

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Deep Listening: The Story Of Pauline Oliveros Daniel Weintraub (Director)

IONE/The Ministry Of Maât/LFTF Mandala 2023, 117 mins

Daniel Weintraub's documentary celebrating the life and work of pioneering American composer, teacher and Deep Listening founder Pauline Oliveros is packed with joy, humanity and wisdom. The project had commenced production prior to the composer's passing in 2016, and it uses new and archived interview footage to let Oliveros narrate her own story, covering not only her background and the remarkable progressions of her career, but also her lifelong quest for creative freedom, enhanced awareness and deeper connections with other people and the shared environment through the power of listening.

Weintraub makes use of an archive of

rare photographs, home movies, hand-drawn scores and signal flow diagrams, excerpts of unheard music, and rare footage from live performances, to assemble an impression of Oliveros that is charmingly funny, wise and profoundly real but without disturbing her essential mystery. We catch glimpses of her in different, playful guises: she's a prizewinning composer of new music, a blackbelt martial artist, spiritual guru, tinkering technologist, mustachioed accordionist in a klezmer band, philosopher, activist, playing with drag and gender, a beautifully complex creator oscillating between extravagant theatrics and quiet introspection.

To add context, there are interviews from her peers and fellow luminaries of the postwar American interdisciplinary experimental scene: Terry Riley, Alvin Lucier, Morton Subotnick, Ramon Sender, Tony Martin, Anna Halprin, Stuart Dempster, Linda Montano and

many more. Oliveros's spouse and longtime collaborator IONE contributes both on camera and off, listed as executive producer alongside the Ministry of Maât, the holistic non-profit organisation that continues to facilitate Deep Listening retreats and associated group practices.

Childhood days in Houston, Texas are recounted almost entirely in terms of sonic memory. Her mother and grandmother both taught piano, her mother also worked as répétiteur for ballet and occasionally composed; In the film, Oliveros describes her matriarchs as "the breadwinners... surviving through something that was one of the few professions that were open to women". Queerness emerges as an early theme, not only with early self-realisation of her lesbian identity, but also in her way of perceiving the world, her deep empathy with outsiders, the value of difference and the ideas and sound that don't fit in.

Oliveros describes being denied access to compositional training and being routinely condescended to by male teachers and peers at the start of her career. In pictures and footage from the San Francisco Tape Music Center period, it's hard to ignore the fact that Oliveros is often the only woman in the room. Her importance and visibility as a queer woman in those male-dominated spaces is a dimension of Oliveros's story that I wish Weintraub had been able to devote more time and space to. Nevertheless, the documentary portrays the boundary-smashing exuberance of the SFTMC era with a sense of anarchic humour. She says, "Play is the greatest research tool that humanity has," and the egoless, collaborative spirit of her pioneering work in the 1960s carries forward as her music becomes even more open and indefinite with her *Sonic Meditations* at the start of the 70s.

From this point, the film shows Oliveros's composing practice increasingly engaging with political and spiritual ideas, tracing prolific decades spent both in and outside academia, working with a vast spectrum of musicians of all levels of ability, researching and developing technologies to assist collaboration and improve access to music making for everyone.

What emerges is a clear image of a deeply integrated, profoundly humane creative practice based on attentiveness and inclusion. The film concludes with stunning footage of Oliveros's *Sensational Sounds For Hearing And Non-Hearing Performers*, led by deaf, first-time conductor Robert Demeter, performed in Bergen, Norway in August 2016, just three months before the composer's death. Deeply moved by the performance, Oliveros told her partner IONE that the moment was "most important in [her] life... because now I think I know what Deep Listening is".

Leah Kardos

Pauline Oliveros

