



Interview with Winn Austin for the Haringey Vanguard Project

Extract 00:00 -12:58

Veronica: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed for the Haringey Vanguard project. Um, as you know, it's a queer black history project, um, and we're interviewing people that are notable. Um, just by key people in, in, in, in the community, we need to get their testimony. So, I'm so happy that you've agreed to be interviewed. And I really am looking forward to seeing your materials and stuff. Um, so firstly, it's an oral history-

Winn: I love the way you said testimony. I feel like we are going to church.

Veronica: Going to church (laughter) It is a bit like that for some people. So, tell me, um, Winn, where were you - um, tell me about yourself, where were you born? Tell me how you came to-

Winn: I was born in Guyana and I came to London in March 1980, which would be 40 years this year. Is it?

Veronica: Yes.

Winn: 40 years ago. And I'm only 27 so it's confusing

Veronica: Wow. Benjamin Button.

Winn: I've got a, I've got a warehouse full of rotten paintings.

Veronica: Right. Right. So, what, so what, um, where did you come from then? You were born in Guyana, but what drove you to London?

Winn: Well, my family we're all here. My grandma parents immigrated in the fifties, early fifties in really early fifties. I think it was 1959, my grandmother came here and my Grandfather I'm from a large family and my mother was one of 12, so they, I think six or seven of them came to live here. So, it was automatic that their siblings and their offspring, rather than siblings, would come here to live. So that's what we did.

Veronica: And where did you settle when you first came to London?

Winn: Well, we settled in, we lived in Brondesbury Park in near Willesden Green, which was kind of a very conservative neighborhood. And our neighbors were a mixture of Jews and Arabs and everything. And they were, it was very lovely neighborhood and people really very friendly round there. In fact, I'm still friends with my neighbors from all those years ago.

Veronica: Wow. So, let's talk a little bit about how you, um, like how you identify and coming out. If you came out, as soon as you got to London, kind of like that part of your life.

Winn: Well, I didn't, I- Listen, I've always had a strong sense of my own identity. I, I grew up in a time where there weren't many labels, so people weren't necessarily going around giving themselves those labels, but I was very, very clear. About who I was and what I wanted to be. I didn't know how I was going to go about doing that. I, you know, I think my parents were at the beginning, it was very confusing, but eventually they understood that this was me because it was always how I was. I was never, I was, I w I, I wouldn't say different, but I was an individual child. Do you know what I mean? I view it with other kids. My age, my contemporaries were looking at different things. I was looking at to kind of educate myself a lot. So, I didn't do many much toys. I did lots of books.

Veronica: Ok.

Winn: Books, and I did magazines. And, you know, so I educated myself in that respect. Cause I loved reading. I still do. I don't do as much of it now as I should or used to, but I really enjoy doing it. So, books were always my thing.

Veronica: And in turn, what was it like kind of ending up in London, like coming to London in 1980.

Winn: Well, the the thing is, I felt I was kind of secure because my oldest siblings were already here. As you know, with West Indian families, they immigrate bit by bit. So, my oldest siblings were already here, but my parents traveled back and forth quite a lot in the time that I was there and going to school and stuff in my earlier years. So, it wasn't a case of, I was coming to this strange land. These were people that I knew that I knew them to be my brothers and sisters, because before they left Guyana, we were together. You know, living with our grandparents. So, it was like, I knew these people and I had seen them regularly, so, and be communicating by letter - funnily enough back then - so. So, I think like people, I think some of these kids don't understand what letters are all about.

Veronica: [unsure?]

Winn: And be very dedicated to, letter writing because I mean, so we wrote lots of letters, so I knew these people, so I wasn't coming to strangers. And the rest of my mother's siblings who were here, I'd met them occasionally. So, I I knew I was coming to family, so it wasn't like I landed, and it was just me by myself. And. No security. It was a fun [time?] actually.

Veronica: So in terms of you kind of discovering, you know, that social scene in London, I don't know if you on the gay scene. Can you talk a little bit about, um, about that?

[Technical issues]

Veronica: So tell me about, um, how you got into, you know, modeling, you know, how did that happen? How did you find your place in London?

Winn: Well, when I, when I first came to London, I was a young teenager. I was even before I arrived to London, I was heavily influenced by fashion, even though I really didn't realize it. Cause my grandmother was a seamstress. So, I was always around her scraps on the floor, cutting scraps and sewing, and learning how to sew hems and things to help her out. And she used to make clothes for the local women in a neighborhood. For the church ladies. And every Sunday, everybody will be well turned out to church. And you notice people turning up to church because I don't think you know anything about church life as a, in the Caribbean on Sunday, women wear hats to church. People get dressed up to go to church. It was just thing. And it was shoes, stockings, gloves, hats, handbags, purses in your handbags, fans and handkerchiefs. So, it was a whole thing. And this was a regular thing on a Sunday. Everybody went to church in their literally their Sunday best. So when I moved to London, I realized that my mother was always very fashionable, I knew that, but I remembered when my mother cut off all of her hair when it was, when it just didn't between the sixties and seventies, just cut a hair into this short kind of baby [?]. So, like long hippie skirts and Paisley tops and things like that with leather sandals. But my mother was wasn't actually hippy. She was just a very stylish woman with, you know, the hippie look was the style of the year. The seventies, silk blouses, I think this is where I discovered my love of soft fabrics. Cause my mother wore lots of feminine, soft fabrics. So, I basically just, you know, I saw her wearing all these floaty fabrics. I remember this particular summer and my mama was visiting. She had this Paisley yellow Paisley, like that mustardy yellow Paisley with black swirls, a skirt and top set. And it was almost like transparent, but it was silk chiffon, and it had these tiers and it was long and floaty. And I remember watching my walking on the street with my mum in Guyana when she came to visit or one visit when I was still there. And she was, she was I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the whole world. She's wearing these exquisite, exquisite outfits and. So, I think that was my love for fashion. Really. I realise, I noticed fashion then. And then I came to London and my sister was studying fashion at the London college of fashion. So, she was all about the fashion magazines. I had Vogue, she got a subscription to Vogue and Harper's and all these fabulous fashion magazines of the day. And so, I kind of like, and I kind of like I was very close to my brothers and sister. And so, for my brothers, I learned the sporty side of myself. From my sister, I learned, the more deli- and my mom, I learned the more delicate sides of myself. So, it was-

Veronica: how many-

Winn: I had. This [?] was never,

Veronica: How many, how many siblings do you have?

Winn: Altogether between all the families? Say it was nine of us. Cause I lost a brother in December. So above[?] We are pretty close-knit family, considering that we come from kind of three different homes. We are still pretty tight.

Veronica: Okay. Yeah.

Winn: So I'm going back to the point about growing up with these siblings. I learned to roller skate from my brothers. I like to take tennis from my brothers. I learned how to kind of

appreciate fashion, hair and makeup from my sisters and my mom. So, I had the kind of both sides, the barrel, and I think. Still to this day. I have that in my personality. I have a little bit of that. I love sports, but I also love makeup and I love hair and I love jewelry and I love chiffon and silk and organza and all this kind of amazing, you know, it's not a contrast for me. I think the two for me, compliments each other perfectly. That's my character.

Veronica: Wow.

Winn: On stage, in a large crowd, I'm in a safe space. It means that I not at no point, will I be overwhelmed by everybody.

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah.

Winn: Does that make any sense?

Veronica: You're protected almost.

Winn: Yeah, I am kind of, I am safe.

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah.

Winn: I mean, whatever I do from there, it's safe. It means that there's a little bit of a barrier between us.

Veronica: Yeah.

Winn: Yeah. You know what I mean?

Veronica: Yeah, I completely understand.

Winn: So when people say like, you know, when I, if most people are, I like being in front of center, it doesn't necessarily mean I want to be the center of attention. I just want to be in a big space, but in a safe big space.

Veronica: Right.

Winn: You have, because if anything breaks out in a big room like that, you're, you're away from it.

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah.

Winn: I think, I think it's just, look, I don't need psycho psychoanalyzing myself, I think is, but I think it just comes from always knowing who I was inside and always never being afraid to show it on the outside, but always have to find security in being outward.

Veronica: Right.

Winn: You understand what I mean.

Veronica: Yeah.

Winn: Does that make any sense?

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Always having that one eye on security.

Winn: Yeah, being aware of. Uh, the, uh, uh, danger lurking from come from any angle, just always being aware, just being in that moment, even if I'm plugged in, in the earphones and still aware of what's going on around me, because that's my security and that's okay. I found that. That's where I've been able to flourish because I've never shied away from the attention, but I've always been at the center of it because I feel secure.

Veronica: Yeah, ok.

Winn: I feel like it's a barrier. Cause when you're in this position, it's coming from a position of strength. When I'm on the stage, it's coming from a position of strength, whatever I say is what goes out into room.

Veronica: Yeah.

Winn: You know, gets from me what I give to them.

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah. You've explained, you've explained that so well, The absolutely [?]

Winn: Know it's...

Veronica: yeah. It makes sense

Winn: Yeah.

Veronica: Because you're not-

Winn: But then there's-

Veronica: vulnerable, but you're visible.

Winn: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Veronica: Yeah.

Winn: Know what I mean? (cross-talking) But in the same token, like then I can walk through the room and be completely anonymous. If I need to be incognito, I can walk through the same room and just the, Oh my God. Everybody- but wearing the same clothes. The same the same look.

Veronica: Wow.

Winn: Just because I know how to. You know, there's an energy that you have on the inside. We all do. And you know, when it needs fire stoking for you to be that you need it to be, need to be that.

Veronica: Yeah. Yeah

Winn: You know, so I've been because I've loved, I've loved being around lots of different people and I have loved, but I don't want to be on safe and endangered. I don't want to put myself in danger. And I never wanted to put myself in danger. This is why I've managed to fly above the clouds with sailors. Sail under the wind at the same time, be noticed and be ignored at the same time. Be noticed by the people who I need to notice. It's going to be ignored by the people who I don't need to have any business getting their attention.

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