

**Interview with Yvonne Taylor for the Haringey Vanguard Project**

**Extract: 00:00 – 12:23**

Veronica: My name is Veronica McKenzie, and I'm conducting an oral history interview for the Haringey Vanguard project. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed, would you like to introduce yourself?

Yvonne: Hi, my name is Yvonne Joyce Taylor. I'm a 59-year-old Black woman, born in Nottingham, and who classifies herself as a lesbian, but has not always classified herself as that. But I have done of recent days. I live in London - I've lived in London for probably almost 40 years now, I think it is 40 years. And I grew up in Nottingham, and by the time I was about 13, I think I realised then that I was definitely not going to be getting married, let's put it that way.

And I had this like penchant for like fancying other girls, but actually mostly women, you know my first major crush was the uhh... Honor Blackman? Who was the first Avengers, in the Avengers with Steve. I just thought she was all embracing and all empowering, but I was really young when that came out, it was in black and white. And then I discovered Angela Davis, and I was like, I wanted to be Angela Davis, and then I wanted to be Tina Turner. And I thought 'yeah, what's the common thesis through all of this?'. It's like they're all strong, empowering women, that didn't look like they followed convention. So, you know, when I was at school, I left school when at 15, but by that time I already knew that I was definitely not going to be having 6 children and working in a factory in somewhere in Nottingham.

I mean, I was quite fortunate, even though I knew, and some of my friends were told, my parents, I didn't tell, because nobody told their parents stuff like that. But, you know, eventually I kind of came up with a legitimate excuse to leave the home, without having to mention my sexuality was the main reason. Well, that and the fact that I wasn't going to be stuck in Nottingham. But basically, I, you know, did all the right things, I got through school, even though I couldn't read and write to start with, I eventually got through. I got O-Levels in English literature and languages, and then I just thought 'you know what, I'm not really interested in this, none of this is of any interest to me' so I just left. I joined the army-

Veronica: So why did you leave home at a young age?

Yvonne: I didn't leave, I knew at a very young age that I was going to leave home, but I actually, you know, in those days, leaving home meant you got married, or if you were exceptionally rich, you went to university. So bear in mind that I left school in '75 at 15, so the only way people like us, you know, left home, is if you did a runaway. Of which, I wasn't prepared to go through all of that drama, especially in those days, cos there was no help for you. Or, you know, you went to university, and I wasn't doing any of those. So I decided, I had a plan - I left school, I potted around for a year, and then I went to and did a year at nursery nursing. It wasn't one - it was a two-year nurse nursing course. So from 16 to 18, I went to college, and soon as I passed that's it, you know, I'm a qualified nursery nurse, would you believe.

I left and joined the army, because that way I was going to somewhere that would ensure me accommodation. It was a job, and it meant that my parents wouldn't have to worry about me. So I joined the army, in September 1977. And then I was very clear of who I was. Not particularly because I liked any of those army women, no offence, although I did have my first girlfriend there. It was a ... it was a strange awakening, if you like. Cos suddenly I was here with all these women that I'd heard all these stories about, you know, News of the World was big on stories about lesbians in the army. So, it seemed like a natural progression for me to join the army. And then I joined, and I thought 'Christ almighty, I've got to reinvent myself, again'. Because you know, racism was a pandemic, and it was certainly not any different in the army. So I recreated myself into this superpower, took up fencing, and suddenly the way that these people treated me became very different. I got promoted and then I started getting access to just things outside my general life experience. So, when I joined, I think the first club I ever went to was a pub in Guilford. It was like a gay bar at the weekends, it was absolutely dreadful, you know, one of those typical province pubs. But the people were generally nice, but they were all very stereotypical.

So if you imagine that me and my little mixed race friend, we were both, you know, Black women who were gay in the army, there weren't many of us. We get to this pub, and it's like 'what the hell am I doing here?'. I also met someone who's now a very very famous lesbian artist, so we're the same age. So we arrived at this ... the three of us arrived at this bar thinking this was going to be it. I'm trying to remember, but it was in Guilford. I can't remember what the pub was called, but it was not an illuminating experience for me.

And then, in that same year, obviously I'd just joined and we're doing our training, and we had a weekend off. And I remember going up to London in November '77 to try out the gay scene. Woah, what a shocker! Yeah, it was a bit of a shocker. So first pub we went to was Gateways. And that really kind of, you know, just about like messed with my brain completely. Cos it was very roleplay-ish, albeit, I will say that Gateways when I first got there, it was ... there were other women from other minority groups. I mean, there's something about the King's Road that people kind of forget is that those posh rich people, they were used to mingling with other ethnics. You know, whether they're exploiting their country, so they've been, you know, they've been to Africa, so they'd seen Black people, they'd been to India, and they'd seen Asians. And some of those people actually did have money and lived on the King's Road, and some of them were femme or butch, whatever they just found their roles as. So, although Gateways later turned into this predominantly mostly white club, it wasn't unheard of to see other groups of ethnic minority in the venue. Probably up on till about '79, and then they started opening up more and more to the likes of people like myself, you know, which were working class lesbians, as they saw us.

So that was my first experience of a women's club, and to be quite honest with you, wasn't overly impressed with the styles, the music. Although the originality of Gateways did allow people in the early days to be flamboyantly dressed. So if you were butch, you know, you were there with the whole works: the Stetson, the cowboy waistcoat and all that sort of thing. Of course, when we got there, we were just like in jeans and you know, checked shirts because we didn't know there was ... - but they let us in. And I think that was the time when they were starting to realise, they needed to make money. So, they widened their demographics. So that was my first club.

Veronica: How was it in terms of meeting the people in the club. How were you treated?

Yvonne: To be honest with you, we were actually, we were actually greeted quite well, because when I think about it in retrospect, we were, we stood out like sore thumbs, me and my friend, cos we weren't really... You know, you were either a Butch, or you were either a Femme. It was that kind of club originally, and so, people were dressed flamboyantly in whichever style that was. And then the next club I went to was not, you know, so they greeted us really well, considering we ... I said we had jeans and a checked shirt on or something, whatever uniform was supposed to be at the time, it was the wrong one for that club. And it eventually became, you know, with the advent of *The Killing of Sister George*, which was filmed there. It portrayed this kind of... and I was thinking 'I never saw people like that'. But after that, they all started coming dressed in checked shirts and doing the waltz.

But at the original Gateways, I would say that we were greeted with ... interest. And, politeness. And, I was brave enough to, you know, try and chat some women up. And effectively I... well the question I asked her was, you know, why was she with this, well, I said 'oaf', but you know, I was only 18, bear in mind. But like she was some huge woman who was like, a bit controlling. Anyway, as soon as they went to the toilet, I thought I'd sort of go up and ask this woman you know, what was it that this person had that, you know, maybe me and my friend didn't have. Just to get some lessons. And she said 'money, darling. If you don't have money darling, there's no point in being in this club'. I was like that, 'woah!'.

So, you know, it was a kind of ... it was on the King's Road, and it made sense. And it was like a little hatch, and it reminds you of the old sort of secret clubs that emerged in the sort of like late 50s and the 60s. This was a relic of that. I didn't even know when it started, but I imagine it started way in the 60s. It was going for quite a while. And from there, everything just got worse and worse. Because then I started coming up to London. And by now, I had discovered several women's clubs in London that really weren't my cup of tea.

I did quite like the pub that they used to have on a Friday night in Euston. Can't remember what it was called, but it's no longer there, which is a real shame. But it was really...it's an old pub and it was like right by the Capital Radio place, and on a Friday night they had this girl's night. And there were more women there that looked a bit like me. And there... and the people that worked there were a bit... you know, they were a bit more what I anticipated it all being about. Still sort of very same-same in the dress styles, but the music was slightly better, there was less Doris Day and you know, and a bit more Gloria Gaynor kind of thing going on. But you know, that's the difference between those two clubs as it comes, by the time the 70s was ending. It was Gateways and this club on Friday night. It was really bad, cos I used to go there quite a lot and it was my favourite. Just because the music was better. And then by the time the 80s came through I was like ...I'd come out of the army and I was living in Brighton. And again, the clubs there, Brighton, the gay capital of the UK wasn't quite so illuminating for me because again I was probably one of two black people that actually went out.

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