

Interview with Valerie Dunn (aged 74)

25th May 2015

Sappho and Social anxiety , Older Lesbian Network, Radical feminism and Early Days of Pride

Extract 1: Sappho and Social anxiety track 1 14:30 - 18:07

V: I went to Sappho, you know Sappho?

C: Tell me...

V: Sappho was um ... set up by Jackie Forster, and that was a social club in Notting Hill. But they did have...they had speakers like Maureen Duffy, and all sorts of quite interesting things going on there, and I went to talk about the centre and some of them said... and I was very anxious, you know? Didn't think I was up to the job really! But, you know, they were saying "Why do we need another club, you know? Why do we need another centre?" Hah! And I said "Well, you know, it's good to have several different things going on." 'Cos by then, I'm not sure when the Lesbian and Gay Centre started, and the London Women's Centre, 'cos that was vital.

C: I've a feeling the Lesbian and Gay Centre was around '85.

V: Yes, you're probably ... probably right.

C: '86 possibly.

V: Erm ...

C: So had it already started, which is why they said "We don't need another lesbian group?"

V: No ... no, it was only some women who said that, you know, because Sappho was there, you know? And there was The Sols Arms as well. Do you remember the Sols Arms?

C: Where was that?

V: That was on Hampstead Road. Just before Tottenham Court Road station.

C: Ah!

V: Yeah.

C: And what was that? Mixed?

V: No ... it was lesbian.

C: What was it like there?

V: Well it was a sort of bar scene really, yeah. Erm, yes, it's difficult. There's so many things we've lost.

C: Did you like going there? Was it a nice place to go?

V: Well, it was all right once I knew people, and I knew people who would be there, but once I went on my own and it wasn't very ... well, I don't know. I think people were so anxious in those days, they ... you know? They didn't want to be seen to be coming onto you if they weren't, and then you couldn't make friends then, so, it was quite difficult I think. I think we were all in a sort of ...

C: Did you enjoy going to the Sappho meetings?

V: Yes. Yeah, oh yeah. Erm ... it's just that I felt erm so ... unready. Because I'd had no sort of practice, if you see what I mean! At being with women or doing anything with women ... Lesbians particularly, you know? And I think I was quite attractive, but I didn't know that, you know? So it was ... I must have given out loads of very crossed messages, you know? I don't know. Probably still do and I don't know it! (*Laughs*) Mixed messages I should say. Yes.

Extract 2 Older Lesbian Network, Radical feminism track 1 27:04 -29:21

And OLN ... OLN, tell me about that and how you discovered them and what you thought of them.

V: Well, then I went along to the first meeting and erm ... and that was so different from the ... the Camden lot because there were women coming from the Older Feminist Network, and they had a different sort of slant. I mean they were feminists, but ... I don't know, there was something different about them! I think ... I think I was a radical feminist, really, and they ... and there's so many feminisms. There's so many ... branches.

C: How do you define your radical feminism, then?

V: Well, I prefer to socialise just with women, you know? I don't ... I don't er look for men in my everyday life. I mean I can ... I can deal with them very well because I used to be a secretary and so! (*Laughs*) But I don't seek them out, you know? I mean the only thing I do with men really at the moment is birdwatching, and because we've got a focus, it's OK, you know? Erm ... but...

C: And in OLN what was their feminism like then?

V: Well it started ... it started you know from a good feminist base, but when there's only one ... meeting place for older lesbians say ... and also you ... in those days it was difficult to – I think it still is – to contact older women, older lesbians, because they were so closeted

Extract 3 Early Days of Pride track 2 20:25

V: But I still go to Pride. I mean I go to Pride every ... every year. I've been...

C: And out of the millions of groups that you're a member of, who do you march with?!

V: I've been marching ... I've been marching with OLN, but now we ... we also march with Opening Doors.

C: Ah right!

V: So ... yeah!

C: Does that ... do you enjoy the Pride march, the celebration these days?

V: It's not the same, it's not ... you know, it's ...?

C: How's it changed from when you first started marching?

V: Well it doesn't feel so political these days although I think we need to be now, I mean, we need to be because we've got so many things stacked against us, you know? The religious right of every denomination, you know, and I ... I go because ... one of the reasons I go is because I can. And there's so many people in the world that can't, you know, and they can't even live a lesbian life, and it's, you know ... that's the least I can do, as it were, really ... to ... I don't know...

C: What was the atmosphere in the early day? What was probably the first – sorry going back to dates –but what was the first sort of time you would have marched?

V: Well, they were smaller marches. They were Pride marches and they were... I remember meeting down at ... Charing Cross, Strand, and you know, it was so exciting. It was... really, you know, something wonderful to do!

C: Was there any feeling of danger?

V: Yes, well ... yes there was, because ... I mean I always kept my head down, but we had, you know what to do ... cards telling us what to do if we got arrested.

C: And presumably people did get arrested?

V: Yes, they did. I mean ... but they ... sometimes it was because they'd put themselves in the way of it, because they wanted to make a point.

C: So what might they do?

V: Well they might sit down in front of Downing Street or, you know? I don't know what else they did?

C: And was there a gay support for... that told you what to do then? You said you had cards.

V: Yes, yes, just the card telling you what to do if you got arrested. And I used to think "God!" You know, "I won't be able to find it!" You know? And I, as I say, I kept my head down. I didn't ... I didn't ... I'm not the sort who wants to make a point in that way, 'cos I ... I mean ... partly it's obviously ... scared, but it's also, you know, I don't think it serves much purpose, and it's sort of putting myself in their hands which I don't want, and also, I mean I think I'd go mad to be locked up. So ... I don't ... I'm not that political.

C: And was there ... in the early days, was there any animosity from the erm ... people who weren't gay or from the police?

V: Yes there was, yes. And ... I mean ... well there was usually a Christian group somewhere along the ... you know? Having a go, and ... you were aware that the police had their horses ready for any, you know? I don't know what they thought was going to happen. But we ...I mean on the whole we were peaceful and yet there was always some upset.

C: But at some point presumably, it's changed over the years, do you think? As far as being less dangerous and less edgy as a thing to do?

V: Yes, of course. 'Cos when ... I mean when we actually saw police in their uniforms on the march it was amazing, you know? It's ... it was something unimaginable