

Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 2 Sing a Song of Protest Final Transcription

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: In 1959, Blues was in a funk. The Emperess of Blues, Bessie Smith, had died a generation earlier. Here she is singing the blues standard, "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

[MUSIC: "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out"]

Theo Gonzalves: And so, one of the main questions was, "Well, where is the state of Blues and who are going to be Bessie's successors?"

[MUSIC: "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out"]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Theo Gonzalves.

[MUSIC: "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out"]

Theo Gonzalves: And I'm a Curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

[MUSIC: "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out"]

Lizzie Peabody: Theo says in the blues world, a name on the tip of many tongues was Barbara Dane, a promising new Blues talent.

[MUSIC: "Crazy Blues"]

Lizzie Peabody: In 1959, she was the subject of an eight-page feature in Ebony magazine. At the time, Ebony was the culture magazine for African-Americans. Here's how that article began.

[MUSIC: "Crazy Blues"]

Speaker: "As the rich white spotlight sweeps over the face with the fresh grabbed look, the girl seemed starting lead blind, especially when that powerful dusky alto voice begins to moan of trouble, two timing men and freedom. She is singing the Blues, just as Bessie Smith sang them and Mama Yancey and Lizzie Miles and Ma Rainey, but she is white."

[MUSIC: "Crazy Blues"]

Lizzie Peabody: You heard that right. Barbara Dane, with her dusky alto voice is white.

[MUSIC: "Crazy Blues"]

Theo Gonzalves: She was an attractive young white woman. When she was belting, she had a voice that was favorably compared to Bessie Smith, to Odetta and for a lot of folks, she really held her own and I would say she was making her claim to the music.

Lizzie Peabody: For Barbara Dane to receive that vote of confidence from Ebony was a big deal. She was the first white woman ever profiled in the magazine. The article underscores how Blues was a genre born of the African-American experience, but adds quote, "Through this pale faced young lady, a lot of dark-skinned people hope to keep the blues alive and royalties flowing." She toured the country with Blues icons like Muddy Waters, Mama Yancey, and Lightning Hopkins. She was even booked to tour with Louis Armstrong, but the reality of racism in the United States made things tricky.

Theo Gonzalves: A startlingly blonde woman was probably something that a promoter or someone wanted to put on stage in Vegas, but to have black musicians accompany her probably was too much for that promoter or to have them stay with her in the hotel...

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Theo Gonzalves: ...in adjoining rooms.

Lizzie Peabody: Though, if anyone objected to the company she kept, Dane wasn't hearing it.

Barbara Dane: Writers would call me a brassy blonde. I thought they meant that I was bleaching my hair, which I was, (laughs), but they meant personality wise that I was brassy because I was opinionated in their odd way of looking at it.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Barbara Dane in a Smithsonian Folkways Oral History interview done in 2007.

Barbara Dane: To express in a vein, for a woman in the '50s and '60s, '70s even, was considered brassy, nervy, too much chutzpah, too much pushy.

Theo Gonzalves: There were avenues for women musicians to be presented and that often involved stepping in front of a manager and having the manager look at you as you turned around, so that he could see what you look like in a tight dress and she thought, "Well, that's one way to do a career." And she oftentimes said, no.

Lizzie Peabody: At the time, promoters had a way of dealing with aspiring musicians who lived by their own rules. They stopped booking her.

Theo Gonzalves: So, she's had to pay the price. And when we think about the term integrity, we're thinking about it in abstract terms, but integrity also means making specific choices about how you want to be in the world and that had a very material effect on her career.

Lizzie Peabody: Barbara Dane never became the next Bessie Smith. As promoters stopped returning her calls, her chance at fame and wealth began to slip away, so Barbara Dane pivoted. She built a totally different kind of career, one where she made music, not for fame, but for change because a few years after clubs stopped booking Barbara Dane to tour the country, Fidel Castro booked her to tour his. So, this time on Sidedoor, we tell the story of how Barbara

Dane's brassy resolve led her away from American stage lights, down a very different road, the road to revolution. All that, after the break.

[MUSIC: "I'm On My Way"]

Theo Gonzalves: She knew who she was from a very early age.

Lizzie Peabody: Barbara Dane's appetite for protest began in her late teens in Detroit, where she grew up picketing and singing at union strikes in the late 1940s. Then in 1947, she flew to Europe to attend a gathering called the Prague World Youth Festival.

Theo Gonzalves: So, she had seen the world at a very young age and started committing herself to a kind of vision of the world that was bigger than just her.

Lizzie Peabody: What exactly was the Prague World Youth Festival in 1947 and how did it influence her?

Theo Gonzalves: Yeah, it originally was a gathering that brought together about 20,000 students from several dozen countries. And the idea was to gather, mostly students in a leftist orientation, to a gathering focused around music, folk song, sports, entertainment.

Lizzie Peabody: Being in Europe, surrounded by the aftermath of World War II, was really influential to the way 20-year-old Barbara Dane saw the world.

Theo Gonzalves: What does it mean to be a young person in their early twenties to be with thousands of others, to kind of dream about what the world could look like after all of this destruction? And maybe, there's a kind of judgment that maybe our parents, maybe our uncles and aunties didn't quite get it right and it falls to us to ask the question, "What are we going to do with this world when we get ahold of it?"

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: As Dane's relationship with club promoters soured in the early '60s, the 35 old began to blend her singing with her politics. She became a star on the folk and protest song circuit singing alongside big names like Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan.

Theo Gonzalves: By 1964, she was down in Mississippi working as a freedom singer. There are a lot of civil rights workers that are agreeing to go to jails and they'll have jail-ins. And so, what the purpose of that is to overwhelm the jail system.

[MUSIC: "Freedom Is A Constant Struggle"]

Lizzie Peabody: In Mississippi, there were volunteers flocking from all over the country, black and white, all trying to do their part for civil rights.

[MUSIC: "Freedom Is A Constant Struggle"]

Theo Gonzalves: And while you're in there, you've got a lot of young kids who've never been in jail. These are kids that are walking out of schools, they've gotten some training, but one of the

things that you do as a freedom singer in that situation is to sing some songs to keep people's spirits up in the middle of the movement.

Lizzie Peabody: Here, Dane really saw the power of music to bring people together. A few years later, Barbara was living in New York city with her small family, when a friend of hers, who was living in Cuba, a broadcaster named Estella Bravo, invited her to come down on a government sponsored junket.

Barbara Dane: Anyway, Estella had kinda gotten herself a mandate from someone in Cuba to bring some singer from the States to represent the concept that when the Cubans were saying, "Cuba si, Yanquis no," what they meant was, "Cuba si and Yanquis government no," not, Yanquis people.

Lizzie Peabody: "Cuba si Yanquis no," was a motto of Fidel Castro's Cuba, declaring its opposition to the U.S., its government and its wealthy companies, but Castro wanted to host an American singer on a good will tour to show that his revolution, as well as the Cuban people, had no hard feelings toward individual Americans.

[MUSIC]

Barbara Dane: There was a great affinity, a long history, and a lot of love between the two peoples.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But 1966 was complicated. It was the height of the Cold War.

[MUSIC]

Speaker: In Cuba itself, 100,000 men were put under emergency orders as they had been during past invasion scares. The waterfront...

Barbara Dane: It was a very intense moment, when the world was kind of within a hair of getting blown up by all this nuclear confrontation.

Lizzie Peabody: The Cuban Missile Crisis was just four years behind them, relations between the countries were tense, but when Barbara landed in Havana, she was bowled over by her reception from the Cuban public.

[MUSIC]

Barbara Dane: There was a newsreel, cameras and a whole everything. We were instant celebrities.

[MUSIC]

Barbara Dane: I sang a lot, all over the country and they gave me a whole night on television. Oh, anyway, it was just a phenomenal time for me and at the end of it, I had a chance to meet

with Fidel and talk about... He wanted to know a lot about the peace movement and civil rights movement as it was unfolding at the time.

Lizzie Peabody: Yep. Barbara Dane met face-to-face with Cuba's revolutionary and Chief, Fidel Castro. The three-week tour created such an impression on her that she was eager to return the following year in '67, when Castro and his crew invited her back, but this time, she had company from all over the world.

[MUSIC]

Barbara Dane: They decided they're going to have a major international music festival and they didn't want to call it festival because it was at the time of Woodstock and they thought the connotations would be different, not right, so they call it an encuentro. Well, encuentro means a meeting.

Lizzie Peabody: Officially, it was the Encuentro de la Canción Protesta. In English, that becomes the International Gathering of Protest Music. The idea was to have a sort of summit where singers, poets, and left-wing revolutionaries of all kinds could share ideas about how to push forward political movements through music, kind of a, "Here's what works in my country, how would you approach it?" There were a few other Americans, but also Australians, Brits, Italians, Angolans, Vietnamese, as well as performers from all over Latin America.

Barbara Dane: These people were going to jail for singing and some of them, well, the Vietnamese came from the front lines there, from singing for the people in battle. Some of them... One of them went back to Uruguay, went to jail for going to Cuba. So, this was not Woodstock, "Go lay in the mud and drink wine." It's not that, it's a different tone altogether.

Lizzie Peabody: Before the gathering kicked off in earnest, the singers played a bunch of shows around Cuba, then they all got together at the famous Varadero beach. Here's what Barbara later wrote about that gathering. One note, there's a mention of the NLF. You probably know them as the Vietcong.

Speaker: When we came at last to the world-famous beach resort of Varadero, we made a headlong dash into the soft blue waves, small laughing heroines of the NLF splashed water on the big serious Argentine. The Australian girl was dunked by an Oregonian boy and for the moment, Europeans and Americans, Asians and Africans with such serious work at hand were indistinguishable from any group of rowdy tourists, with the difference that we were all conscious of the tremendous struggles waged to secure our right as peoples of all races and from the lower economic classes.

Lizzie Peabody: I heard Barbara say that Encuentro was important enough to Cuba's goals that even Fidel Castro made an appearance.

Theo Gonzalves: That's right. There's a story in which Castro shows up and ends up playing basketball...

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Wow!

Theo Gonzalves: ...with a couple of the Encuentro participants.

Lizzie Peabody: When they weren't playing music or balling with Castro, the group had long conversations about how to bring this revolutionary fervor and music back home.

Barbara Dane: One of the things we talked about at these meetings was how can we... We're all doing the same thing in different ways in different countries and we're all trying our best to unite our various peoples with music, with ideas. Well, how do we help each other do this and how do we create a worldwide movement out of this?

Lizzie Peabody: So, Barbara got the idea of starting a record label on behalf of her new revolutionary friends to publish their music on their terms.

Barbara Dane: I thought, "Okay, it's time for somebody to just put this stuff on records and make it available. And if it goes only so far and doesn't go to this ocean of people, that's okay too, because a little bit as a seed and a seed can grow."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Barbara came up with the name Paredon Records. She published the first album in 1970.

Barbara Dane: Going to the records themselves, the very first one is called, "Cancion Protesta."

Lizzie Peabody: The full title was "Cancion Protesta, Protest Song of Latin America." All the songs on the album were recorded during the Encuentros in 1967. And with the very first track, Paredon Records went big. Just 19 seconds long, but it featured Fidel Castro talking about the power of art to win people over to your cause.

[Fidel Castro Speaking on the Track]

Lizzie Peabody: The next track is a song called, "Varadero" about the beach where they gathered by a Cuban singer named Carlos Pueblo.

[MUSIC: "Varadero"]

Lizzie Peabody: The song tells the story of how Castro's revolution liberated the beach from American millionaires and returned it to everyday Cubans. The album was accompanied by liner notes, more of a booklet really that teaches listeners about the cultures and social movements that the music represented, since the songs were all in Spanish, Dane included translations as well. The booklet for Cancion Protesta also included an essay about the 1967 gathering at Veradero, the label's creation story. With that, Paredon Records was born, but the revolutionary dance party was just getting started. Coming up after a quick break, Barbara Dane uses spy craft to produce subversive and idealistic world music. Stick around.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, at this point in the story, Barbara Dane had toured Cuba twice, met Fidel Castro and spent weeks collaborating with left-wing musicians from all over the world and all of these experiences compelled her to start a record label. She called it Paredon Records.

Here's American History Curator, Theo Gonzalves again. And what were the goals of Paredon Records, just simply put?

Theo Gonzalves: The goal of Paredon Records was to document the world's music and politics on record. There are a number of things that are inspiring them to think about politics and music. One, was the Vietnam war, opposition to the Vietnam war was growing.

Lizzie Peabody: Beyond Vietnam, Paredon was focused on decolonization and equal rights struggles around the world. In 1970, in its first year of publishing, Paredon released four albums, Cancion Protesta, one about Angola's war of independence from Portugal, a collection of speeches from Black Panthers' leader, Huey P. Newton, and lastly, one called FTA, songs of GI resistance. Barbara herself sang on that one. Just for a taste, here's what it sounds like.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The records didn't sell well, but Dane says that wasn't really the point.

Barbara Dane: Now, our objective was not money, our objective was culture. Moving culture from one, to another, to another.

Lizzie Peabody: To produce the albums and their information dense liner booklets, Barbara had to find people who could translate the song lyrics. Luckily, she lived in New York City. Barbara sometimes sent friends to the United Nations to look for someone who could translate songs from Arabic, Greek or Haitian Creole.

Barbara Dane: So, that's how this stuff... All of this gets done is just spit and chewing gum. You just got to figure out how am I going to connect with somebody who can handle this aspect?

Lizzie Peabody: Occasionally, Barbara published songs, or even entire albums, that she didn't really have permission to use.

Barbara Dane: Now, my motto really is, always been is, if it has to be done, if it's in human terms, something that has to be done, you just find a way to do it.

Lizzie Peabody: Dane recalls one album that was sent to her from Northern Ireland, during that country's violent civil war.

Barbara Dane: I never met those people, any of them. I contacted them through clandestine methods. They contacted me and we put it out. I didn't have a name for the group, I made up a name because one of the phrases that kept coming up was, "Men of No Property" so I said, "Okay, they're the Men of No Property."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Or, the music from Chile, which was then under the brutal dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

Barbara Dane: Someone got in touch and said, "We have this album, we want to put it out." So, I had to meet someone in a coffee shop with my whatever scarf on that they would recognize,

they gave me the material. It was all done that way, I never knew the name of the person who brought it to me. As I recall, he was missing the joint on a finger, someone who had been tortured. So, there is that element in running through that whole label.

Lizzie Peabody: These musicians were taking great personal risk to have their music put out in a way that told the world what was really going on in their countries.

Barbara Dane: In it, you'll find the voices, the thoughts, the fears, the hopes, the dreams, all of that is in one little album.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Paredon Records also focused on oppressed groups inside the United States. In 1973, they published an album called, "A Grain of Sand; Music For The Struggle by Asians in America." Here's lead singer Nobuko Miyamoto.

Nobuko Miyamoto: I'm a third generation Japanese American born in Los Angeles.

Lizzie Peabody: Nobuko's life growing up in the United States was marked by a lot of traumas.

Nobuko Miyamoto: I was a child of Japanese relocation. So, I experienced going to a concentration camp with my people, 120,000 others, and that experience was a marker in our lives.

Lizzie Peabody: Consider the time in which Nobuko was growing up in the U.S. She lived through World War II, then the Korean war, and then, Vietnam.

Nobuko Miyamoto: Well, which was sort of a wake up, the third war that I'd seen in my lifetime, that was against people who look like me. And it was the first time that Asian Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, realized that we needed to come together to take a stand against this war.

Lizzie Peabody: To band together in the face of another bloody American war in Asia, Nobuko and her friends work to create community and build pride around their identity as people of Asian descent living in America.

Nobuko Miyamoto: We're a small community, but at that period in 1969 and '70, we realized, "Well, we can't just fight a Japanese American or Chinese Americans, we had... That's when Asian America happened.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: During these community gatherings, Nobuko played music for morale and solidarity. She ended up playing in a band with two other activist musicians. They called themselves Yellow Pearl. One of the songs they sang gave voice to what it was like growing up in the U.S. This song is, "We Are The Children" from the album, "A Grain of Sand."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But unlike some of the other albums published on Paredon Records, Nobuko doesn't think of *A Grain of Sand* as protest music.

[MUSIC]

Nobuko Miyamoto: It's really an album of coming to voice for Asian Americans. If we were speaking to the white world, it would be more of a protest album, but we were speaking to our own communities, who had not had a song, who had not had a voice, a political voice.

[MUSIC]

Theo Gonzalves: So, that idea of what Asian-American had to be invented. It had to be talked into existence and it had to be sung into existence. And this album helped to provide that. It was really the first album to describe what it would mean for an Asian-American consciousness to develop and it still is important for a lot of people today.

Lizzie Peabody: Despite this album's importance, Nobuko says the process of recording it wasn't exactly luxurious.

Nobuko Miyamoto: Yeah. It was very working class. (Laughs). We did everything in three days. We never did any more than two to three takes, most of those in the first take. Plus, she didn't have money for us to spread it out. We'd say, "Oh wait, can we do that one more time?" "Oh no, no, no. That sounds fine." "We Are The Children," Chris's voice cracked on something.

Lizzie Peabody: That's her band mate, Chris Iijima.

Nobuko Miyamoto: ...and he wanted to do it again and she says, "No, no, no, no, that's fine." And then later, he went back and listened to the, "We Are The Children" and he actually said, "Oh, that was my favorite part, when my voice cracked." (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: Another singer recording with Paredon was Argentinian, Suni Paz. She says it was the first time she'd recorded anything. Like Nobuko, she was an activist and teacher, not a professional musician. Paz recorded her album *Brotando del Silencio* with Paredon in 1973, and she remembers recording with Barbara Dane as a bit intimidating.

Suni Paz: First thing I got to tell you that she never liked my voice. (Laughs). She always criticized my voice. She said, "You have to open your mouth more or breathe better." She was very blunt in her criticisms.

Lizzie Peabody: Well, Dane knew what she wanted out of Suni's voice, she gave her the freedom to curate the album's message.

Suni Paz: She gave me full, total, complete freedom and I asked her, I said, "Look, I have this crazy poem, but I want to do it as a poem because it doesn't have music. This is not a song. It's a poem." And she said, "Yes, no problem."

[SUNI PAZ'S POEM]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Suni's poem, "Indio Y Negro" about the parallel plight of Native Americans and formerly enslaved black people in the Americas.

Suni Paz: So, it came out really beautiful. I think it's a gorgeous recording, I personally love it.

Lizzie Peabody: Following her debut on Paredon Records, Suni Paz went on to record 32 more albums.

[SUNI PAZ'S POEM]

Lizzie Peabody: And really, it's this community-minded approach that defined Paredon Records, but after a decade of grinding, in 1981, Barbara wanted to move back to California to dust off her career as a singer and Paredon took a lot of time. So, Barbara recruited a team of people to keep Paredon running.

Barbara Dane: So, we did turn it over to a collective. The collective worked very hard and kept it going for three or four years, I guess, but it became clear that without the travels and the connections that I was making through the travels, it was impossible to find the material, to build the trust.

Lizzie Peabody: And so, by 1985, after releasing 50 albums showcasing protest and anti-colonial movements on six continents, Paredon was over, but the ideas that Paredon showcased were still out there. Here's founding Director of Smithsonian Folkways Records, Tony Seeger, and he says, "Sure, they were out there, but you couldn't walk into most suburban record stores and find them on the new release rack."

Tony Seeger: The influence of Paredon Records, I think was probably somewhat restricted to people who could find them. Today, you can find almost everything on the internet if you search for it, you may have to go to some strange corners, but at the time, if you lived in most of the country, there was no strange corner in your town that you could go to where you could find Paredon Records.

Lizzie Peabody: Seeger says that Paredon was popular with groups of musicians who would buy the music, learn a few songs, and then pass the albums onto their friends. It was a way to circulate ideas while keeping costs down.

Tony Seeger: I think that's an important part of what was happening in the pre-internet era, was that you had a lot of fairly radical songwriting being done, and a lot of wonderful performances from around the world of protest and struggle and singing against injustice, whose impact was partly through the musicians who heard it and then carry the songs along, and tossed it to other people.

Lizzie Peabody: This was Paredon's real power. It wasn't only about the songs that Paredon published, it was also about the songs that it inspired and Seeger says that Paredon was also a witness to history. All of this pushed Seeger to acquire Paredon Records in 1991 for preservation under the Smithsonian's roof.

Tony Seeger: Barbara Dane was passionate about the music of the struggles for decolonization and justice in the world and I thought that was a really important part of the history of the 20th century.

Lizzie Peabody: And that's why. with Paredon, Barbara Dane created a critical testament to the political movements and music of the post-colonial era. As for her career after Paredon, Barbara Dane returned to one of her earliest loves, blues music. Since then, she's released four albums, some new jazz and blues recordings, as well as a few featuring songs that had never been published from her heyday as one of the heirs apparent to the Empress of Blues.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. And right now, Smithsonian Folkways Records is celebrating 50 years of Paredon. They built a Paredon portal on their website. If, you want to hear more music or read about the label's history, there's a link to it in our episode notes, as well as on our website at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For more stories of important American women, be sure to look into the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. To learn more, go to womenshistory.si.edu, or join the conversation using [#becauseofherstory](https://twitter.com/becauseofherstory) on social media.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We interviewed a lot of people for this episode. We want to extend a special thanks to everyone who helped make it happen: Theo Gonzalves, Nobuko Miyamoto, Suni Paz, Nina Menendez, Tony Seeger, Bev Grant, Javier Leon, and Alison Leithner.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks also to everyone at Smithsonian Folkways for their guidance and support, including narrative holm grin, Jonathan Williger, Jeff Place, Kim Sojun, Logan Clark, David Walker, Cecilia Peterson, Greg Adams, Dan Sheehy, Charlie Webber, and Will Griffin.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Nathalie Boyd, Sharon Bryant, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Tami O'Neill, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from Jason and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Episode art is by Dave Leonard. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorships@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]