

Backstage with TPP Performer Bonfire Madigan Shive

A Trillions Interview

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Our second of three interviews with Rock Against The TPP's talented group of onstage performers is with legendary cellist Bonfire Madigan Shive.



Madigan Shive, who performs under the broader name Bonfire Madigan Shive, has been creating her own blend of wildly creative music going all the way back to age 15, as part of the Pacific Northwest Riot Grrrl rock scene.

Her music, anchored by her mastery (and some would say, wizardry) of the cello, is a trailblazing blend of folk, art, punk, classical and avant-baroque.

She has collaborated with people as diverse as music producer Hal Willner (behind the scenes with Lou Reed, Marianne Faithfull, Allen Ginsberg, and Laurie Anderson, each legends of their own), Joan Jeanrenaud (co-founder and performer with the legendary Kronos Quartet), David Coulter (of the Pogues), and more.

She has composed music for numerous films, has received commissions for prepared solo cello suites for San Francisco's Grace Cathedral's Vigil of Light, and a live score for the American Conservatory Theater's production of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore. She's also composer and musical director for Los Angeles' Getty Villa theater production of a new English performance of Sophocles' Elektra featuring Olympia Dukakis.

Trillions spoke with her on August 8, 2016.

Trillions: Tell us a little about yourself and your music. It's not the same as being right in front of you as you're performing, but it will at least help people understand a bit.

Madigan Shive: My name is Madigan, but I'm known professionally and artistically as Bonfire Madigan. That's how I've toured for many years as a composer and musical director with my own band and ensemble. I'm also a performing artist known as Bonfire Madigan Shive, as I've done quite a bit of work on the stage as an actor and musician – also as a writer of my own production, using the cello as my ultimate partner, in both performance and writing. I have multiple albums out under the name Bonfire Madigan. I've performed vocals and cello and other instruments that I've contributed to other artists' recordings. And I'm also an activist who's been involved in many different movements for social justice. I'm known for my work in mental health, radical mental health. I'm one of the founders of an organization known as The Icarus Project, which is a peer-based organization that's about alternatives to the mainstream mental health paradigm, with people at the center of their own mental health journey.

Music, not only is my career, but it's my medicine, and as an artist and activist that's the kind of life I've built for myself.

Trillions: One of the things that is clear after listening to your music is that you have been an activist in quite a number of different causes for quite some time – and actually going back to a relatively early age. I'm curious about where all that came from in your life. If you think about it, you really have three different things: You have the cello in itself as a performance vehicle; you have the creation and performance of your music for various forms, some of it is your own band, some of it is background music for various things; and then you also have using it as a voice for causes. What was behind it that really triggered some of those causes for you?

Madigan Shive: It's interesting. Going back I'd have to say, as your life goes on, you look at what happens from different perspectives. So depending on when you ask me and my life's trajectory, it would probably be a very different answer. But right now I think it's tied a lot to the experiences with my mother at a very young age. She was just a very different person in the way she experienced reality. By all accounts, she was labeled very disabled by mainstream society. But at a very early age I saw that in her "disability" there was so much strength and there really were these gifts. And it always troubled me that her differences were looked at as liabilities instead of an asset – which I saw as great strength in her difference.

When she was able to work, my mother worked as a nurse, as a private nurse. And the people she worked most passionately with were children with extreme disabilities, developmental disabilities and many different disabilities, and she worked with very old people and people with terminal illnesses. This was quite extraordinary work that she did. Sometimes she would bring me along as a child. At six or seven years old, I would stay with her, while she was caring for [people] on the weekends, and I became [their] friends. I felt these people not only were a part of our community; they were part of our extended family. And I really saw

them as my aunts and playmates. I think being exposed to that level of human difference ... My mother was labeled as many different kinds of psychiatric illnesses, and I saw how punishing that was for her. And for her it was very, very traumatizing; the idea of going back into a psychiatric hospital for her was not a healing place. And in fact it was a place of punishment.

And so this was all the information I was getting at a very young age. And also dealing with her self-medicating with all kinds of things that weren't helpful as well. So there was a lot of addiction and abuse in her journey to find healing and balance, which ultimately she never got. She died when I was 18 years old.

The baton was passed to me, though. She really fought for alternatives for herself and her journey to also be viewed as a spiritual journey. Which now I feel more connected to at this time in my life. Definitely these issues of disability rights, but really how we as a society, as a people, as a culture treat the most marginalized among us, became something I couldn't shake from my experience. And so this put me on a lifelong trajectory of listening to those of us who aren't heard. And then also dealing with my own extremes of emotion and ideas and how I could incorporate that into my own processes, my own identity. Instead of shaming myself or letting myself feel shame for having extreme moods or extreme ideas or extreme feelings.

Luckily I had the cello there as my medicine and my vehicle, to contain that full range of human experiencing, and I've become an advocate for that.

Trillions: I can understand. The labels happen and we put people in buckets and we decide they are one way or another because of what we think is what it is. You were around someone who was very different and also stood up for you too, based on what I can tell even by your brief bio. Let me go back earlier in your career too. The cello itself is an interesting instrument.

When I was going to school, they still had music class in grade school, though I think that's been mostly driven away because of budget cuts. Even though I think they're learning that might have been a mistake. And we were all encouraged to learn instruments. And I picked the saxophone. And as a guy who walked for school for two miles, the choice of the saxophone wasn't necessarily the best of an instrument, especially since I was little. But I loved the saxophone, I loved performing, I loved to play the instrument. No, I don't still have the saxophone, but I did that.

And you picked up the cello. I'm curious how the cello came about. That choice. Was it because of classical music, was it other forms of music that you were intrigued with when you were a child, or where did it come from?

Madigan Shive: It's interesting that you bring that up about the public schools, because that was my introduction. I was introduced to the cello in a "Meet the Instruments Day" in the fourth grade, where they shepherded our class into the cafeteria, where they had instruments from band and orchestra set up there, in the cafeteria. My family was very working poor, working class. We moved all the time, so I was always the new girl. It seemed like I was never at any school for more than a year or two. And so here I the new girl again, on "Meet the Instruments Day," and I just felt very unseen and unheard. I was always kind of

scrawny, skinny and small. I tended to look younger than even my age. I remember being sent over to the flute line, and I said, no, I wanted the trumpet. I wanted to try the trumpet; I tried the trumpet. And the woman said, no, your mouth is all wrong for this. And I just remember having this day of anxiety where nothing fit and they wouldn't let me get my hands on what I felt drawn to.

I was exposed to music. My father played guitar, you know, folk songs. We would joke that the acoustic guitar is the "poor man's piano." It went with us; it was in the corner of every house we lived in. I actually picked up the guitar at about five or six, learned Bob Dylan songs with my dad, which was great. And the Beatles and Neal Young; that was the era I was growing up in. Thank goodness, because it's some of the most timeless songwriting of our culture, U.S. culture, and hearing stories of my dad playing Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix. These are the greats; these are the gods.

But what happened in that cafeteria was I was so frustrated and sad. And they put me in the line for the violin, and I remember hearing the violin, and how weepy [it was]; it just seemed like another dainty little thing they were trying to stick in my hands. And then I saw this big violin, and I had never seen anything quite like it. I kept seeing this big violin, kind of stuck behind the piano. And I had always wanted to play the piano, but we never lived anywhere long enough, we never had enough money, we'd just move around with the [guitar]. But behind the piano was a cello. And I just kept saying "The big violin ... May I try the big violin?" They wouldn't let me. They had decided they wouldn't get it out for the kids [that day].

And I proceeded to have a big meltdown in the middle of the cafeteria. Until finally they put it in my hands. And I remember the moment when I said, "What is this?" And the woman said, "This is a cello," and I said, "Cello." And I just remember the word in my mouth; it felt like home, it felt like this place I wanted to be. I just remember putting my arms around it, and it felt like another child. It felt like my new best friend companion.

My mother had made me this Raggedy Ann doll that was almost as big as me. I grew up swapping clothes with this doll, pretending that she was my twin. And I had this exact same feeling, taking up the cello that day. And I remember running home. Like you, it was probably a mile from my elementary school. You know, we walked there by ourselves, not like these days. And I got home from school and I said, "I know what I want to do." My mother was sort of out of it. I think she was overly medicated that day. And I said, "Mom, Mom, I know what I want to do." And she said, "Well, what is it?" And I said: "I'm going to play the cello. I met the cello today. I'm going to play the cello. We've got to rent a cello." And she just kept looking at me, this foggy, dazed look on her face, "The what? The what is it, honey? The what?" "The cello, Mama, the Cello." And she said: "I'm not sure what that is. What are you talking about?" And I said: "The big violin. I'm going to play the big violin." And I remember in her sort of delight and confusion, just this lightbulb went off, where my life and my whole being. I thought: "I'm going to make this instrument about us. This is my journey now."

And I think that because it was something that "people like me" or "families like me" or "kids like me" didn't do, that I just became so determined. I just hauled

that instrument on every bus. There were schools that I went to that did not have music programs, and I would request that they bus me to other schools that did – and they did. And that became my challenge and plight and I guess my personality. Give me a challenge and I can't back down from it. Really, what I was handed that day was really my lifelong companion. And that continues to be true for me. I can't imagine my life without it.

Trillions: That appears to have been a pivotal event in your creative life. The paintbrush by which you express yourself. And just plain not having had it until that point, that's pretty amazing.

In terms of your influences, this is another thing that is extremely interesting to me. You cite in your biography **Riot Grrrl** you also have been influenced by – I have to say these because many of these are my favorites – Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull. I remember Lou Reed all the way back from The Velvet Underground days all the way up to modern times. The Kronos Quartet, which as an expression of instruments such as yours and doing some really unusual things, they're amazing. I followed them for years. Then you mentioned The Pogues, who I know. Two that I don't know that well: the Finnish group Apocalyptica and then the Slovenian industrial music artist Laibach. And you mention all of these influences and that's curious. This is an interesting concoction to perhaps help form your musical presence.

How did some of these influence you and how did you come up with ... Actually, I was wrestling with what the question would be. I had a very stable, nice question for it, which was something along the lines of "How did you come up with your innovative musical style?" which sounds like it was pulled out of a "dial a question" book. So my second one was "Where was the meteor that landed that actually influenced your sound?" Because you're very different.

Madigan Shive: [Laughs] Well, thank you. That's very encouraging to hear, because Miles Davis is famous for saying "It takes a really long time to sound like yourself." I like to think somehow I got a jump on that. That's actually true of my whole composing career. Even starting as a teenager in some of my very early compositions, the feedback I got was very penetrative, very vociferous. People were very affected by the sounds I was making and the kind of music I was writing, literally at the age of 15, 16.

I remember one of my very earliest concerts: a man coming up to me, who, by all accounts I didn't even understand why he was there, it was in a kind of all ages, high school, punk rock, it was in a gymnasium that was mostly taken over by teenagers or early twentysomethings. And it was interesting, because it was one of the very early concerts of a band that, at the time, was called Peel Me a Peach, a band called Sunnyday Real Estate, which people now feel started the emocore movement of music, just after Nirvana and grunge. And anyway, I'm on this bill with them, doing my cello and things; I had an acoustic guitarist with me, in an early project called Tattletale.

But I'll never forget this man, who I'm sure was somebody's dad. You know, a very tall, very large man. And like I said, I was a very petite person, very androgynous at this time. I was always very interested in what exists between the places between the things we think are binaries or dualities. I think I'm very much

at home in the liminal spaces. I was always very androgynous, and I was also very fierce – this fierce feminine [voice] in me needed to be heard.

And so this man comes right for me. And at first I'm a bit intimidated. Then I notice that he's crying, you know. And he says to me: "I just want to say this is the first time that I've cried in public in my life. And I don't know exactly what you did or how you did it, but the sounds you are making and the songs you are singing opened something in me. And I just have to tell you, young lady, that I don't think I'll ever be the same again after having heard you perform."

I bring that story up because that was, again like the gift of the cello, one of the oldest and first and most penetrating experiences of having an audience member give me feedback. And what he also said to me was "Please keep doing this. Please keep doing this." And I took that to heart. I realized that it wasn't just for me. It wasn't just this important catharsis of my own soul. But that I was actually in conversation with other people on a deeper level than we usually get to go to. And that's what very powerful creativity and art and understanding can do for us, right? It shifts our idea of the way things are and have to be. I would say it even shifts our understanding of being sort of reality prisoners into being co-creators of reality creators. It was almost something in that moment; I felt like a medicine woman, it felt like some kind of shamanistic calling, which is how I'm able to gauge it.

Of course, for many years I could never think of it this way. In fact, it was even heresy to think of myself as an artist. You know, my father was an auto mechanic. I remember once he said, "Well, this is great, you're getting this attention and you're able to do this, but, you know, you think you're going to get any health insurance?" He was very worried for me. In his mind, who is an "artist" and has regular meals on their table?

There was a joke I used to hear around that time. What's the difference between a large pizza and a jazz musician? One feeds a family of four.

I was very influenced by all this music. You know, it's interesting. The artists that you named in my biography are not just artists that influenced me. In fact, some of those artists I had never heard of before, and they actually wanted to work with me. And then I was exposed to and found their work. Wow, yes, they're doing something really different, very innovative, very much the essence of their own journey. But it was in alliance with my own journey. It's just to get to a deeper vibration. And as a musician, that's where you're going for, to go to a deeper vibration. Less inhibited, less adulterated, and that's why music is the universal language of human emotion.

Trillions: It's also true that music has been there long before other kinds of language going forward. And the cello itself, at least the way that I think of it, is one of those instruments that is an interesting combination of things. Besides that it can create beautiful sounds, it can also create some very rough and almost savage types of sounds. It also is a rhythm instrument even though a lot of people may not think of it that way.

Madigan Shive: Yeah.

Trillions: You know, in the same way that they refer to the piano as part of the percussion family. Which makes sense only if you've tried it. But you remember as a kid, they used to classify things, we have the woodwinds, we have everything else, that was part of the power of it. Part of what I was impressed with, as I listened to your music, is you draw out of the cello – as well as your voice – but you draw out of the cello all those different personalities of the instrument that, if you're simply in symphony orchestras, you don't tend to touch. You're following the mainstream. It's a very interesting kind of thing, and I can see how you've become who you've become. And it's wonderful and a miracle and in some ways your mother's support of you, though that may not be the way others think of it, your mother's calling you the creative name, I guess it was "Running Pony," is that correct?

Madigan Shive: Yes.

Trillions: When you were a little girl. I remember reading that. And from that to just kind of listening to you when you discovered the cello, not only did she not stop you, she supported you in your journey. That must have helped a lot. And regardless of the struggles she was going through, she cared to see you experience that.

Madigan Shive: Yes. For sure.

Trillions: The "Rock Against the TPP" tour ... I see in your lineage of causes that it would tend to fit. How did you get involved in that and what was it that appealed to you about it?

Madigan Shive: What appeals to me is that we as a people have an opportunity to speak out against something that has been behind closed doors for a very long time. And just on a very basic level, that's not how democracy can work. And I am living firsthand the effects of toxic trade deals for generations. And I've explained it to people; if we had an opportunity to have a say in something like NAFTA, you know, what could our world look like?

And I have a base at the border of Mexico and the U.S. And I have young children who are Mexican-U.S. children. And I can tell you that their lives would be very, very different if we didn't have something like NAFTA, the way that it was set up. As far as a global economy that's determined by the most wealthy corporations, and with no say and no oversight by people. What that looks like from workers' rights to environmental conditions to – the list can go on and on, how detrimental this has been – people on the planet, people's ability to be self-determining. And to find our passions and to find our gifts and to give them freely.

And so when "Rock Against the TPP" actually came to me, directly, because the campaign manager for Fight for the Future is actually someone I'm a big fan of, and she and I know each other's work, and years ago we had worked together, actually, on another tour. She started a group called Riot Folk, gosh about 10 years ago now or something. And has been very much involved in labor rights and environmental concerns and all kinds of issues. Police profiles, racial profiling, all kinds of stuff that she's worked on and spoken out against and organized tours and demonstrations for better than a decade.

I was so impressed by her activism and her organizing and any event or project that I was involved with that she was a part of always turned out well because of her communication and dedication. So when she became campaign manager for Fight for the Future, I'd just been bowled over by their success, passion, her charisma, as a team, as an organization, what they do.

They concocted this "Rock Against the TPP." And when she approached me ("Would you like to be one of the guest artists on the tour?"), I mean, just the opportunity to be a part of that, to work with her, to get the message out, to let the public know that we have an opportunity. A small window right now, but between now and November, when Congress votes on this thing, finally, it's come out, the 5,000-page document is finally public after, what is it, eight years behind closed doors or something, they've been drafting this thing? We have an opportunity to speak out against it. About it and against it.

It really doesn't benefit working people at all. And since I've gotten involved, it's been astonishing the conversations I've been able to have. And I've made friends with Evangeline Lilly, who is an amazing advocate and activist. Just the other performers involved, organizations getting behind it, it's really generating its own whole community and constituency. I'm going to be a part of the San Francisco date next month, on September 9, so yeah. It's just a joy to be a part of this work.

Trillions: One last question and then I'll let you go. What's next for Bonfire Madigan Shive?

Madigan Shive: This is an exciting time for me. I have a lot of projects that have been in the works for some time. I'm seeing the finish line. There's a film project called **Whisper Rapture. Whisper Rapture: A Bonfire Madigan Suite**, a short film made by a San Franciscan named Ken Paul Rosenthal. It's been in the works for a few years now, but we're seeing the finish line. It's a 30-minute doc-opera, documentary opera, art film project, and it followed me; really, the sort of star of the movie is half of my new album. So it really places my music as the main character and it's interleaved with narrative of my journey we talked about today on this program, for your publication. But I'm very excited about this project. People can go to www.whisperrapture.com to find out more about that movie.

And at the same time I'm getting ready to launch this new album, which I've been working on for many years. And it includes some very special guests; some of the people you will know because you talked briefly about them. My friend and ally and mentor, Joan Jeanrenaud, she's the founding cellist of the Kronos Quartet, she makes an appearance on this album. As does David Coulter, who was in The Pogues, and he has been a guest with the Kronos Quartet; he's played with so many amazing projects. He makes several appearances on this album. As does Joelle Holland, an amazing vocalist and songwriter who also was a guest on the "Rock Against the TPP" tour.

And so it's really brought together a community of mine for many years. It's taken me a little while to get it finished, because I've become a mother just in the last few years. That shifts time and momentum but also in a very powerful way and in an important way. And I feel that, ultimately, even though it's slowed down some

of the processes, it's more deeply enriched the album, I believe. So that's going to be coming out in the new year.

I'm also excited because, on the tail end of that, I'm getting ready to relaunch – wow, for me – almost two decades of my composing, my repertoire. I have a lot of archived material that was on independent labels, little indie labels, and maybe only came out as a 7 inch or a composition on a compilation or music I wrote for a theater project that they didn't make an album for. I literally have 20 years of music, and I'd say about half of it is not circulating.

I have some allies in the industry who are really encouraging me. So I'm getting ready to make available, through Bandcamp, almost 20 years of my back catalogue. So ... an exciting moment for Bonfire Madigan. You can go to bonfiremadigan.com and learn more about that; most of it is going to be coming out in the new year. Yeah, it's a very exciting moment for me. I feel a lot of my efforts, a lot of hard work over these years, is getting ready to be shared and released. For more information, please visit <http://www.bonfiremadigan.com>

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