued because she

had communities around her that have continued her work. What a wonderful thing to have one's work continued after you are no longer in this physical realm.

I was thrilled to meet with Pauline Oliveros, but I did not expect that meeting her would help my wellbeing, but it certainly has. A lot I cannot explain, but one thing I can tell you is that there was something about her attitude towards her work that has really improved my wellbeing: learning a different attitude about work and putting my work out in the world. I used, and I still have a tendency, to be very anxious, very kind of self-centred, tied up with wanting to do everything right, wanting to be smart, wanting everything to go well, to the point where I would often be giving a talk and just could not wait for it to be over, as if I were running a race and my goal was to finish rather, than enjoying the moment and experiencing the importance of the work.

This is why now I promote her work. I am not doing anything to finish the race any more. She was all about the work. She was very focused on the work, which was always important, but she had a relaxed way, a calm way of living with her work that I just loved.

She always had other collaborators, people around her. She was always the leader

in collaborations that I took part in, probably on everything that she was ever involved in – however, a collaborative leader. She listened to people and she could bring people into the group, and keep them focused on the work and ensuring that they felt that they belonged. I guess I now try to emulate some of her ways. I try not to approach my work so that it involves working myself up into a frenzy in order to complete tasks. I focus on how to draw people around me, to work with people I enjoy working with, to listen to people, to be open, but not so open that you erase yourself. She never erased herself and was always super present. I think that this is one of the ways that wellbeing around work works - balancing people, yourself, and the task at hand.

Whilst Pauline had no formal training in psychology or counselling of which I am aware, she was constantly studying and reading voraciously. She and IONE, her life partner, had a Tibetan Buddhist teacher for a long time. She would quote what she had learned from him. However, she did not follow one particular practice either. She was interested in cognition, in neurons, in the brain, in consciousness. She was just interested in a lot of things. When she talked about her listening practice it was always about the sound in an environment: for example, she often spoke about growing up listening to the crickets. I guess I was also attracted to her work because I also have an interdisciplinary background from undergraduate through graduate school. I earned my doctorate in a critical theory programme, but I always incorporated my interest in music no matter what I was studying.

I was primarily a jazz, I would say a jazz historian, although not strictly a historian. I was interested in analysing jazz, in historical moments. I am an oral historian, so I interviewed a lot of jazz musicians. For my first project, I interviewed over 100 musicians who had played in all-women big bands of the 1940s. I listened to their versions of Jazz history - the point of view of people whose stories got left out. I was fascinated by their versions of jazz history that made all of jazz history just look different. Thus, in my earlier work, I never played music but listened to

<https://www.um.edu.mt/ssw>

people who played music talking about it, interacting with people who played music. Pauline's Adaptive Use Musical Instrument (AUMI) project ([aumiapp.com](http://aumiapp.com)) invited me, invites everybody, to be a musical creator. That completely thrilled me and thrills me to this day!

As a young person, I had a kind of a love-hate relationship with the flute that I played in my school band. There were notes I could never hit as I have a finger that locks and it was just so frustrating. When Pauline started talking about this instrument (AUMI) that would be economically free, downloadable, computer program that would be accessible and adaptable so that any living body would be able to play sound by moving, I was inspired. I was thinking of people with the least mobility in inclusive music making. What I did not anticipate is what it would mean for me, because I just had not had much of a joyful relationship with my flute.

AUMI uses a built-in camera from the iPad or computer to make community music. What you do is you put the sounds that you want into different boxes or grids of the instrument and then you set it up so that it will follow your preferred body movement, be it fast or slow. She turned surveillance tools into adaptive music-making.

I think that playing with other people added to my wellness. As an academic, I spent a lot of time imparting information to others. I find this part of my work very satisfying, but also hard, since I am fighting my anxiety to be relaxed and do my job well, and understanding my lectures present high stakes for the students, even if I am relaxed. Teaching and learning are more anxiety-laden than they should be. The AUMI became a way for me to interact with people I did not know, to not have to worry about not having/knowing what to say, to be with people in a mode where you know there is an activity we can all access. That means that we can all use our different bodies, different movements, different choices, and interact. It is about the experience

Pauline Oliveros became explicitly interested in disability late in her life, but she was always interested in inclusion. For her,

inclusion was a practice, something that you can never think is finished. It is always about listening for who is not included, knowing that someone is always excluded and you always have to always be listening. She taught me inclusivity as a practice. I was privileged to be with her during a time when she was learning about disability and I learned alongside her since I really hadn't been attuned to disability myself. Watching her gave me the courage to get involved, to expand my circle. It was hard because I had to face that I had been reading and writing about racial and sex discrimination all my career but I had never thought about disability. It was just really a shock to me that I would miss that. I felt bad about myself and started thinking about where the kids with disabilities in the town I grew up in were and this led me to research which school these kids had attended. Of course, they had been completely segregated, lived parallel lives, and we never met them in this small town in California. Thus, Pauline modelled for me how to practice inclusivity in a way that is not about congratulating yourself and beating yourself up, which are both self-centred responses. Instead, it is really about learning something new about yourself and responding to the world differently. Pauline narrated about a birthday party in the park where she and her friends were playing. There was a little girl watching them play. They knew who she was but none of them knew the little girl and so they didn't approach her. They just kept playing. Pauline's mom came up to her and said "You need to go invite that little girl and ask her to play with you". Pauline talks about that moment as being where she learnt that there is always someone out there and you always need to be listening for that - you need to widen the circle.

My professional life is radically different because of Pauline and AUMI. I was writing about jazz, about jazz musicians, and still am, but from the moment that I met Pauline, I knew I needed to do something different. I reflected: I need to write about this. I need to do collaborative work, I need to play and write, what people call practice-based research. I also wanted to play and not just write about other people playing. I now play regularly with people, with new people, with all generations of

people. I have a community AUMI improvising group that meets every week and we call ourselves the Pre-Pandemic Ensemble, PPE. I also carry this experience to my students. In fact I can say that in my professional life, I am not writing about jazz history as I did. AUMI has returned me to what I loved about jazz, to its capacity, and times, to break through oppressive systems and connect people to each other, to amplify marginalised communities, and to use the skills gained in this work to build new communities. When I go back and look at my writing, I realise that having this practice changes the way I see and experience things in my personal life, and I know that it has also changed my work.