

Elaine McKenzie: Setting up The Glass Bar. Memories of The Fallen Angel. Church upbringing. Being a lesbian accountant in 1980s London.

ELAINE MCKENZIE

Clare (C) interviewing Elaine (E)

Extract 1: 15.23 – 20.15

REASONS FOR SETTING UP THE GLASS BAR – MEMORIES OF THE FALLEN ANGEL

E: I think one of the major... kick for me to start The Glass Bar for a gay woman coming onto the scene is sometimes in London it's very cold. It can be a little unfriendly, if you're not in with any group. So you've got to be quite a bolshy person to go and introduce yourself to a group and, you know, make them understand that you're going to be around and you want to be part of that group, and it helps if you're attractive and funny, you know, those stereotypical things! But erm, I remember going into a venue, it was The Fallen Angel. It was raining. It was a Tuesday and it was raining heavily and I had this bright red kagool, and I was wearing this pair of trousers which were fuchsia and they had triangles, with lots of different colours on them! (*Laughs*) So I walked into this venue, I was soaked and I'd got my kagool on, and I opened the door and everybody kind of stopped, turned and kind of looked at me, and then you could see like someone was thinking "What the hell is she wearing?" Others thinking "She's lost". And they were in their standard uniform attire, which was - these were the customers - which was jeans, jeans, white T shirt, leather black jacket, hair slicked back.

C: All of them?

E: Yeah, most of them. Most of them, so they all look like something out of like James Dean, that kind of look, and yes, I felt out of place. I felt "Yes, this is definitely wardrobe malfunction kind of - no, I don't belong here, I really don't belong here." I went in all the same. I thought "I'll go in all the same, get a pint." I sat right at the back, you know, like a naughty school girl sat right at the back of the class, and I sat right at the back, and I drank my pint very slowly by myself and no, nobody ... nobody approached me. Nobody said hello, nothing. Finished my pint, then left, and I thought if ever I have a venue, I am not going to do that. If somebody comes in on their own, I'm not to necessarily assume that they're Billy No Mates or ... they might be meeting somebody, or they might actually decide I'm going to go out on my own. Why not? I do it all the time. But I'm going to say hello to them. How are you? How's your day? You know, and then just say ... give them my name, tell them what I'm about, so they don't feel that I'm a mad woman hitting on them, and then go about my business, you know? And if they want to be introduced to groups do that. I think that's one of the reasons why The Glass Bar was so successful because you can ... you knew you weren't going to be left alone, and I think that's very important. People were not designed to be alone as a species. So it's good to be together and it's good to have conversations, it's good to network, but it's good to have somebody there to facilitate that, can make that happen and that's why, one of the reasons why I started The Glass Bar to create spaces, a space for women just to be, you know? They don't have to compete with the noise of men, the space men take up, the oxygen men take up.

... And it's a space where you can just be, you're ... and it doesn't matter what you're wearing, you know? The uniform changed from jeans, white T shirt and black leather jackets to jeans and checked shirts from Mister Buy Right, then Oxford Circus and, you know, dungarees. Dungarees and it moved to something else and then it went to lipstick lesbians and you all walked in wearing corporate suits, you know? It changes, but it doesn't really matter what you're wearing, you could come to The Glass Bar and you could have a conversation with somebody. You could come on your own and have a chat with somebody, and that is what I wanted to create, and I was very successful at doing that.

Extract 2: 42.37 – 48.04

CHURCH UPBRINGING. 'COMING OUT' AS AN ACCOUNTANT TO LESBIANS IN 80s LONDON.

E: ... so by the time I ... I *had* to come to out to my parents then at least I could explain exactly what it was and I knew more about my sexuality, and because I was on the scene I knew more about other people and how they deal with their sexuality. How some people are very comfortable with it, some people are still fighting with it, particularly those who are steeped in religion. I ... I was baptised when I was seventeen and I left the church when I was eighteen, and it's one of those things that if you're brought up in the church and it's quite strict, you ... it really has a tight hold on your life and how you think and what you ought to do and stuff like that and it was quite good to break free of that and just be able to do my own thing and shape my own values and have my own principles, and that's what's important to me and leaving home ... in my family, you leave home when you're about to get married, so it's like my brother and I left home well before that, and my parents were thinking "What are you doing? You've got your own room. Why don't you just stay?"
(Laughs)

C: Was it in Norwood then you lived?

E: Streatham.

C: Streatham and when you were in your early twenties, when was that? The '80s was it?

E: Yes. Yeah, '80s. 86, 87.

C: And what was the ... what can you remember of the scene then? Political or social or any way?

E: Well, if you were a lesbian you *had* to be a socialist. You had to be. You had to be a socialist. You had to be a Labour supporter or you know, Socialist Worker. You had to be. Now, I'm a Labour person, very left of centre, but not erm, not Socialist Worker, really no. Jesus no! Erm, yes ... and the ... and, you know, you couldn't have a good job, you know, you had to be a social worker. I was an accountant. I was doomed! Every time I walked in it was like "So what do you do for a living?" "I'm an accountant." Oh! It was the worst thing you could ever say! You'd think people would say "Oh, you're a woman and you're an accountant in a man's world. Well done you!" It's like ... no! I'd go into a bar and they'd go "Oh, drinks are on Elaine, she's an accountant!" And I was a capitalistic scumbag! It was hideous!

And the thing is, what makes me so angry is those very same people who would say "You're capitalistic scumbag" bought their council flats. They bought their council flats for a song. Sold it for a mint. Capitalist scumbags! So yeah. I had to deal with that and because I was an accountant I couldn't possibly have any Socialist principles at all, anywhere. So ... that er ... I would keep my politics to myself, basically, and then I ... had to keep my career to myself!

And in the '90s it all changed, it all changed because you know you had the lipstick lesbian, you had the power dressing women in business, so now being an accountant was "Oh, well done you!" And I'm thinking well "I've left the career now" and they're saying "Why did you do that? Why are you hiding behind a bar when you could be an accountant?" I was thinking "Well ... I just ... timing." So if had ... if you were very business orientated then you still couldn't have Socialist principles at all, and therefore you had to be a right wing Conservative. So I think sometimes to the rest of the world people think that I'm fairly right wing, but when it comes to ... when I talk about politics, they always look slightly confused, you know? "I thought you were a Conservative." It's like "No. Just no. No, no, no." So that part of me is actually quite difficult to get across to people, you know, be they friends or be they just customers. "No, I do have Socialist ... but you know, that's my politics. It's not ... I'm not a Conservative. Yes, I do run a business but that doesn't mean that, you know, I'm Thatcher's child. Far from it.