



Daphne Brooks & P.A. Skantze: A Playlist for Encouragement

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević:

Hello and welcome to the Salon. Our guests today are habitual co-thinkers P.A. Skantze and Daphne Brooks, who pick up on previous conversations on the radical potentiality of pop and rock music and of the lyric to reason together on the embodied, the sonic, and the political.

Daphne A. Brooks is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of African American Studies, American Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Music at Yale University. She is the author of a number of academic publications on 19th and 20th-century African American literary and cultural production, Black feminist theory, performance and popular music. The first volume of her trilogy *Subterranean Blues: Black Women Sound Modernity*, entitled *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* is out with Harvard University Press in 2021.

P.A. Skantze is a Reader in Drama, Theatre and Performance at Roehampton University in London, where she also heads the Centre for Performance and Creative Exchange. Her articles include examinations of national identity, the choreography of Bill T. Jones, surtitles and contemporary theatrical performance, gift exchange and creative generosity, Shakespeare and Mabou Mines, gender and motion, the epistemology of practice as research, watching and spectatorship as praxis, and a wealth of work on sound and composition in performance.

Brooks and Skantze take their Salon for LMYE, recorded as 2020 drew to a close, as an opportunity to think about what they term 'sonic encouragement', to be found in music and in performance. Reasoning through a number of sound cues gathered through their personal and public experiences throughout the year, they forefront an idea of 'ludic solidarity in the catastrophic'.

This conversation took place between New York and Grosseto on the 22nd December 2020.

[00:02:38] SALON

P.A. Skantze: Okay.

Daphne Brooks: Happy Kwanzaa!

[*Laughter.*]

PS: Happy Kwanzaa to you! What day is it?

DB: I don't know. I just tend to just take all of December for Kwanzaa. You know, I mean why not?

PS: Why not? Hanukkah!

DB: Maulana Karenga and his Afrocentric friends designed the holiday during the Black Arts Movement so I figure, you know, it's a side of improvisation. But at any rate, it is good to see/hear you in the strange...

PS: It is so good to see/hear you in these strange, awful times.

DB: Yeah, couple of Decembers ago we were all together.

PS: We were, we were, talking the sonorous.

DB: Yes exactly. And now as our mutual dear friend Fred Moten would say, as he said to me the other night, we'll have to muddle through somehow, so...

PS: Yeah I mean it's really... So I – and you know this is fundamental to the kinds of questions you and I've been talking about for a long time – but you know I was just in the States to visit my brother, and it is just really a moment of where – I mean, what I want to talk a little bit about with you because you're a person that I don't have to translate to and I think that's, you know, an interesting thing.

DB: Yes, I feel the same way.



PS: It's the sonic is – like I've been thinking a lot about sonic encouragement. And the ways in which, and this partly comes out of the family Zooms that have been instituted since the pandemic, because like so many people it never even occurred to us to Zoom before as a family. And, as you would appreciate highly, our Zooms have come to include instructions like: 'One person decides the artist or the band and then everyone has to choose three songs.'

DB: Wow. That's great, that is so great, I love it.

PS: And it's been really like reliving certain ways about how we got through. You know? Like what you're saying about Fred, how we muddle through but also like how we move through, how we Prince through, how we Rolling Stones through, you know, how we 'through' in those ways.

DB: Yeah, that's beautiful, P.A., that's really, really beautiful. Can I leap in and say that–

PS: Please.

DB: –I want to lift that formulation 'sonic encouragement' – definitely, I want to lift it. I also want to add to our maybe little lexicon that we're building together here, 'sonic healing', which I've thought a lot about, and there's a song that I want to share.

PS: Okay.

DB: It's also really a particular performance so you and I will hopefully be able to see it. The reason why I keep coming back to it actually has to do with Radiohead, which is not – I'm not, I'm not playing Radiohead! Although I could. [*Laughter.*] I have some reasons why I'm not playing Radiohead.

PS: Yeah, yeah.

DB: I wrote a piece for *The Guardian* this fall [2020] on the Blackness of Radiohead – 'The beautiful Blackness of Radiohead' was the title of the piece – and it was very important to me because Radiohead is a very important band to me, I've learned some things that I didn't know about the band in relation to BDS [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions] and the BDS movement from a couple of years ago that makes me quite sad actually. But they're one of my favourite bands of all time and you know I was writing about the number of Black artists who cover Radiohead – Lianne La Havas has a gorgeous, you know, right, but there's a ton, right? And I was writing about these ways in which freedom and, you know, rejection of authoritarianism has been embedded in their work for a long time.

PS: Yeah.

DB: I wrote about it to mark the 20th anniversary of *Kid A*, and I got the most ferocious racist hate mail–

PS: Oh!

DB: –that I've ever gotten before in my, you know, 20 years of doing public-facing writing from across the Pond.

PS: Holy shit...

DB: Just a lot of boys who were upset and it, you know, and of course it was in stereo with the white supremacy that–

PS: Yes.

DB: –has made it put itself on, you know, repeat play at high volume especially these past four years that we know it's been there. It didn't traumatise me, and I also understood the importance of not writing back to these people! There was only one person I wrote back to who actually started very innocently and then became more problematic, but he was asking why I was capitalising 'Black' in my in my article which is something that I've returned to doing. I have an author's note at the beginning of my book that's coming out in February–

PS: Yay!

DB: –where I type out why I made that change. Yes, P.A. Skantze had a had a lot to do with that book getting done in terms of ideas. So – but I didn't write anybody back, but if I had, this is the song that I really wanted to play just to send a link.

[00:07:51 to 00:10:36] 'Try a Little Tenderness' (1967) by Otis Redding (recorded live in Cleveland)



DB: The version of this that we're looking at is a performance the night before Otis Redding was killed in a plane crash.

PS: Oh god.

DB: I can't make it through this song – I never can make it through this song. And, you know, it speaks to the core tenets of the soul music revolution and, you know, its insistence on claiming the right to the inextricable ways that Blackness and humanity work in tandem with one another in the West and model a kind of ethics of radical care and intimacy. And I just kind of thought, like, what would it mean, *[laughter]* you know, what would it mean to respond to that level of spontaneous quotidian violence I was receiving on email with a song like this? It would mean extending the tradition that MLK and Baldwin and an entire generation, my parents' generation, have really put into action on the streets to transform the United States fundamentally half century ago? So it's a song that I come back to a lot right now as I'm watching, as we're all watching, what we hope are some fundamental transitions that we urgently need in order to save ourselves.

PS: So I have a memory that goes with this song that was an incredibly powerful performance at La MaMa in New York and the whole piece, the whole live performance piece was centred around someone returning again and again to a vinyl record player and playing this song. And it was – because the other thing is there's something really profoundly beautiful about the fact that just right now, cut off as we are from one another physically, the only thing we can do is try. Right?

DB: Yes that's right, that's right.

PS: You know?

DB: That's true. I mean that, you know, one of the many, many just gorgeous things about this performance that I hold so dear is that it mounts struggle as a site of cathartic energy and infinite potentiality. It's not an endpoint, it's always going to be the site in which we continue to make an unmake ourselves. And Otis really rehearses that, you know, over and over and over again in the song itself. It's just, it's really – it's the thing that I feel like we need right now!

PS: Yes, and it's interesting that you began – you were talking about the responses you got from that article which I haven't read, which means that my daily checking of *The Guardian* has been inadequate, Daphne Brooks!

[Laughter.]

DB: Oh, no no...

PS: But one of the things that's also interesting to me about that is: what does 'Twitter tender' look like? This is precisely this whole – the history of the Black sonic in the context of R&B – which is something I'm going to talk about – is, was also for me as you were playing that, I was thinking: 'It has a physical vulnerability, it has always had a physical vulnerability.' And, you know, with all of the caveats about how we all know that this is about performance and an outside. At the same time, there's something of the body offered always.

DB: Yes.

PS: And it's not a cue, but when I had been thinking about talking to you, which is such a fun thing to do, I had been thinking also that while I was finding my, what I was deciding on, I was listening to the beginning – I'm obsessed with Barry White being exactly like Falstaff.

[Laughter.]

DB: I love you.

PS: And so one of the things about the opening of the 'You'll Never Find' opening, right, it's that circular 'ba-da-da-da-dum ba-da-da-da-dum ba-da-da-da-dum' at the opening of it. And I thought I could just live in that circle – like, if someone would just establish that circle, that would be a place to dwell for a while.

DB: Yes.



PS: Because it just feels like there's something, you know, powerful. So sonic encouragement comes from – and I think actually I just will go ahead also and share my screen because he's wearing a great miniskirt and I'm sure you've seen this.

DB: [*Laughter.*] Okay! Can I say one more thing, P.A., too?

PS: Please!

DB: I want to also flag only that Otis has been important to me in facing, you know, white supremacist everyday violence, but also an understanding, you know, our pandemic lives that, you know, the key to saving ourselves is to be tender with one another. And it's such a basic need that we all demand and that everyone should be welcome to. So...

PS: Yeah, I completely agree.

DB: In that place of dwelling that you just referenced, yeah.

PS: Yeah. Okay, so this was what made me – and this was again, it comes – my life right now is very much engaged in sort of things that I... It was my brother who showed me this for the first time because I'd never seen it. And I literally sat in Texas on a Saturday night hanging out with my family and thought: 'Oh, I really want to play this for Daphne and talk about this.' So let me share...

[00:14:04 to 00:14:27] 'Just to See Her' (1993) by Aretha Franklin and Smokey Robinson (performance recorded as part of Aretha Franklin: Duets)

PS: There's a whole tradition right in this – in Southernness itself and then in Black church tradition but also, you know, any kind of Southern tradition of helping people along sonically while they're doing things, right?

DB: Yes.

PS: So I love the ease and the virtuosity when Aretha says things like: 'Do you really?', you know? I was thinking about the time we're living in and I was thinking it's like one of those disaster movies where we're got to go over some impossibly small rope bridge that's not going to hold us. And the crevice is unbelievably deep. And it's her voice saying 'Sing it, Smokey!' that gets you to the next part of the bridge, right?

DB: Yeah, come on! That's the antiphonal, right, the radical antiphonal call and response.

PS: And also that kind of, for me with Aretha it's like she's giving voice – and this is of course, you know, partly in my background about thinking about Shakespeare and R&B – but it's as if she's giving voice–

DB: Which I love.

PS: –to a few things, right, but she has an entire like sonnet behind that thing, right? She's – I mean, we're not hearing every line of the sonnet, we're just hearing what comes out as she's putting the microphone to her mouth, going 'Do it, Smokey' right?

DB: Right, right, yeah.

PS: But I just thought, what would it mean if we could know how to have that kind of – to use the words that you've brought up with Otis – that kind of tender patter, right, with one another? And I've so often thought about this in the extremities of the academic where people give their talks in this silence. I mean obviously this doesn't happen everywhere, but I've often thought, you know, what would it mean if we were constantly saying things like: 'You go, girl!', right?

DB: Right.

PS: As people were saying really interesting lines, right?

DB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PS: Because it – you know, it has to be repressed. When I'm listening to really interesting people I have to repress, I mean – often I don't! [*Laughter.*]

DB: Right, yeah, which we love about you, P.A.! Stevie is the prophet of love and preaches love as, you know, one of the core tenets of his repertoire. But again, to keep going with this notion of tenderness, I just started to think about the distinctions between love and tenderness. They are



entwined with one another, but I think that tenderness is a gestural action as well – right, that that anyone can access. It does not require that kind of deep study and history to be able to cultivate a kind of foundation of love. We should love our strangers – this is something that across religions we've been taught – but you can have tenderness immediately at your disposal without that kind of history of intimacy. And so I guess that's why I was just, like: 'Oh my god, that's such a radical idea to just be able to think about that as how we put ourselves together each day in relation to each other!', right? You know, we should be able to reach deeper for love of humanity, right? [Laughter.] But if we can start with just tenderness, right, as being in our 'equipment for living', as Ralph Ellison would say via Kenneth Burke, or vice-versa, we'd be in much better shape. That was really – that clip was extraordinary and great to see. I will pull up a clip that I went to quite a bit especially early in our 2020 dumpster fire, and it's part of a – I will reveal that it's part of a playlist that I was asked to build as the revolution was unfolding this summer. And Princeton, my former place of employment, was putting together this kind of online thing through Princeton [University] Concerts where people did playlists, and so I agreed to do it. I think Black folks got called upon to do a lot of commentator [laughter] kind of activism – more labour, more labour on our part!

PS: But also, like: 'White people, work harder!'

DB: Right, I know! And so I had to choose, we all had to pick and choose what we're going to do and I thought well, you know, this is a playlist for the moment sure, I'm always willing to do that. This is a track that only recently came into my life, I'd say, in the past few years. I did not know about Pastor TL Barrett, who's still with us and based in Chicago, but he made this album in the early '70s, made several albums with his Youth for Christ Choir. And he just straddles the realm between soul and R&B and the gospel elixir that is all of those things, the sacred content and the secular forms – he's able to mix it all together in a really extraordinary way. So let me play a little bit of this.

[00:20:00 to 00:23:53] 'Nobody Knows' (1971) by Pastor Thomas Lee Barrett, Jr. and Youth for Christ Choir

DB: Here's what I wrote about this: 'The mighty Pastor Thomas Lee Barrett, Jr, leads his majestic choir through a dazzling rereading of the classic African American spiritual 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen'. Barrett's reimagining of this sacred lament leans into a gospel/R&B groove that burrows deep in with stubborn determination and fortitude, carrying us through the valley of despair and ultimately moving you towards the light of glory sounded out by the incandescent voices in his ensemble. A stirring combination of Black struggle and grievance, resilience and revivification all bound up in one more riveting performance.'

You know? God bless, my mum's 94-years strong, knock on wood–

PS: Yes!

DB: –heading into her ophthalmologist appointment out in Palo Alto, California, later this morning. But I think one of the last times I saw her, we were at home in Berkeley, first week of February, and I can't remember if it was that visit or the one right before in December, but I always take her to her little spa appointment, get her nails done. And we were in the car and I put this song on and she looked at me and said: 'Oh what is this?' I said: 'Pastor TL Barrett.' 'Well lord have mercy, you'd need to send me a copy of this. This is something else!' So! Yeah, I think, you know, this is a 'stop you in your tracks' kind of performance, and I just think that there is a way that he's working in several different affective registers.

PS: Absolutely.

DB: Right? To sort of play with that combination of, you know, that African American combination of catastrophe and radical ludic pleasure in the face of catastrophe. I want to be very careful with that formulation, but it's, yeah–

PS: Well, I mean – no sorry–

DB: No, go ahead.

PS: No, but one of the things that I always get so bent out of joint as the ex-Catholic that I am is the idea that the ludic can only come out of the catastrophic.

DB: Yeah.



PS: And yet, and yet, you know—

DB: Yes, and yet.

PS: And yet, I'm willing to believe that that people who have a talent for the ludic become even more talented in the catastrophic. *[Laughter.]*

DB: Yes! Yes! Well right, that's the Black radical tradition, right there.

PS: But the other thing I love about this, Daphne, I mean not is it incredible to listen to, but what a great thing to put on your playlist for the revolution. Because the other thing about that song is that of course it's a church song, so of course choirs sing it, but I think it's often been offered as a very solitary song, right?

DB: Yes!

PS: The 'I' in the lyric is a very powerful —'Nobody knows the trouble I'VE seen'.

DB: Yes.

PS: But because that choir starts that verse, that 'I' becomes 'we', in a real powerful sense.

DB: Yeah, that's right, that's right, that's right! And you know, John Coltrane once said, we hear the 'we' in their 'I', you know, in reference to blues performance, and Hazel Carby in her germinal study of Black women musicians, blues icons, references that line at the end of her essay, you know: 'We hear the 'we' in their 'I' ' [Carby 1986] — so absolutely, yeah yeah yeah.

PS: I'm sure you have had this experience as a tense exponential, but I was talking with a friend in the midst of the heightening of the revolution in summer and the experience people had of suddenly hearing from their white friends...

[Laughter.]

DB: Yeah...

PS: Who were like, you know: 'Tell me what it is I should be doing!'

DB: Right, right.

PS: And I think one of the things that's interesting for me in this, I've been — my favourite word of the revolution was 'dismantle'.

DB: Right.

PS: Not least because it's an Audre Lorde word for me — that whole process of what it means to, you know, just to go back to sonic encouragement, what it also means not to be the lead singer, right? I think, you know, this is one of the things that's going to be the big question around real radical — I mean, I think the US has a much, in my experience in the UK, I think the US has much more experience with really delving into questions of white supremacy within the academy. The UK is definitely, you know, I'm formally excepting some of your very good friends in the UK, *[laughter]* but in general in the UK in my experience of the UK, for me this is going to be the big question is — as I was saying to a friend recently if you write again and again about your position as a white person, it feels to me when I'm reading it, I think that that seems like you're still the centre of the universe—

DB: Right, now.

PS: —it's just that now you're apologising for being it, right?

DB: Right, right, right, right, yeah.

PS: And so the question is what does it actually mean, you know? And this goes straight to the sonic: what does it actually mean to listen? What does it actually mean to learn from the women who your new book — which I cannot wait to hold in my hand — is addressing in, you know, as I know will be in revolutionary way.

DB: One of the things that I can say that's outside of confidentiality that we've talked about on the ground at my institution — with some of the hegemonic departments who've been here since the beginning — is to actually engage in conversations about what does intellectual humility look like.

PS: Whoohh yes!



DB: Right? And it's not a hard question. It shouldn't be, because, you know, if we go back to the basics of what study involves, right, it does involve and necessitate a certain level of humility conjoined with curiosity, right? [*Laughter.*] And those are two things that are often missing from academic life, strangely enough! And yet we know that the history of ensemblic jazz performance as our greatest thinkers have shown us involves humility and curiosity, you know. One of my favourite pieces by Albert Murray, 'Improvisation and the Creative Process' [1998], which he originally delivered I believe as a lecture for a conference at the great – Robert O'Meally at Columbia designed the jazz studies programme that's two decades plus strong there. In their great community at Columbia, he had this conference that ended up becoming the basis for the collection *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* [1998], and Albert Murray really, you know, talks at length about just the kind of equipment for living that one needs to participate in any kind of a jazz performance, right? And we know this from *Invisible Man* [1952] from his best friend Ralph Ellison, right, that you have to go on a journey through reclaiming all of that history and knowledge or being open to it and open to obtaining that knowledge in order to play along, right? And if we had a little bit more of that kind of an approach within the modern academy I think we'd have just a more dynamic and ethical way of being together.

PS: And also I think, you know, the financialisation of the university–

DB: Yes.

PS: –has meant that students come to us for either a stamp that says they've been in a something and they've come to the end of it – not anything about discovery. But I think the other thing is that what comes with that is an absolute – you know, student satisfaction is based on you never confusing them. How can that be possible? [*Laughter.*]

DB: Right. Right! Yeah, yeah.

PS: What is curiosity but the result – the happy result, the willing and humble result – of confusion, of the process of discovery, right?

DB: Yeah, yeah.

PS: I think that's one of the things that – you know, I saw that change, you could see that change of it coming to this point of students feeling like they should not show that they don't know.

DB: Right!

PS: You know, and that, I mean to me, like, if there is anything out of, you know, what has just been a season of awfulness, one of the possibilities is: 'Let's say that nothing works.'

DB: Mhmm, right.

PS: So having said that, let's say that the only – and I say this to my art students all the time – the most important thing right now as you go into this as young people, as you go in to, in fact, change a white supremacist theatre culture, is that nothing has worked and therefore the only thing you can use is your imagination.

DB: Mhmm, right.

PS: And, you know, we go back into this, it's about encouragement because to me that's also profoundly part of the process of the moment in which – and it goes back to what you just played us – because when we rely on one superhero to do our work that person gets exhausted!

DB: Right.

PS: And eventually dragged down by their own human, you know, human foibles.

DB: Yes.

PS: So we have to swell each other, we have to be able to give each other space to come in and go out.

DB: Mhmm, right, that's right, that's right, yeah, right, yeah.

PS: I have one–

DB: Can I say one thing, just a response to that?

PS: Say one thing!



DB: The other piece of this then is – we’ve got humility, curiosity, but also generosity, right? You’re talking about giving each other the space to come in and out and that’s also tied to tenderness, right: to really give each other the space that we need to be able to grow and to imagine that we can, there is a possibility to transform ourselves, you know.

PS: I will share one more thing but I can – I’m going to embarrass you. Hahaha!

DB: Oh right now? You don’t want to do that, I’m still drinking coffee.

PS: [*Laughter.*] Drink that coffee!

DB: Yeah.

PS: So I’m only going to embarrass you because one of the pleasures of waiting for your book was reading the blurbs about your book.

DB: Oh my god, P.A., I can’t believe you’re doing that!

PS: I am doing it, and the reason I’m doing it, there’s a very, very specific reason I’m doing it. And that is that one of the things that’s important to me is that your work, beyond what your work is doing in terms of completely new ways of understanding which have certainly changed the way I understand and listen, but I think the other thing is that many people who respond to the work are immediately talking about how – and this is from, of all things, *Kirkus*, right, which is not like – but this is from a *Kirkus* review: ‘A spirited study–’, I mean, ‘spirited’, we could talk about that but we won’t. [*Laughter.*]

DB: I can’t believe this.

PS: I am going to do it! ‘The spirited study of how Black women musicians and writers have informed each other despite gatekeepers’ neglect and dismissals. A *sui generis*.’ And as soon as I saw ‘*sui generis*’, I thought: ‘No no, just a *generis*!’

[*Laughter.*]

DB: Oh god...

PS: ‘An essential work on Black music to launch future investigations.’ And that’s the thing, Daph – I mean, you know, that’s what the work is for!

DB: Yes.

PS: That’s your, you know – when I was thinking about sonic encouragement, like that’s you in the eureka moment of this extraordinary work you’re doing that allows us to get to the next part of the bridge, right? And so it is about generosity, it’s totally about generosity. And happily, no longer embarrassing you, my other sonic quote is also about generosity. [*Laughter.*]

DB: Fantastic.

PS: It’s very short. Okay. and I may have sent it to you already.

[00:33:11 to 00:33:28] ‘Bootsyeen Pentameter’ by P.A. Skantze

DB: [*Laughter.*] I love it.

PS: I’m just going to play that again because it pleases me.

DB: [*Laughter.*] Do you want to say what it is, so people know? So good.

PS: So this is what I call ‘Bootsyeen pentameter’. I actually made it, I actually – I’ve never ever known how to work Audacity, but I was so taken with the idea that the way Bootsie Collins from Parliament-Funkadelic and other things says ‘yeah!’ that I suddenly thought: ‘Wait wait wait, like, if there are five of those that’s pentameter!’

[*Laughter.*]

DB: Oh my god!

PS: So I’m calling it ‘Bootsyeen pentameter’.

DB: You know, but, I mean, the thing that always thrills me about you, P.A., as a model, right, and we think about what we can model for others to carry on and extend beyond the work that we’re doing, and so I appreciate it even though, right – I’m still mortified – but I appreciate it what you are able to draw out of that review, that is, again, equipment for living. And that is that your innovative



experimentation and your recourse to invention is always put forth in such a way that it does inspire others to have to think counterintuitively. If you're talking about Shakespeare and R&B, it is about breaking the rules, so to speak, in order for us to, you know, build something new. And that's what we should constantly be doing in order to save ourselves. So I appreciate that so much. I'm going to give you two more tracks then – I think we have a little more time left, if you're okay with this? And it's helpful for a lot of reasons, I hope. It's helpful to me. Because one of the things in the book that I do is – and I did this actually in my protest music class, and at first my students for resistant to it and then they came along with me – my Protest Music and the Black Radical Tradition class included a fair amount of white artists. So like Dylan and, you know, so usual suspects, but to them not usual. Even, you know, someone who people presumed to be white who I didn't think of him as white, Eddie Van Halen, we talked about him when he passed. But the point was to remind each other of what it means to recognise: one, Blackness is our friend, our different – Fred always reminds us that this is something that is so fundamental to not only our experience of the West but how the West was made and how it will be unmade, how it can perpetually be unmade. And to engage in these ideas about liberation in ways that have to be shared with our white allies and that our white allies have to buy in. And so, you know, there are white feminist thinkers in my book who are complicated but who are so crucial to figuring out a kind of collaborative way forward, even in our failures towards being able to affirm our shared condition with one another. And so the first one is for me one of the albums of the year.

PS: Okay.

[00:36:58 to 00:39:23] 'Cosmonauts' (2020) by Fiona Apple

DB: I know we're running short on time, I want to be able to pull up two of my worldwide sisters! But I will say about this child, who I always think of her as it as the revolutionary child, ever since she came on the MTV Awards during the season of her debut album *Tidal*, which would have been '97 or so, and she quoted Maya Angelou! [*Laughter.*] And I was like: 'Who's this white child?!'. You know, 'As Maya Angelou would say...' Like, wow! You know, '97! 'The genius Gen-X songwriter Fiona Apple writes epic sonic manifestos about feminist interiority and all its dense complexity, steeped in roiling emotions. One of the late denouement tracks on her masterpiece of an album 2020's *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, 'Cosmonauts' [is] a swirling piece of pop enchantment, the tale of real and sturdy romantics facing cosmic struggles. "How do you suppose that we'll survive?" Apple asks of her lover before leaning into the certainty that "you and I will be like a couple of cosmonauts / except with way more gravity than when we started off". An anthem to carry us through our times and into a galaxy of possibility.'

PS: Mm, mm. I love that.

DB: I love pairing this with Pastor TL Barrett too, because it just – she moves into this, you know, just raucous ensemblic – now – crescendo, and that felt especially hopeful and comforting when it came out in the early pandemic just to hear Fiona both doing her hardcore solo out on the edge stuff but then – yeah, moving–

PS: Mm.

DB: –in and out of being with the crowd, you know.

PS: Oh yeah, it's incredible.

DB: And thrilling to the crowd.

PS: So I was trying to think, you know, I was thinking to myself, wow, so I mean obviously we're, you know, to speak Bowie's name is just pleasure anyway.

DB: Yeah, it should. Always.

PS: But I was thinking of futurism, and I was thinking of how – you'll pardon the pun – but it's kind of pale a lot of times in white hands, or in white mouths or in white lyrics. But that's extraordinary.

DB: Mhmm, yeah, yeah, no. It is. I'm very moved by this work–

PS: Mhmm.

DB: –and by what she gives to us in the way of thinking about collectivity, right, through her single vision. And here's the other. This is an oldie but a goodie, it's from the edge of the 21st century, my girl from across the Pond, one of my favourites of all time.



[00:40:16 to 00:44:17] 'We Float' (2000) by PJ Harvey

DB: 'At the dawn of the 21st century, English post punk warrior PJ Harvey recorded a love letter album to New York City, *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*, a rock'n'roll feminist flaneur's take on the emotive volatility of modern life in motion. The exquisite climax to all that maelstrom, 'We Float', her parting message on that album is one of both existential reckoning and ethereal wonder. "We float..." croons Harvey, "take life as it comes." Twenty years on—' – 20 years on!

PS: Oh my god!

DB: '—she sings the soundtrack to our 2020 quarantine life.'

PS: Mm, mm.

DB: We'll float, P.A.!

PS: We'll float. We will. I mean, you know, I was thinking – I didn't say this about Aretha and Smokey – and it's yet another Shakespeare and R&B connection – but one of the things that I loved, that I love is the easy promise of salvation, that 'I will do anything'. And one of the things that's so interesting is listening to different forms of how we get there from here, right, because each of the things that we've listened to, it takes us in a different way, you know. It doesn't all have to be that kind of glorious, you know, for me, sweep of Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* exaggeration of, you know, 'you can't even imagine how great this is, so I'll just talk about how it's so great it's unimaginable.' [*Laughter.*] To a kind of all this time it's – this is such a bracketed song. Like, it's such a bracket of that space of, you know, the floating space, as a space together – it's really extraordinary.

DB: When you float it's – you have to move tenderly through the world.

PS: No kidding, no kidding. No... And you can just imagine, I mean, I can just imagine fingers again being able to touch each other, right?

DB: Yes.

PS: You know, which is – I mean, I have friends in this pandemic who live by themselves and one of them said to me: 'You know, I haven't been hugged in six months.'

DB: Yes.

PS: And I thought, you know, you can die of Coronavirus, or you can die of isolation – you can die of anything.

DB: Yes.

PS: And yet there's ways in which, going back to the beginning of talking about my family and Zoom and music – and for me, really, I just want to say again, like the power of the joy I have in your work is the claiming – and I thank you for what you said about my work because we are claiming this saying: 'Listen, if you don't think this is thinking, you're not thinking.'

DB: Yes.

PS: You know, I'm done with you! I don't want to hear it like, you know: 'It's blah blah'. If you don't think this is thinking then, you know, you need to go and study.

DB: Well, I mean our Black feminist pioneers taught us that from Audre, who you namechecked, to my late great mentor Barbara Christian and 'The Race for Theory' [1987] reminds us that Black folks have been doing theory since the boat touched the soil here.

PS: Yes, and who was the first person that changed my life because at MLA, she said: 'How can I write about Toni Morrison with words that are so ugly?' And I thought: 'Yeah, you know what, I'm done with those words!' [*Laughter.*]

DB: There you go.

PS: I want to play, I want to think about words that are as beautiful as the words I'm reading.

DB: Yeah.

PS: How can we – that is a form of tender criticism that's really interesting to me.



DB: That's, right, yeah, no, that's really true! And really maybe that's where the notes come in, right? That's where the notes can pick up where words don't go, as our friend Fred [Moten] would say.

PS: Mhmm.

DB: All right, you all, is that a wrap?

PS: That's a wrap.

[*Laughter.*]

Transcription by Nick Awde

Clips Summary

[00:07:51 to 00:10:36] 'Try a Little Tenderness' (1967) by Otis Redding (recorded live in Cleveland

[00:14:04 to 00:14:27] 'Just to See Her' (1993) by Aretha Franklin and Smokey Robinson (performance recorded as part of *Aretha Franklin: Duets*)

[00:20:00 to 00:23:53] 'Nobody Knows' (1971) by Pastor Thomas Lee Barrett, Jr. and the Youth for Christ Choir

[00:33:11 to 00:33:28] 'Bootsyean Pentameter' by P.A. Skantze

[00:36:58 to 00:39:23] 'Cosmonauts' (2020) by Fiona Apple

[00:40:16 to 00:44:17] 'We Float' (2000) by PJ Harvey

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Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/salon4-daphnebrooks-paskantze/>.

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