Interview with Marc Thompson for the Haringey Vanguard Project
Extract: 00:00 – 11:57

MARC: OK so I'm Marc Thompson, I'm 50 years of age. I was born in London in Brixton, Brixton born and bred, lived there all of my life. Pretty much on the same road and same area, I'm very proud of that. I am a black gay man who has been out since he was 16, and has being heavily involved, engaged, participated in London's Black Gay Queer Life for the best part of 30 odd years. My work, I have worked in HIV activism, health promotion, community activism in community development since around 1992. I'm the co-founder of PrEPster, which is a community social movement around advocating, agitating for prEP and also the Director of the Love Tank, which is a company which is about working with marginalized communities around health issues. And my other project is I am a director, one of the directors and editors of Black Out UK which is a social digital space and movement for black gay men in the London in London, sorry in the UK. That's what I do. That's who I am.

KAMARA: Amazing, could you tell me a little bit more about your background …so growing up in London - I guess growing up with the identities that you hold and how you understood and came into them.

MT: So as I said I was born in Brixton. My parents are Jamaican, my grandparents are Jamaican and so I kind of describe myself as a Windrush child or grandchild because both my parents came here when they were kids in, you know, and working class proudly. My dad worked in demolition. My mum was a secretary for a while - do you know much more than that – aspirational Caribbean people so you know the type. I had a relatively happy, easy-going childhood. Was not in poverty, didn't have any kind of huge social issues or anything like that. And I had quite a protected upbringing, so really supportive parents, really kind of big on being yourself and just living your life rather than you know focus on education. Which is OK. Came out when I was 16. Which is pretty straightforward. I… you know I like to say that I'm one of the luckier ones. I don't have a huge tragic 'my parents threw me out - my God being black and queer is the most terrible, awful thing ever, and I struggled with it'. I certainly didn't, and as I said my family were really supportive. You know, like most black parents it was difficult at first and I think that was more to do with what other people think rather than there was something wrong with me. Yeah but they were really supportive and as I said I came out at 16 and kind of got involved in 'the life'.

KAMARA Just before I ask the next question I'm just letting you know that it's because of sound reasons – that is why I'm responding the way I'm responding so it doesn't look like I'm not engaged… So I guess maybe explain what the life means. If you can elaborate?

MT: Well, this is an historical kind of interview isn't it? So I came out in London in 1985 into um… I was really lucky, I always think I was really lucky in lots of aspects of my life because I was fortunate enough when I came out - and it depends on where you put your ethnic identity against your sexuality, right? So for me, engaging with other black, gay people and I'm not talking Queer people, we were not using that language then. Engaging with other black gay people, was was… it wasn't necessarily important to me, it just felt really natural. So when I was coming to terms with my sexuality, I never had that thing that some… I

always knew there were other gay people, right? I never thought Oh my God, I'm the only gay person in the world, where am I going to find other gay people? I knew there were other gays. What I didn't think was there were other black gays.

I thought I was the only one for a really long time, not for a really long time and when I came out at 16, I met my first boyfriend, probably a couple of weeks after me coming out or around the same time and he very quickly introduced me into London's very small black gay scene. And it was tiny – 'cause you are talking kids who were you know, thinking about population numbers… You're talking about the second generation of like Windrush you know. So our parents had been…that generation had come here. So we're like in our early 20s. So it was clustered in different parts of London. It was really about going to house parties, people that you knew. Again, there weren't that many social spaces for us.

There are one or two clubs, Stallions, Crackers… there were a couple of places that I remember we didn't necessarily go to cause I was too young. But the scene was around friends and around house parties, around who you knew and it very often felt like everybody knew everybody 'cause it was that small. And that has like any small community, has its pros and its cons. You know that everybody knows you, but when everybody knows you they know all your business, and they're always in your business. And we're talking about the gays here. And you know, I'm going to dress it up…we can be shady, and we're gossipy and that's what people do. And if you have small clusters in communities, but there's also the grass… as queer people doing that more than anybody else.

So. OK now and I'm kind of like seeing guys and meeting people and going out on what was then the scene and it felt really small and it felt really comfortable and it felt like you knew everybody in it. And that was OK for a little while. That was OK for me for a little while.

KAMARA Yeah, it's really interesting that you are saying like this 'because I get similar impressions around the time from my parents are saying like yeah it was mostly house parties. We kind of kept to our own communities…

And it's, I guess, affirming to know that not much has changed in terms of affirming and also concerning in some ways, but in terms of like that tight knit community aspect how that hasn't changed.

MT I mean it was. I mean, I think it's very important to remember there's a reason why we do that, and you know, as migrant community, migrant and or communities of colour in the UK in particular, we do it… sometimes I think now we think there is a narrative that we do it because it's a, it's a reaction to racism or white supremacy, or, you know, there are no spaces for us. Yes, that's partly true. It's also true we do it because we love being around each other right? And we use the word now like "safe space". We were not using the word "safe space", we were using actually… we are throwing a shebeen or Blues dance because you're playing music that I wanna hear. You cook the food I wanna eat. I'm not going to get hassled …that wouldn't come into it about hassle, but I am going to hear the music I love, I'm gonna be around people that look like me. There will be no questions around anything and you just did it unquestionably so the Blues parties and the shebeens that we went to organized were no different to what our straight counterparts were doing. So that's one.

Two. Yes, it was wrapped up in safety, but also it was culturally normal for us to do that in this cold ass country, which wasn't providing for us. There are many of us who still dipped

our toes in the wider "mainstream" entertainment scene. And that's where we encountered racism, and that's when we probably said, actually, it's probably safer back here. But as time progressed in my own life and my own journey, I wanted to expand so I couldn't always stay in that small community of mine. You know, my horizons, my taste expanded as well.

KAMARA So the project is kind of looking at between the 1970s to the 1990s. Obviously a really broad period of time, so I guess zeroing in on the kind of organizing work that was happening in the 80s. I'm wondering if you could talk about the kind of stuff you were involved, the kind of things you were adjacent to, and how that informs your thinking 'cause …you just mentioned about wanting to branch out from like smaller community scenes and moving into like… from my understanding, like institutions and like broader spaces, so maybe talking a bit about like the relationship between those things.

MT OK. I mean I partied, right, for the first five years of my coming out. So say from 1985 to like 1990/91 that was more about me being a young man, enjoying myself partying. I wasn't necessarily political. I was political in my head and I cared about anything about my community. I was also dealing with the fact that I was diagnosed HIV positive in 1986. So I was processing all of that and managing all of that and how that sat within my community. In around '91/92 I started to get involved in HIV education and activism and the education for me was because actually I wanted men to understand that they could avoid this because, you know, it needs to be avoided and then that morphed into more activism around HIV, so not just making sure that men and I'm talking about black gay men here, particularly because that was my community were not just educated but also, what were systems, what were organisations doing to respond specifically to our need? So becoming an advocate for our community as well.

I then in '92 two I got involved in organizing all movements like Let's Rap, which was a bi-weekly ummm workshop group meeting for black gay men where we spoke about community development, safer sex, all these sort of things. We would organize these workshop things for black gay men and they were culturally specific and they were a safe space for us. And then from there in around '95 I set up a formal organization called Big Up, which was funded by local authority, local health authorities to provide education information support around HIV to black gay men in the UK. So my, my kind of activism and work has always focused around sexual health. Black gay men, HIV and I think I moved … and I think then for me, I moved …my politics, my work became blacker and more political.

My social life became less black in terms of the black gay community. I kind of felt like I was outgrowing it. My musical tastes changed. Um, I needed to be in a space where it wasn't so small. You know where not everybody knew me. I wanted a bit of anonymity.

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