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Exploring ‘Unknown Territories’

UC Santa Barbara entomologist Katja Seltmann has an alter ego. She goes by the name Irene Moon, and she came into being decades ago when Seltmann first started creating science-inspired performance art and DJing as an undergraduate student at the University of Georgia.

Seltmann — or, rather, her Moon persona — is still riding the airwaves, joined by her partner, Yon Visell. Together they co-anchor “Unknown Territories,” an hourlong cultural arts program on the campus’s radio station, KCSB. The topics: all things science.

With diverse science backgrounds (Seltmann is the Katherine Esau Director of the Cheadle Center for Biodiversity and Ecological Restoration and Visell is an assistant professor in the campus’s Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Department of Mechanical Engineering and Media Arts and Technology Graduate Program), the pair brings an unusual bent to their weekly radio show, which airs Tuesdays at 9 a.m.

“We both love radio as a medium for expressing ideas and for education, and it’s really fun to do,” Seltmann said. “This show has been great for us because one of the things about being a researcher is that you have to keep up with the literature. Each week, we read a variety of journals, including Science, Nature and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, to choose our topics. We also check social media to see what’s hot and what people are talking about.”

The couple’s broad range of expertise — biology, physics, engineering and cognitive sciences — informs the program’s content, which focuses on topical discussions aimed at communicating ideas about science through entertaining yet critical discourse. Among their subjects from contemporary research: DNA editing; climate change; gravitational waves; the chemistry of blood coloration; the Zika virus and its insect vectors; the search for extraterrestrial life; and hominid-Neanderthal interbreeding.

According to Seltmann, “Unknown Territories” fills a critical niche. “We strive to promote science communications as well as to develop a larger dialogue with the community about scientific issues,” she noted. “And because KCSB is a public radio station that streams on the Internet, that community is not just Santa Barbara. There is a connection to the larger world. We feel strongly that everyone in society should be empowered to learn, evaluate and participate in science.”

Seltmann and Visell have extensive on-air experience interviewing scientists around the world. To enrich the program, the hosts invite guest researchers from UC Santa Barbara and other universities and encourage listeners to call in with questions about the topics being discussed.

But science is only part of the show. Musicians both, Seltmann and Visell draw on their comprehensive record collection as well as music archives for the tunes they play during the broadcast. Often they dive into their own extensive compilation of experimental music, vintage interviews, radio plays, educational film recordings from prior eras and thrift store oddities on vinyl, CD and cassette tape.

As a result, the show’s overall soundtrack features musicians representing a wide range of eras and genres: Esquivel, Par Accidante!, Fred Frith, Yma Sumac, Vangelis, Dick Hyman, György Ligeti, Raymond Scott, Wendy Carlos, CAN, Matmos, Pye Corner Audio, Lew Davies & His Orchestra, The Tape-beatles, Delia Derbyshire, Benny Moré, Flying Saucer Attack, Pierre Henry, Luigi Nono, Nancy Sinatra, AV Geeks, People Like Us, Golden Teacher, Giorgio Moroder and many others.

“Our playlists are unique,” Seltmann said. “We often use material from the Free Music Archive to augment our weekly theme. We try to find music that fits, but when we can’t, we rely on the mood or feeling of the topic and look for songs that capture that.”

The hosts archive their shows and maintain a Facebook page for fans of the program.

About UC Santa Barbara

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