

THE REBORN Jemima Wilkinson & Publick Universal Friend

Transcript of [What'sHerName Episode 62](#)

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Olivia Meikle: Hi, Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi, Olivia!

OM: Many times in this podcast we start with our characters' birth.

KN: uh-huh.

OM: I think this time the most interesting and most useful way to start this episode is to kill our subject. [pause] Maybe.

KN: ...Maybe? Okay? [laughs]

OM: So! We're going to start with the death of the woman that we're talking about today. Jemima Wilkinson died in 1776 in Colonial New England from typhus, which was brought to her town by a warship arriving for the American Revolution, which is just kicking off. This warship is called - in the peak of all ironies - the *Christopher Columbus*. [laughter] Columbus just never stops bringing pandemic to the United States... So, in this area of New England, this disease is known as "Columbus Disease" [laughter] and it is a mass outbreak that kills and sickens huge numbers of people.

Now, we only have conflicting newspaper and second-hand accounts of what happens next here, so we can't be *exactly* sure what happened to Jemima Wilkinson.

KN: Okay.

OM: But according to many friends and supporters of Jemima Wilkinson, what happened is this: Jemima Wilkinson died - and the person who rose from Jemima Wilkinson's sickbed was named Publick Universal Friend.

KN: Oh! [pause]... in Jemima Wilkinson's body?

OM: Well... maybe.

KN: Oh. [laughs] That's a very Quaker-ey name.

OM: Right, yeah, 'Friend,' meaning Quaker; Jemima Wilkinson was a Quaker. And this is one of the most fascinating and crucial characters for understanding colonial New England religious culture.

KN: Cool!

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson

OM: And this is What'sHerName

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: So to learn more about Jemima Wilkinson and Publick Universal Friend, I talked to [Michael Bronski](#).

Michael Bronski: My name is Michael Bronski. I'm Professor of the Practice in Media and Activism at Harvard University in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program. I have been an LGBTQ activist since 1969, a freelance journalist, I was an organizer... I've been a professor for the last twenty years. First at Dartmouth College and now at Harvard University. I've written a bunch of books.

OM: He wrote [A Queer History of the United States](#) and [A Queer History of the United States for Young People](#), both of which are fantastic and I highly recommend.

I've never met anyone who has heard of Publick Universal Friend. *I* had not heard of Friend until last year when reading Michael Brodski's book. Friend has just been completely erased from, not just women's history or queer history, but also from religious history - which is really strange,

because Friend was **so** important to the religious movement and the religious changes that happened in colonial New England and early America.

KN: You mean Friend was, like, famous and influential?

OM: Extremely so - Friend was a *hugely* influential and important preacher in colonial New England.

KN: Interesting.

00:05:01 - 00:10:04

OM: And so, today we get to delve into not just issues of gender and identity and sexuality and all of those really interesting things, but into the religious culture that was being *as* “revolutionized” as the political culture of this brand new nation.

KN: Yeah it was.

Michael Bronski: So, I want to talk about one of the most curious figures of the American colonial period. Particularly around this person – I’m being very careful with my pronouns – this person raises really important questions about religion and about gender in early American history.

OM: Jemima Wilkinson was born into a very large white Quaker family in Rhode Island in 1752. She was the eighth child, and the fourth girl, out of twelve kids. Her father was a Quaker, her mother was not a Quaker, but attended Quaker meetings. If our listeners know a bit about Quakerism, there's no expectation of “membership,” everyone is welcome to any meeting, and they're - especially at this point - there's absolutely no push to proselytize or “missionary” anybody. It is just an open society. “We'd love to have you if you'd like to come, and if not, that's fine.”

We don't know a huge amount about Jemima Wilkinson’s childhood.

Michael Bronski: Jemima was a very apt horse rider. She received a good religious education, was able to interpret large parts of the Bible, both Hebrew Bible and the Gospels at length, as well as Quaker texts.

OM: She is getting a broad religious education.

Michael Bronski: She apparently was very good with plants, which many women were at that time, which explains to some degree her ability as a healer later on. What was called a hundred years ago “folk medicine,” which we now think of as actually herbal medicine.

OM: Which as Michael Bronski points out, *then* they called... “medicine.” [laughter] And so she is a medical practitioner and well known for her herbal cures and remedies. Her family is very devoted to the Quaker ideals of peace and community and service, and they're good Quakers who embody those values of Quakerism.

Michael Bronski: Jemima was a very devout Quaker. Quakers do not proselytize, but what they do is they give witness, and they allow anybody to speak, right? So from the beginning Jemima . used to everybody, men *and* women, at a meeting being able to speak.

OM: In Quaker meetings, there is not a preacher. There is not a leader. Anyone can speak. You sit in silence and anyone who would like to stand up and testify can testify. She is used to a much more egalitarian gender balance in all aspects of her life.

KN: And it's interesting because we think of that as a new thing, like a “modern” movement - but really not just Quakers, but during the Enlightenment that was a major movement. A lot of people were living that way three hundred years ago.

OM: Yeah. She's growing up in what we now would be very tempted to call a progressive community or a modern community, but it's not modern at all. There have always been communities like this in every culture, that pushed back against any sort of strict gender construction.

KN: Yeah.

OM: When she is a teenager, she starts becoming interested in another religious group called the New Light Baptists.

Michael Bronski: Which really kind of emerges in America coming out of the First Awakening. They really are Evangelicals in many senses. They go out preaching... so she becomes very interested in that. The New Light Baptists were essentially a rejection of the sort of dourness of Calvinism. It is very much a sort of “hopeful” vision of salvation.

OM: They are another sort of dissenter group that comes from England, like Quakers, like the Shakers. Breaking off from the Church of England and very conversion-oriented.

KN: “Feeling”-oriented.

OM: Yeah, and charismatic. But they differ from a lot of the other Evangelical groups that are coming to the colonies at this point in that they're very... the word that I keep reading is "joyous." "Humankind can be saved... share the good news," so it's a much more upbeat kind of religious message than many of what we associate with, sort of, 'fire and brimstone' early Evangelicalism. This is also an interesting combination, for a teenage quaker girl to be combining these two things in her life.

00:10:05 - 00:15:04

Michael Bronski: So at the age of eighteen or nineteen Jemima comes down with a very bad case of typhus, which was actually called Columbus disease in Rhode Island, because the ship called the Christopher Columbus brought it to the colony - 1776 right - so literally she is coming down very ill during the revolution.

OM: And Jemima Wilkinson is *severely* ill. She is in and out of consciousness. They are very afraid that she is going to die. In this many days of fever, Jemima Wilkinson began having visions. She saw, quote, "archangels descending from the East with golden crowns upon their head, proclaiming 'Room, room, room, in the many mansions of eternal glory for thee.'" "

I am completely fascinated with this. What does that mean? Who are these angels speaking to? Is this a specific vision for the recipient of these visions? Is this a general vision for humankind? Either way, I got real goosebumps the first time I read that. It resonated with me *now*. I guess because that's the kind of religion that I am drawn to. I suddenly felt very strong kinship with this person.

When the fever ended, the person who was in the bed announced that this person had no gender, and this person's name was Publick Universal Friend. (Again Friend as in Quaker, the Friends...)

KN: What a name!

OM: It's the greatest name. *Universal* Friend, which I love - "room in the many mountains of God for thee," right?

KN: Publick?

OM: Publick Universal Friend.

KN: Interesting.

OM: ...and Jemima Wilkinson was no more.

KN: wow!

OM: And Publick Universal Friend was a preacher. Now, we need to have a quick talk about pronouns...

Michael Bronski: When I did *A Queer History of the United States for Young People*, my editor and I decided that we would not say “he or she.” We would not use the more ubiquitous “they,” since Friend never said Friend was a “they.” So these words, which are really useful for us today, in many ways are not useful when thinking about things historically. And one thing I've learned from writing these two books, right, is that it really is important to see people in the complete context of how they live. So, saying “Friend,” even though I used it three times in a sentence, is actually the most accurate.

OM: Friend said that they [sic] were Friend and had no pronouns, so Friend had no pronouns.

Now like most of the things we're going to talk about in Friend's life, there are lots of different versions of this story, because Friend did not write anything down.

KN: Classic, classic religious leader move.

OM: Yes! And of course at this point, a person announcing that they have no gender is fascinating news, and the newspapers were fascinated. So there are lots of stories from this time about this person, but they are all taking a variety of different slants with a variety of different agendas, and it's very hard to know what Friend actually thought or said because all we ever have is second or third or fourth-hand accounts. One of the things which people argued about is: Did Friend say that Jemima Wilkinson died? And Friend was brought back from the dead? Did Friend merely change names as some sort of a spiritual calling? We can't know for sure. But what we do know is that it seems very unlikely that Friend would have publicly claimed to have been ‘brought back from the dead,’ because that's the kind of thing that got you killed in this largely-Puritan society.

KN: Yeah. That's a very Jesus-esque thing to claim and very dangerous.

OM: And there were many people throughout the rest of Friend's career who claimed that Friend claimed to **be** Jesus.

00:15:05 - 00:20:01

KN: Oh, interesting!

Michael Bronski: Friend said a lot of things. [laughter] We have very little from Friend per se. We have people who have written down what Friend said. And we all know that that is actually not a primary source. This is why the question of “did Friend think that Friend was Christ?” comes up. I think it's ambiguous how Friend was presenting this. I mean clearly, as a matter of physical matter of the body, it was the same physical matter.

OM: But we do have an account from one of Friend's followers, which is interesting.

Michael Bronski: One of Friend's followers wrote this: That Friend said, “And the angels said, “The time is at hand when God will lift up his hand a second time, to recover the remnant of his people, whose day is not yet over.” And the angel said, “The spirit of life from God had descended to Earth, to warn a lost and guilty, perishing, dying world, to flee from the wrath which is to come, and to give the invitation to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.””

OM: It's most likely that Friend saw this as more of a spiritual rebirth, instead of physical rebirth. And this is one of the things that is, again, hard for us to talk about because in looking from now, we mostly want to be surprised at the *wrong things*. [laughter] The things that we find unusual and surprising about Friend's life were completely normal for the culture and time.

Michael Bronski: So, this is a rather typical conversion story. Friend began preaching this and first converted Friend's family, and then began to convert other people.

OM: This is all extremely normal. Visions are normal. Communing with God is normal. Prepare for the second coming. All of this is normal and completely unremarkable.

KN: Especially in New England during the Great Awakening. It's ‘the Thing’!

OM: Right, this is not anything that anyone would raised an eyebrow at. That's the part that we now want to go, *Oh, wow, visions of God!* That's odd to us now, whereas for many of us now, we just go, “Oh okay, they had no gender, sure yeah.” And, at the time that would've been the *Wait what now? How? What?* Right, that's not a Thing in colonial New England.

KN: No problem with the visions of angels and things like that.

OM: Right. And again - us wanting to ‘push terms backwards’ - my first impulse was to say, “Oh, Friend is non binary.” We *can't* say that, that wasn't a Thing. We don't know what Friend

was, and we can't apply words backwards that didn't exist. So, over and over in the story we have to re-situate ourselves and remember where we are, and what to be surprised about.

There is definitely this idea that you have some sort of deep religious conversion experience and become a different person.

KN: Sure.

OM: What we *can* state for sure is that Friend was *very* clear that Friend was *not* Jemima Wilkinson. Friend refused to sign any documents that had that name on it, and when absolutely forced legally to sign, or in any way acknowledge Jemima Wilkinson's life, would sign an X.

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00:20:01 - 00:25:00

Now, we want to introduce you to an amazing new podcast we think our listeners will really enjoy. It's called *Fierce: a storytelling adventure, the women who changed the world*. The thing I really love about this show is that it's linking these forgotten women from the past to women in the present who are sort of a modern incarnation of that—A famous female pirate and modern female sailor carrying on that legacy. Yeah so cool! Sort of like acknowledging that the women who play these roles today are standing on the shoulders of those women who came before. It's an eight part series that launched on May 6th, and they have new episodes every Wednesday. The host, Jo Piazza, is an award-winning journalist and a bestselling author. If you love *What'sHerName*, and we know you do, we think you're also going to love *Fierce*. Listen to *Fierce* on the iheartradio app or wherever you get your podcasts.

Michael Bronski: Friend dressed in a manner that was perceived as androgynous to some degree, although more on the masculine side. We have to remember that clothing was very, very gendered; there was no unisex. Friend essentially wore a long coat, usually filled in around the neck with a scarf or something that looks like an ascot.

OM: Like a long preacher robe, the kind of thing that male preachers would have worn - but again there aren't Quaker preachers, so this isn't coming from a Quaker influence. This is Friend pulling aspects from different societies.

Michael Bronski: A wide-brimmed hat, almost identical I suspect with the hat we see on the Quaker Oats box, with William Penn. Friend never wore the requisite hair cap that women wore.

OM: So Friend begins preaching, which is odd in and of itself for a Quaker, but begins holding meetings anywhere. As is very common for the time, meetings are happening outdoors, in churches, and meeting houses, meetings are happening in homes... Anywhere Friend can find people to listen, Friend is preaching.

And people love it!

KN: Oh!

OM: Friend is a fascinating public figure, as the newspapers get a hold of the story, so lots of people were just sort of lookie-loo-ing, I'm sure. But many people were very drawn to Friend's religious teachings and became followers.

KN: What was Friend teaching?

Michael Bronski: Friend begins preaching and gets a following. Friend apparently, we only have secondhand reports, Friend never wrote sermons, Friend apparently would speak for two and a half hours off the top of Friend's head. Friend had a large range of biblical references that Friend used. Friend favored the Book of Revelation from the Gospels, which is actually fairly apocalyptic, and was preaching that the end of the world was coming very soon - which was actually not at all out of step with other religions at time. Even in a fairly "civilized" place like Rhode Island during the revolution, it seemed possible that the end of the world would come fairly soon.

KN: Was Friend preaching "Room room room for all"?

OM: Yes! And again, for a Quaker, less surprising, right? Quaker meetings are open. Quakers are committed to social justice as one of their core principles. Friend takes that and carries it one step

farther. Meetings are open to *anyone* of *any* race, including indigenous people, which was extremely unusual for the time - and that is something that ends up getting Friend in trouble. The colonialists do not want people listening to, and championing the causes of, the indigenous people they are trying to push out of the land they want. And Friend is still extremely committed to social justice, to caring for the poor, to hospitality as a virtue. Everyone who attends any of Friend's meetings gets fed, no matter why they're there. Anyone who would like to come and eat can come and eat. Much like Sikh meetings now, that one of the core principles is feeding people, is making sure everyone has material needs met before you tend to spiritual needs.

Michael Bronski: Friend had rather conventional morality. An emphasis on absence from sex, fairly following the dictate of Saint Paul that is "better to marry than to burn," and sex was okay if you were married.

00:25:01 - 00:30:03

OM: Many people probably have heard of the Shakers, who are another offshoot from Quakers at this point, that believe in abstinence. Friend is sort of a midway point; abstinence is best, but if you must, you can marry. It is a very Quaker-ish, "communal good" kind of society, and they do eventually form communities. Friend's followers purchase a large amount of land in New York state. There's some arguments... they think it [the land] is in Pennsylvania, it ends up being in New York state. There's an argument between Pennsylvania, and New York state, and the British government, *and* the indigenous people (whose land it really is), about who owns this land - but they do form a city called Jerusalem. And they own all of the land in common, but it isn't a commune, people "own" (in quotation marks) individual pieces of land, and they have their place on this land. So it isn't like the Shakers where there are giant communal structures.

Michael Bronski: And the question has always been, is Friend simply an anomaly? Is Friend - I mean many people then and even some people in later history, who thought Friend was sort of a huckster with a good gimmick.

OM: There are again these newspaper reports, and that's mostly what we have to go on. And many newspaper reports are claiming that Friend is a huckster-con-person. You know, 'just in it to profit.'

Michael Bronski: Although that then falls apart with - that Friend never benefited at all except getting a lot of publicity for Friend.

OM: Friend owned *nothing*. Friend would not sign legal documents, and therefore had literally no material property. And any land or anything that Friend ever did purchase was held by

Friend's friends in their names, because Friend would not sign legal documents under the name of Jemima Wilkinson.

Michael Bronski: One or two scholars say that that Friend was taking literally the words of Paul to heart, when Paul says that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile male nor female." But I think what makes the most sense to think about this is that if you think about America at this time, right? America's pulling away from Great Britain, it's really inventing itself from the bottom up, and is really inventing - along with everything else, like democracy, a government, the constitution, the Declaration of Independence - is actually rather intent on culturally breaking away from Great Britain and inventing a national literature, a national theatre, a national school of art, and a new version of gender. So there's a huge impulse across the country to actually reject British masculinity, which is seen as foppish and effeminized (even though all of our founding fathers wore rather 'fruity-looking' wigs.) [laughs]

So in America, we really look into reinventing gender, and we come up with, over the next decade, Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, the 'strong American man' who was out in the wilderness, and conquers the wilderness [unfortunately also killing indigenous people, right] and the 'American woman' is also re-conceived, right? I mean people don't realize that Abigail Adams, besides writing those incredible letters to John Adams demanding freedom for women as well, also ran the farm and was a major investor in New York investment houses during this time. So the 'New American Woman' is as much of an invention as the 'New American Man.' I think if we put Friend pretty much inventing a presentation of gender that is completely new, it makes total sense in the context.

OM: So even this, what looks like, we look back and go, "Wow, that's wild that someone is doing this gender play in 1776," It wasn't... this was an odd extreme of it, but the idea of breaking down these gender norms, and who should wear what and who should do what, it's totally normal.

So, Friend is inventing an entirely new *form* of American religion that pulls from all of these known forms, but also creates something new - that isn't just a conglomerate. It is a *new way* of thinking about what religion is *for*, about what your responsibility is as a member of a religion...

00:30:04 - 00:35:07

So it's a really fascinating mixture of all of these religious movements that are happening around Friend at this time, and it's really innovative and creative and influential, because Friend has *many* followers and Friend is *extremely* well known. This is an *important* religious movement.

KN: Like how many followers?

OM: Thousands.

KN: Daaaang!

OM: It's a *big* deal!

[music]

Michael Bronski: Friend goes to Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania. The entire family is disowned by the Quakers who began seeing them sort of competition, and Friend preached on street corners, in meeting houses, and people's homes; large groups of people would come. There are a lot of first-hand news reports, many which are contradictory, but Friend was getting a lot of attention at the time. The revolution is going on - Friend is actually preaching to British soldiers *and* to American soldiers.

OM: So it's a radically inclusive community. This itinerant preacher again is very common for the time. But outside of this Quaker community, anybody who is *not a man* doing that is extremely unusual and odd. And followers start amassing very quickly. This is a message that appeals to people who are in the midst of what has to be an absolutely terrifying war. And it probably feels like the world is falling down around your ears.

KN: Yeah! Yeah and such a time of upheaval, political and social. Sometimes, as we are seeing around us today...

OM: I was gonna say... [laughs].

KN: ...people are ready to just go "Whoa, okay - start from scratch. What do we know?" And they're open to all kinds of radical new ways of structuring life.

OM: Yeah, once you've opened the door to the idea that you could just change things, you could just do differently, then it allows access to the idea that *you could just change things!* "We could just stop wearing powdered wigs, and wear coon skin caps!"

KN: "We're casting aside our Britishness? Oh okay, what else are we casting aside? Our gendered-ness? Let's cast aside our Christian-ness? What else can we just cast aside while we're dumping things?"

OM: Yeah. Especially when all of those things are innately linked with your British-ness.

So, Friend eventually moves to Philadelphia, again amassing a huge number of followers.

KN: That's so interesting. So Friend is in Philadelphia like the same time as all the Founding Fathers?

OM: Yeah.

KN: We're like... Continental Congress we're talking? Benjamin Franklin?

OM: Right in the middle of all of this.

KN: Fantastic!

OM: Benjamin Franklin, also a Quaker in Philadelphia.

KN: In Philadelphia – and if Friend is really that fascinating and that public, then they had to have...?

OM: Yeah I mean, you *know* that Thomas Jefferson was interested in this right? I mean, of course he found this fascinating.

Even for a Quaker, Friend is an extremely 'early adopter' of abolition. And strongly encouraged - again this is sort of a Quaker-style... Friend is not the 'boss' of this community, there is no boss of this community. Friend is a voice that people listen to, but Friend isn't 'making laws' - and Friend *strongly encourages* anyone who joins Friend's religion to free their slaves. And the entire community is doing active work protecting indigenous people - and that's not making them *super popular* among the people who hold slaves. That's why we can't take any of these reports at face value, because so many of these newspapers were allied with pro-slavery forces or anti-Native-American forces, and so it's to their benefit to claim that this is a 'crazy person who claims they're Jesus.'

Michael Bronski: By the mid-1780s the group decides that they really want their own land and their own place in the world, that they've traveled around the colonies enough. And they really saw it religiously as an exodus from civilization, using the biblical notion of the Exodus - interestingly, right, is what exactly what the Puritans labeled their coming to the American continent - as an exodus; and not a surprise, in that exodus they actually saw their new home as the new Jerusalem.

00:35:07 - 00:40:02

OM: This exodus narrative is one that is used over and over and over again.

KN: Right, yeah. Leave the boundaries of society so that you can be truly free.

OM: Sadly, it doesn't really work any better for Friend's friends than it does for...

KN: ...then it does for the colonists, then it does for the Mormons.... society expands to absorb you...

OM: The world finds you, and the problems come with you. And, eventually, even in this communally-owned society, people began fighting over land.

Michael Bronski: Friend gives Friend's final sermon 1818, and begins to suffer from a series of diseases that , in retrospect - they didn't really have a name, but it looks like congestive heart failure. So Friend actually dies at the age of forty-three on July 1st, 1819.

OM: I love... you know I love when history happens through 'detective work.' The reason that we can diagnose what Friend died of, is because we have records of what herbal treatments Friend was using...

KN: Ohhhh

OM: ... to try to combat this process, and these remedies are ones which were intended to calm the heart, reduce swelling, reduce pressure on the chest; so, this does seem like congestive heart failure.

Now, the goal of thos society is 'following Friend's views,' and there is a prohibition on sexual activity. That means, much like the Shakers, the colony is not creating children and membership is dwindling. And where the Shakers are actively taking-in orphans, and see this as part of their role, of like "we are raising the extra children" and that's how we get children. That's not a central tenet here, and so the colony is dwindling. And when Publick Universal Friend died, things pretty quickly run down.

I think we can understand why Friend may not have featured heavily in women's history, obviously - because Jemima Wilkinson was a woman, but Friend was not. But it's *baffling* that Friend has been so erased from religious history, because this was an important, vibrant, influential, meaningful religious movement. But since being included in Michael Bronski's *Queer History of the United States for Young People*, Friend is starting to gain a little ground.

Michael Bronski: So I think what's interesting is the position that Friend has actually begun to occupy. I went to the Wikipedia site earlier today, which had been completely updated from a year ago. Somebody had done a lot of really good work.

I think there are several lessons for us today, right? One lesson is that who knows how much is lost in history, that we have to rediscover. This is just - I mean, at least my way of thinking - one of the most fascinating figures of colonial history, still completely unknown.

OM: But the insights that Friend's story gives us into what colonial religion was doing, what it was concerned with, what appealed to people, and what people were worried about... Friend is critical to that conversation, and so I'm really excited that a little more attention is starting to be paid, and I really hope that scholars of Colonial American religion will pick up this story and start looking at this, and the lasting influence that this movement had - because we know it did - track down more of those influences and figure out *what happened here*. And how did this put a unique American stamp on "who God is and how we relate to them"?

KN: Awesome.

Michael Bronski: So I do think that for us today, whether it be in gender discussions, in history, religious history, or even the history of America, and what that actually means in terms of looking at religion and looking at sex, gender, sexuality, that Friend presents a completely unique paradigm through which we can look at these other issues.

00:40:02 - 00:41:19

Huge thanks to Michael Bronski. If you'd like to learn more about Publick Universal Friend and Jemima Wilkinson, you can visit our website at <http://whatshernamepodcast.com> where we have lots of pictures and links to other great information. There you can also become one of our patrons and help support new episodes of the podcast - just click on donate at our website <http://whatshernamepodcast.com>. For as little as a dollar a month you can help support the podcast and help us make more women's history. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook where we post lots of photos each week.

Music for this episode was provided by Andy Reiner, Robert Stoddard, and Boston Sing. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.