

Margaret Spence: Lesbian pubs in the 1980's. Lesbian Strength Marches. Taking her son on marches. Mother's reaction to being a lesbian. Black lesbian and gay scene. Turnmills club.

MARGARET SPENCE

Clare (C) interviewing Margaret (M)

Extract 1: 17.55 – 22.18

FINDING LESBIAN PUBS, LESBIAN STRENGTH MARCHES, AND MYSELF.

M: Mid '80s. I was, I was roughly about 24, 25, and, yeah, most of my feelings around women had actually been sufficiently suppressed, but were now coming to the fore. I was now sort of like "Oh, well they seem to be getting on with it all right!" And they were quite openly out. They were, you know, they didn't mess about, and there were three or four of them in the block, and my friend had actually ... just ending a relationship with somebody else, and then there was another one and they had a ... there was a couple, and there was another one, and there was another one that lived over so and so, and my friend actually said "Do you fancy coming to a pub?" And I said "Oh, I don't really do pubs, but what ... what ... what sort of pub?" And she said "It's called The Only Alternative" and I said "That's an unusual name for a pub. Where's that?"

She used to do discos, so she was running this disco, and it was at this place called The Only Alternative. I can't quite remember it, but it was in town somewhere, up in London. I think it might have been Bethnal Green or somewhere. But anyway, went to this pub and it was women only, and I was like "Oh my God! It's just no-one but women here! That's really good, innnit?" So every time she went, I kind of "Oh can I come with you?" "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And then there were other events that she would go to, and like I'd be going "Well, well can I come?" and she'd go "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and my son was young enough to actually not be an issue. So, you were allowed to actually – if it was a women only event, you were allowed to actually take male sons providing they weren't above the age of eleven, or something. So, that was great! I could take him along with me! And I wanted to be involved, I felt like I belonged. I felt like I was part and parcel of ... um, everything that they were kind of doing, and then they invited me to Hyde Park Corner, to the Lesbian Strength March, and I went "Will I be able to come?" And they're going "Well, you're a woman, aren't you, and no-one's actually going to know one way or the other". And I'm going "Oh, I don't know. I don't know whether I should go. But what about ... what about me son?" And they're going "Well, bring him along with you." And I'm going "Oh, if my mum found out, she'd kill me! She'd kill me." But that kind of added to the excitement. It kind of added to my whole "Oh, I'll go ... What ... what do you do?" And they going "Well, we sort of like protest about, you know, not having rights for lesbians" and I'm going "Oh, right, OK. My mum would kill me. She'd go mad. We'll go ... I'll dress up so that she won't know that it's me."

Anyway, we went to Hyde Park Corner, and I just felt like I belonged. I felt like I was part and parcel of everything that was going on. I didn't feel ... I didn't feel rejected in anyway. I felt a little bit paranoid about erm, my colour, but then that was sort of like all part ... I'd always kind of felt inferior – a bit of an inferiority complex throughout my life for different reasons: being Black, being overweight, being someone that fancied women and I wasn't supposed to, being a single parent. I always kind of ... there were always different issues as to why I kind of felt inferior. But here I felt really safe. I felt empowered. I just felt like "Well, this is where I should be!"

Extract 2: 41.50 – 43.34

MARG TAKING HER SON ON LESBIAN STRENGTH MARCHES. MOTHER'S REACTION TO MARG BEING A LESBIAN

M: I think at the time it was ... you had the Lesbian Strength March and then you had the overall Gay March that used to meet at Hyde, Hyde Park Corner, and we used to go under the Newham Lesbian um, Strength banner, and there is a picture somewhere in the world of my son actually holding the Lesbian Strength banner around two patrons who were actually having a wee in the park! And I always thought "Please don't get us on camera! Please don't get us in the newspaper. If my mum sees this, she'll have a heart attack. She'll die!" And I remember actually avoiding ... any time I went on a march, I'd kind of avoid anyone who had a camera because "I

can't be seen. I can't be seen! I don't want to be seen. If my mum sees me I'm going to die!" I came out very late to my mum. Very, very, late and she was fine.

C: Really?

M: Yes! Well I say she was fine, I mean she'd moved back over to Ireland and I wasn't living at her ... I wasn't sort of like living under her roof. I'd actually moved in with my girlfriend in Brighton by then, and we'd been living together for about four years, and she did say to me "Don't you think it's about time you told your mum?" And I went "Oh ... if I really must." And I did, and she said "Well, Mag, I've asked you a number of times and you've told me no." She had, and I had. She said "I kind of guessed, and if that's what makes you happy, then that's fine. I'm not condoning it mind! I'm just saying." So I kind of got to a point where I thought "Well, that's better than nothing."

The sad ... sadness of that is I was there when my mum actually passed away. I had to be by her bedside, and she wasn't in too good a situation, obviously, she was going, and she said to me "Mag, are you wearing trousers or are you wearing a skirt?" And I said "I'm wearing trousers, Mum." She went "Ah, well." And I think that just about says everything that my mum could actually say about the whole situation is "Ah well, never mind." You know?

Extract 3: 1:01.58 – 1:07.43

BLACK LESBIAN AND GAY SCENE. TURNMILLS NIGHT CLUB

I mean this is sort of like more '95 ish. '95 or early '90s. Black and ethnic minority groups had started developing their own exclusive ... lesbian and gay parties. Places like Chokes (*Ed. Marg corrected this later to Shugs*) which was down on the Brixton Road.

C: What was that like?

M: Erm ... It was interesting in as much as it felt like you were part and parcel of ... an identity of Black and ethnic minority lesbian and gay men. But Black culture often ... is very ... visual or is it visual orientated? Or very ... if you don't look the part ... if you don't look ... if you not wearing the right kind of jeans. If you ain't looking the same as everybody else, or looking pristine, then there's going to be someone that's going to ... "Have you see the state of her?" You know? That kind of touch, and I ... I never appreciated that. I was bullied as a child at school for how I looked, so I was always ... again, felt insecure no matter who I went with, because you didn't fit in with the in crowd. I didn't know very many Black and ethnic minority lesbians or gay men. I think that that's how it was for a lot of us in our different groups. You knew white men and women, but you were one of that crowd, and, you know, trying to fight your way in for whatever reason, felt a little bit like, you know? You were almost like the token, which felt a bit isolating.

But then once that movement, that black and ethnic minority movement started to develop ... it became a little bit more mixed. It became a little bit more mixed. Things like going to the Oak Bar was actually a little bit more mixed. My experience, my personal experience is that the women that I'd gone out with, all the women that I'd started seeing were white women, Greek Cypriot, Irish, they were from their own ethnic minorities. So I tended to um, kind of mix well, but it was still part and parcel of a wider group, if you know what I mean? So I didn't go to them as often. I felt more comfortable actually going with a little bit more of a white mix, purely because I just felt more comfortable. I didn't feel as though I had to be, you know, wear particularly pristine clothes, and clothes had always been an issue for me and generally the ... I think overall the whole thing about the lesbian and gay community for me was that you had to look the part. Not quite sure why because ...

C: In the White world as well as the Black?

M: Both, both, you know? If I'd ... I went to Turnmills once, Turnmills, Clerkenwell Road. I went to Turnmills once and gone in with a bunch of ... I'd gone in with ... I can't even remember who I'd gone in with, but I'd gone in with a bunch of women and I remember this woman coming up to me and sort of like saying "Are you in drag?" And I went "Sorry?" "Are you a man in drag?" And I went "Are you taking the piss?" And it was like "Right, OK, I know I might have a bit of a five o'clock shadow, but that's medical darling, do you know what I mean?" You know? That kind of stuff. I mean if you didn't look the part. If you weren't sort of wearing jeans ... I mean I said to

you before, I was kind of wearing dresses at The Bell. Have you ever been to The Bell?

C: Yes.

M: Oh right. Well, the night that I kind of went was sort of leathers and ... ! ((*Laughs*)

C: Quite dark and seedy and snooker tables ...

M: Well, exactly! So you can imagine me with my red dress ... black high-heeled shoes “Hi!” “This woman has definitely walked in the wrong place!” (*Laughs*) Erm ... I loved to challenge that as well. I do like that whole idea of people making the assumption that I should be a particular way, you know? I really do love that whole challenge of “Don’t make that assumption of me. Don’t make that assumption that I should, as a Black woman, be listening to Bob Marley. I should as a woman be, you know, wearing lipstick and whatever or ... I shouldn’t be ...” You know? All that sort of stuff. That’s the one thing that’s given me my strength, I think is that whole challenge of “Don’t make that assumption of me. Never!”