

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Karen Fisher	<b>Date:</b> 23.05.2019 <b>Age:</b> 50+
<b>Key issues:</b> 80s, punk scene, Greenham Common, Embrace the Base, S&M, Chain Reaction, Black Widows, Rebel Dykes, Rebel Dyke Project.	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Realised she was interested in girls in early secondary school. She had a troubled time as a teenager and left home in Cornwall at 16 and started work. Was squatting, got involved in the punk scene in London, and became aware of feminism and met other lesbians. Eventually she got social housing in Lambeth. Discusses finding the lesbian community in South London. Discusses involvement with Embrace the Base at Greenham Common and describes it as a spiritual and political awakening. She lived at Greenham for a year and a half and describes what it was like to live there. After Greenham she moved to Amsterdam and started a women's band and lived in a women's squat. Moved back to London and was employed as a motorbike dispatch rider. Started going to Chain Reaction and meeting women and became a member of the Black Widows motorbike gang. Also a member of the Rebel Dykes. Discusses tensions between S&M lesbian groups and mainstream LGBT community. Also discusses the ways in which the AIDS crisis brought lesbians and gay men together. She discusses changes in attitudes, and her current drag king act, writing and music performances.	
	<b>Length of interview:</b> 40 mins





Evelyn: This is an interview for From a Whisper to a Roar, an oral history project conducted by Opening Doors London and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is the 23rd of May, 2019, and I'm interviewing the wonderful Karen Fischer. Could you start by telling me a little bit about your early life and how you came to an understanding of who you really are?

Karen: My early life was troubled and I don't even know now if I know who I really am, I'm still discovering.

Evelyn: Excellent. Life's for the adventure.

Karen: Exactly.

Evelyn: When did you first realise that you had same sex desire?

Karen: Well, you know, I suppose it starts around eight-ish when, you know, your best friend is a bit more than, you know, your best friend, you want to play doctors and nurses, mainly nurses with your best friend. So yeah, I was around eight when I realised that yeah, I might have those feelings for girls.

Evelyn: And how did that impact on you? Did you just accept it? Did you-

Karen: I didn't talk about it. I didn't really think anything of it. I was busy reading Malory Towers and, you know those Enid Blyton books, they were breeding grounds for baby lesbians. I wanted to be George out of the Famous Five, so yeah. I didn't really think anything of it until I suppose I was in my teens and I went to secondary school. And then, of course, it's an all-girls school which again, what else do you expect? But there was a lot of ... is it homophobia or lesbianism? And then I realised, "Hold on a minute, I need to keep quiet about this. This isn't something that you can be talking about or expressing or anything."

Karen: Yeah, then it all became a big secret from 13, I suppose 12-13.

Evelyn: Yeah, and so how did things progress from there? How did you, at that time ... So you were born in-

Karen: One of these years.

Evelyn: One of those years back there, and so what political movements were you aware of, or were you aware at all of some of the big things going on, the second wave of feminism?

Karen: No, none of that. No. I didn't really go to school. I had a very troubled teenage. I was a runaway, I didn't really go to school, I was just literally surviving, that's what I was doing, and I left home on my 16th birthday and so I literally just had to work. I was feeding myself, I had to clothe myself and yeah, so I didn't have any knowledge of anything political. But I did like..I got into the music scene so I knew what punk was, so I suppose that was my first political awakening was probably punk.

Evelyn: Uh-huh (affirmative), yup. You're with me.

Karen: Yeah. It's a funny thing that that was the politics, but of course it's anti-politics.

Evelyn: Yeah, absolutely. And so what kind of ... did you go to gigs? How did that pan out?

Karen: Yeah, I went to gigs, I was squatting, because of course I was homeless, and so I met other squatters and went to punk gigs. I saw The Sex Pistols, Patti Smith of course, who then became like my biggest, biggest inspiration, and to this day I still love Patti Smith.

Evelyn: Why wouldn't you?

Karen: Why wouldn't you? And then it was places like the Anarchy Bookshop in Brixton, and magazines like Crowbar, and I think I started to become aware of feminism. (Pause) So I became aware of feminism. I met other lesbians, finally, woo, and they were feminists and yeah, so we had discussion around their houses and long talks about equality and gender pay gap and, you know, that sort of thing.

Evelyn: What sort of time are we now? Early '80s?

Karen: Early '80s, yeah, that's the early '80s.

Evelyn: And you were in South London?

Karen: I've always been in South London. I've lived here since ... well, let's just say I had my 21st birthday here. I have been so lucky. I got social housing. I was housed because I was homeless and vulnerable. Of course now I'd be on the fucking streets selling my soul. But yeah, I was housed by Lambeth and I hung onto it. So yeah, this has been my stability. This is my ... it saved my life, to be honest. So yeah. That's why I've never bought it because I think that's morally abhorrent. One shouldn't buy social housing because it's meant to be for people.

Evelyn: What was it like finding your tribe, finding those woman?

Karen: It was incredible, because I didn't even think there were any other lesbians. I thought I was the only one, and that's why I had to run away. I lived in Cornwall from 13 to 16 which I just might as well have lived in hell and I didn't fit, I talked wrong, I looked wrong, I was clearly not Cornish where I spoke like 'my handsome' [with a Cornish accent], so I tried to be Cornish, but the whole thing was horrible. So I left on my 16th birthday, ran away to London and yeah, eventually found my tribe, as you say. With whom I'm still friends to this day, lovely women.

Evelyn: We've got the interview's for people generations away, how did you recognise your tribe? Was there a look?

Karen: Well now, that's a good point-

Evelyn: Was there a place to go?

Karen: I met my first girlfriend in a pub. I had slept with a woman before, but that was...I ran away with Janice the Go-Go dancer from the hotel where I was working in Cornwall, and so that was good. That was my first lesbian experience. But then I came to London, I had a boyfriend, all those kind of things and I was out with my boyfriend in a pub in Streatham. And my, who was to become my first girlfriend was there with her boyfriend, and I knew I was a lesbian and I fancied her. I thought, "She's pretty." Anyway, she started paying me attention so I thought, "Oh, she must fancy me. Good." She was probably just chatting.

Karen: But anyway, then, you know, I started flirting and then she was like, "Oh, yeah," and then, lo and behold, she hooked up with me, we both left our boyfriends so she was my first lesbian I met, and she knew other lesbians so that was then I was then ushered into that-

Evelyn: That network.

Karen: ... that network, yeah. There you go.

Evelyn: And where did they meet? Were there lesbian spaces or the corner of the pub down the street?

Karen: Well, we mainly met around people's houses because it wasn't safe to be out. There were women's gigs in the basement of the Anarchist Bookshop in Brixton. I remember I played a gig there, because I was performing even then for to feed myself. So yeah, that would be one of the first places. Oh and, there was a woman's disco in Brixton in the town hall, which nobody remembers. It was a little back room ... not a back room, a ballroom in the town hall which had a lesbian disco once a month, I think, but yeah. I can check back. I've got all my diaries so I could actually look and find out.

Evelyn: And how did people find out because there was no Internet?

Karen: I've no idea there was no Internet. Well, we phoned each other. I don't know [crosstalk 00:07:36]-

Evelyn: Not on a mobile phone either.

Karen: No, no, no. You'd be at home on your landline or you'd have a pocket full of tuppences and go down the payphone. But I think because it was a regular event, we knew we would be there. That's what you did. You knew you were going to be there because that's what there was. So those were the first lesbian things I remember going to. And then, of course, you meet other lesbians and your network grows, doesn't it? Always in South London.

Evelyn: Yeah, so you were performing at this time. Were you singing?

Karen: Singing and playing the guitar, yeah. I was in a three women harmony group called Trivia, and I was singing and playing guitar with my then girlfriend, so yeah. Singing, songwriting.

Evelyn: How did things move on from there when punk hit?

Karen: No, punk had already hit-

Evelyn: Punk had already hit so we're talking-

Karen: ... we were already into punk, so I'd gone past punk and now I was into women's music, like Ova, the band Ova, they were a big influence, and those singer-songwriters from America whose names evade me for the minute, but I could come back to it if you really need to know them. And yeah, Holly Near, people like that.

Karen: Then we went from punk which, you know, I learned, then you didn't have to do everything by the book, I suppose. I was already on the edge of mainstream society anyway and so punk really fed into that part of me that was just like, "Yeah, you know what? You can just do one. We're going to do our thing and you can't stop us." So I already had this real anarchic side of me that was being nurtured by that movement.

Karen: So then, of course, came Greenham, which just then, all that part of me was then able to find lots and lots, thousands of other women that felt the same.

Evelyn: A spiritual home.

Karen: Yeah, completely. I mean, completely a spiritual home.

Evelyn: Tell me about ... Well, in fact, for the purposes of the recording, explain what Greenham was all about.

Karen: Well, Greenham Common, US Air Force Base was a US Air Force Base on Greenham Common in Newbury, Berkshire and it existed there for ... there's as long as... I don't know, I don't know when it was first there, but it was definitely there before they decided they were going to put cruise missiles there with nuclear warheads, because Reagan and Thatcher made Britain a launchpad for nuclear weapons because it was the Cold War between the US and the USSR, and the weapons wouldn't reach from American soil to Russian soil, so they decided we'd be a good halfway point, so they dumped them here.

Evelyn: Handy.

Karen: Handy. And without anybody's consent and, of course, women found out and the CND got involved and, before you know it, there's a peace camp there, which was just a whole new entity. I'd never even heard of the word peace camp, but there it was.

Evelyn: And so did you go and live there? Did you go down for [crosstalk 00:10:34]-

Karen: I went there on the 12th of December, 1983, for an action that was called Embrace the Base, and it was literally they wanted as many women to go as possible. The call out went, I don't know how, but anyway we heard it from afar that women had to go because the plan was to link hands around the nine mile perimeter fence, so around the entire base to encircle it with women's energy. Because the missiles ... had they arrived? Had they not arrived? They were definitely on their way or they were there already, but 1983. It was all in the ... the cogs were already turning.

Karen: And so the call out went and so we went. We went in a car, there was five of us, four or five of us, and we got there and it was total organized chaos, and we walked up at the main gate and didn't know anybody and there was women everywhere, as far as the eye could see. And we held hands and we did it. We joined hands around the nine mile perimeter fence. So that was so magical to realize we had that power and there were 30,000 women there. 30,000, can you imagine? Nine miles.

Evelyn: It was amazing.

Karen: It's incredible and we did that, and that was the real start of something enormous for me, realizing we could question authority. We could defy authority. Yeah, so Greenham was a real spiritual awakening and political awakening, and there was nothing else to do except sit around all day and chat about politics and do actions, and it was a very fertile time in terms of learning about my powers as a woman and a human being.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And so paint a picture of what it was like physically?

Karen: Tough. It was very difficult. I mean, we're living outside, literally outside, so you imagine camping but then without any of the nice bits. You're in a tent, I was in a tent to begin with and it's cold, and when it rains you get wet, but there was always a fire burning. The fire was kept burning 24/7 because it was our life really, you always ... It was survival on a very, very basic level. We had to fetch water, we had to chop wood, we had to cook our food on a fire.

Evelyn: Where did you get the water from?

Karen: Well, there was a standpipe which the Council allowed us to have, but every so often they would cut that off, and so people used to bring things. People used to come on like a day trip, "Oh, should we go to Greenham?" And you'd get a bunch of women arriving and they'd have donations, and they'd bring food, tinned food and water and blankets, blankets were important. It was cold in the winter, it was hot in the summer and it was fantastic. It was just wonderful. I've never felt that spirit of community like that. You looked out for each other, you had to.

Evelyn: Amongst the women there were straight women and lesbians?

Karen: Well, you know, in my experience of course there were lots and lots of lesbians. I think any women's ... I mean, I'm sure if you looked back on the suffragettes and could actually get into their lives, a lot of them were closet or not out lesbians, because anything with lots of women is going to attract lesbians, of course it is. Because one, they've got the freedom because they haven't got homes, and families and kids, and two, they want to meet other women. So of

course, there were loads and loads of lesbians and a lot of straight women who thought they might be lesbians, and a lot of them were.

Evelyn: And there were some women who you might describe as political lesbians?

Karen: I don't know what that means?

Evelyn: Who felt strongly ... I suppose that's more second wave feminism, who felt very strongly that politically they should reject men.

Karen: I don't know.

Evelyn: No.

Karen: I don't know.

Evelyn: It wasn't a feature of Greenham?

Karen: It may well have been, but it wasn't something that I came across.

Evelyn: That's right. How long were you at Greenham?

Karen: I lived there for a year-and-a-half. I did one winter, and then I could not do another one. I literally, physically couldn't do it. Because it was tough, it was really tough.

Evelyn: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And I suppose all the hygiene stuff, no nice little shower cubicles?

Karen: No, we used to go down in Newbury and have a shower at the gym or the swimming ... You know, you have a swim and a shower, so we weren't filthy, don't get me wrong. We had a wash.

Evelyn: No, but it's interesting to understand the mechanics of it.

Karen: Yeah, well we had toilets. We had one kind of Porta Loo, and then we dug shitpits and you could always have a wee in the bushes, and looking back yes, I suppose it was a little bit basic but we would leave and people in Newbury would let us go for a bath, so there were... avenues. And, of course, I still had this house. Don't get me wrong, I could always come back and have a shower here, and that was an advantage.

Evelyn: But it's all part of that communal living to work out all of those little details-

Karen: Yeah, exactly. And you'd hitch out into Newbury, with your towel go and have a shower at the swimming pool. It was communal living, it was very much looking out for each other. Because every so often the bailiffs would arrive. We weren't allowed to live here, it was completely illegal, so every so often Newbury Council would send the bailiffs and they'd just literally rip everything up and throw it in a big dumper truck, our personal possessions, everything. So you would always have to take everybody's things. That's what I mean, you looked out for each other. You helped each other. You had to.

Evelyn: Fabulous. So from Greenham what did that project you to next?

Karen: Well, after Greenham I went to live in Amsterdam and I started a women's band, which is a very political thing to do, and I was again squatting in a women's squat, and so it was the personal was political. We would go on marches there. It was still very much punk. There was still a lot of anarchy. Amsterdam was very anarchic, it had a very strong punk squatting movement and I was a musician, so yeah, we had a women's band and played at lots of different Prides, played all over Europe.



Karen: And yeah, I lived there until the early '90s and then I came back to London and started going to Chain Reaction. In fact, I met women from Chain Reaction in Amsterdam. They came over and I quite wanted to come back to London, and two of them worked for a company called Creative Couriers, which was a dispatch rider's, motorbike dispatch riding company owned by two lesbians. They said, "Well, if you want to come back to London, we'll give you a job." I was like, "Bring it on."

Karen: So that very first girlfriend bought a motorbike on HP for me and I paid her back every week, and then I was a motorbike dispatch rider. Just fantastic, I mean it was just lovely. And so in between that was my job, and then, you know, and then through that I met the women from Chain Reaction, and that's where the whole beginning of what I think we're now calling the Rebel Dykes Movement, because we knew each other. So yeah, probably at Greenham we'd ... A lot of us had met at and then moved back to London. So yeah, it was around then, isn't it.

Evelyn: And explain Chain Reaction.

Karen: Chain Reaction was a club in a gay men's bar in Vauxhall where women normally weren't allowed, but we took it over every Tuesday night, and it was the UK's first lesbian S&M club. So yeah. So we now, now we not only had marches, we had sex together. That was good.

Evelyn: Excellent.

Karen: We were very pro-sex, that was the difference. Because a lot of ... I mean, maybe these are the women you're calling political lesbians, they were more of the academic side of things, we were more working class. I think that would be the way to describe it. And so yeah, and so we knew what we wanted and that was sex. That was what the gay men had and we wanted that.

Evelyn: So that's kind of, I suppose they call it sex-positive-

Karen: Very much so.

Evelyn: ... feminism?

Karen: Oh, do they now? Okay. That will be it.

Evelyn: I have read this little phrase-

Karen: Okay, that's what we were.

Evelyn: I think that might fit here. So, um give us a flavour of the range of clubs, events, what went on to kind of support that culture?

Karen: Well, there was a big house in Forest Gate where lots of them lived, lots of those women from Chain Reaction lived. There was maybe six bedrooms, so you know, 20-odd women there and, again, in Bird in Bush Road in Peckham, same thing. Still this communal living, and we would meet up for marches, section 28 of course was very big then, anti-Maggie Thatcher marches, Tory Out marches, and so the personal was political because that's where we met each other.

Karen: Then Chain Reaction kept running for three years, four years? And so yeah, there was..I don't know what else to say. We just used to meet up to do things together. And then the Black Widows, of course, there was a motorbike gang which I was part of because, as I said, I had a motorbike so lots of us from Creative Couriers became members of Black Widows, so then we'd do that together.

Evelyn: And so did you go off to the country? Did you-

Karen: Yeah, yeah. We did a few rides out of town. We'd go to down to Brighton and go up to Thorpe Park and yeah, or just meet up and tinker around with our bikes in Brixton. The leader lived in Brixton, so we'd go around her house and just hang out.

Evelyn: So you were an anarchic little group. How did that sit with some of the more mainstream lesbians and LGBT community? Were there any tensions or did you just do your own thing?

Karen: Oh God, there were loads of tensions. We were banned from the Lesbian and Gay Centre because we wore leather jackets, they hated us. Those academic lesbians that I was talking about, those frustrated closet ones, they didn't, they didn't, they thought S & M, they didn't understand, or they couldn't be bothered to find out or listen, that the S&M was consensual. So as far as they were concerned there was this horrible power imbalance and these desperately vulnerable young women or whatever were being inveigled into this group with these horrible predatory lesbians, and it was nothing like that. But that was their vision-

Evelyn: Stereotype.

Karen: ... of what we were doing, that stereotype, and so you know, then we became these bad girls ('fiendish' chortle) and I think we quite liked it really.

Evelyn: No! (feigned shock)

Karen: (Laughing) I think no, because we were used to being outside of society, so yeah, put us there. We don't give a shit. We will carry on doing what we're doing, we're not going to stop. But yeah, what I remember one year after Gay Pride we went back to the Lesbian and Gay Centre and we'd marched all in our leather jackets, and literally we just wanted a beer and a wee, and we weren't allowed in. I mean, that was shocking.

Karen: But it was a misconception. You know..Sheila was it Sheila Jeffries? You know, she's apologized since actually for taking that stance, but what can you do at the time? We weren't able to discuss, we were too angry. Well I won't say we, but I, I was never involved in those academic discussions. I don't do well in that environment. I just find it overwhelming. People start using really technical terms and I'm just like, "I'm going to say the wrong thing any minute now," and I won't mean, you know, that but that language can be quite divisive.

Evelyn: Yeah, if you're talking about power imbalances-

Karen: Well, there you go. That's the initial one, isn't it?

Evelyn: It fits with that language, doesn't it?

Karen: Yeah, there you go. Yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Karen: Yeah, thank you.

Evelyn: Yeah, tensions within the community, I can imagine. How did the gay guys regard you?

Karen: Well you see, when; that was the beginning of the AIDS crisis and so what started to happen was lesbians started to get involved more with gay men. I think up until that point there had been this enormous divide between lesbians and gay men because we didn't have anything in common. But once the AIDS crisis hit, you know, I

used to volunteer at The Landmark, I had gay men friends and we could see what was happening and it was horrible.

Karen: And so tensions changed because we were more united for the AIDS crisis, really. A lot of lesbians got very heavily involved in supporting our gay men friends through that.

Evelyn: Because it's an extraordinary decade, the '80s, in terms of the Thatcher Administration, Section 28 effectively banning local authorities from allowing any promotion of homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship'-

Karen: Those are the words.

Evelyn: ... as the phrase goes.

Karen: It wasn't even promotion, it was discussion.

Evelyn: Discussion, yeah. Nothing, nothing-

Karen: Nothing, because it's not happening.

Evelyn: ... no positivity was allowed, that essentially. You had the AIDS crisis-

Karen: And the AIDS crisis on the end of that, yeah.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Karen: Yeah, terrible, terrible times.

Evelyn: But as you, I think were implying there, it kind of brought the community together in the face of adversity, really.

Karen: Of course. Of course it did. Of course it did.

Evelyn: Because there had been a huge split, particularly with the women moving towards separatism, older women than you moving towards separatism [crosstalk 00:24:32]-

Karen: Oh no, I was a complete separatist. When I lived at Greenham . God, I wouldn't even have a male cat! But you know, I needed ... I didn't realise how that would empower me in later life, because for a long time, especially at Greenham because it was women only, so after dark no men were allowed. Men could come and visit, fine, during hours of daylight, and they could bring us things, lovely, but as soon as dusk starts going you could actually say to the men, "Well, you can't be here any more." I'd never ever been able to say that to a man, "You're not allowed here any more," and so just being able to do that, and the men leaving, that just changed something so fundamental in me because I'd had this very troubled childhood where men had always been a very, very negative influence. So to realise I had some power in that dynamic was very, was very ... what's the word? Empowering for want of a better word.

Karen: So yeah, I was a separatist, completely and utterly, and then the AIDS thing, that changed something for me because I started to see men as people... and my friends. And so from The Market Tavern, when we ran Chain Reaction, there was one gay man that had to be in there because it was a gay man's bar normally, Michael his name was, and he had to be there because he had to open it and lock it up. So he was the only man in there and half the time his eyes were watering, bless him, because he couldn't look.

Evelyn: Why would that be?

Karen: Well, you know, lesbians having sex. It was all a bit much for him, bless.

Evelyn: In the club?

Karen: In the club, yeah. In the club, but still.

Evelyn: There was no go and get a room?

Karen: No, no. We did sex shows every week.

Evelyn: Oh.

Karen: Two of us, or two, three, four, five, 12, there was no room. We would have a live sex show every week and do all ... you know. We went through the glossary from A to Z of things you can do-

Evelyn: Wow, this is [crosstalk 00:26:20]. I mean, this would probably be illegal now.

Karen: (Laughing) You know what? I don't know if it would, but some of it.

Evelyn: Some of it, yeah.

Karen: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:26:29].

Evelyn: so, like, paint a picture. So we're in-

Karen: We're in a club-

Evelyn: ... a club. Is it dark?

Karen: ... it's dark, it's very-

Evelyn: In the basement?

Karen: ... industrial. No, no. It's up some stairs. It's up 39 steps, it's very industrial. All the windows are blacked out. You've got camouflage netting on the walls, you've got a bar running down one side. Obviously, it's a club, so you've got club lighting and then a dance floor, and then one side of the dance floor there's a stage which is about, I don't know, six foot by three foot, and on that stage every week however many women would decide they were ... "We'll do the cabaret this week." And it was usually you with your girlfriend, or somebody you quite fancied, and then you'd do a show and you'd work out a show, a scenario.

Karen: So, you know. You were two gay men, you were pretending to be in a urinal, you both have dildos, you pretend to have a piss, somebody else would come in. It would be like, eyeing them up, yeah, just like ... And then, of course actual sex would actually happen. And so it was amazing times. Incredible. Looking back, "My God, we got away with that." Although there was the Women Against Violence Against Women who broke in at the very beginning with the crowbars and smashed the place up because they thought we were doing something ... And again, I'm saying this-

Evelyn: It's all about consensuality, isn't it?

Karen: Yes. Well, that was the thing that just they never really understood. But yeah, I wasn't there that night so I can't talk about that, but it did happen. So yeah. But after Chain Reaction ended, I got a job at the Market Tavern on the door and then I met loads of gay men, and that was really (it's going to takeoff - *a reference to a washing machine spinning in the next room*). That was really the pivotal point for me of not being a separatist anymore because these men were lovely, and they were lovely to me. So why do I care?

Evelyn: So it was really a part of your life that you had to go through to realize that once you were empowered that you could come back out again, and man's power wasn't like it was when you were a child? Yeah.

Karen: Yeah, I knew what a boundary was. I could understand how to set a boundary, I didn't have to do anything I didn't want to do, and these men were gay anyway so you know they weren't going to bother me sexually. I think that was part of thing I had to discover, that I've had gay men friends and that was fine. And now, of course, I've gone on to have straight men friends and it's all different. But yeah, they're all phases of your life, aren't they?

Evelyn: Yeah.

Karen: You have to grow through them.

Evelyn: Yeah, you do indeed. So, um tell me a bit more about the Rebel Dykes, the look.

Karen: The look was leather, black leather, studs, big boots, short, short hair, piercings, mainly ears. We hadn't got into doing anything else. I don't think at that time we were piercing anything below the neck, but tongues, lips, noses, eyebrows. eyebrows? I don't know if they were fashionable then, maybe that didn't happen until the '90s. But yeah, piercings, leather, tattoos.

Evelyn: And most of the women lived in squats?

Karen: Er no. The one in Forest Gate was a proper house. Peckham Bird in Bush Road was a squat. This was never a squat, I never lived in a squat. Brixton, some of them lived in squats, some of them were renting local authority houses. Nobody bought a house, nobody had a mortgage. Let's leave it at that. You know we had very low paid jobs or we were unemployed. You know, there wasn't any academia, probably nobody had a degree. Most people probably did finish an education of sorts, but yeah, not to any ...

Evelyn: What do you think was the glue that stuck you together?

Karen: Sex. Sex, rebellion, drugs, dancing, music.

Evelyn: And how did the rebellion exhibit itself?

Karen: There were marches. Well, first it was political, so every Saturday night we were at the gay bar, we were at the Bell in Kings Cross, we would walk down the street wearing leather, we would ride our motorbikes, just your mere existence was rebellion, just getting shouted out on the street or getting spat on or being hated, that was rebellion. But we weren't going to stop. No one was going to stop us being who we were, and that was the beauty of it.

Karen: So yes, of course we went on all the marches and the demos and the political uprisings, but every day it was rebellion.

Evelyn: Yeah, that was the more important thing. And did you have huge reactions in the street?

Karen: Yeah, of course. I was beaten up, I was spat on, I was shouted after, yeah. I mean, on a motorbike there's not much they can do, you can just give them the two fingers and ride off. But yeah, of course.

Evelyn: How did the police react, if they were involved?

Karen: Well, I don't know. They weren't involved really. I mean, I didn't get ... as far as I can remember hassle from the police just for being who I was. I didn't get support either, I didn't feel like I could tell the police that, "Oh, that person's just done a bad thing." That would never have occurred to me. I think the police were still the enemy then, really.

Evelyn: They were part of authority and that's what you were against-

Karen: Yeah, exactly.

Evelyn: ... anyhow, so you wouldn't run to them?

Karen: Run to them for help, no.

Evelyn: So. Looking back, what were the best bits?

Karen: All of it. I mean, they was lovely days. Of course there was heartbreak and upset and squabbles because we were all women, and you know that happens, but it was great. I mean, they were ... All the things I've mentioned are the best bits.

Evelyn: It was, again, like Greenham, it was a community.

Karen: It was very much a community. And not just worked together, we worked at Creative Couriers. And then when that stopped, I ran clubs so still loads of us were doing things together. It was very much that feeling of supporting each other and being there for each other, helping each other.

Evelyn: How did it ... has it come to an end?

Karen: It's changed, of course. Lots of, well - as I was saying earlier about not buying social housing- lots of people have been forced out of London, they can't afford to live in London any more because there's no more social housing, so that's changed. You know, we've dissipated, but that doesn't mean we don't have respect and regard for each other. I'm still in touch with a lot of women from those days, not on a regular basis as we used to be, but the Rebel Dyke Project that Siobhan started has really, magically put us all back in touch with each other which is beautiful. I cannot tell you, I'm so grateful to her for doing this. It's really brought us back into each other's lives in a very significant way and it's really lovely.

Evelyn: Tell us a bit about the project and how it's going forward.

Karen: Well, Siobhan started it four years ago now, I think, and she just put her feelers out saying, "Oh, I'd quite like to get some ... I want to make a film and this is what I want to call it. I want to make it about us because we've been written out, and if we don't write ourselves in, nobody else is going to." But obviously [inaudible 00:33:52]. But she was very aware that there was no record of us and she was like, "Well, I'm not having that," and so she came to London, I think she was living in Manchester then.

Karen: She came down to London with her camera. I was the first person she interviewed, and she asked similar question to you, but she expanded a little bit more on the Greenham areas and the Chain Reaction areas. She interviewed quite a few other women who still live in this part of the world, in London, and realised that she had something. And so then she's gone on to interview lots more other women. I couldn't tell you exactly. Really you should ask her.

Karen: And now, of course, we've got all this footage and no funding to finish it, so she's applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund for money to edit it and get it out there. So fingers crossed, we have September the 7th we have a Rebel Dyke party where she's going to do the final filming which is us now, which is just going to be great and that's down in the DIY space in ... She says Peckham, but it's not. Anyway, Southeast London.

Karen: And then yeah, I mean any day now. They say it takes seven years from the idea to the screen, so there you go. We're halfway through.

Evelyn: So over the years there's been successive legislation in recent years around the policies, around LGBT and so on. Have you felt the impact of this?

Karen: Of course. Of course. I look at these ... I mean, I hesitate to use the word kids, that's patronising, I look at these young women now and I'm so happy for them, really. They're just living their lives. Being gay isn't a thing. It's fantastic. I'm so pleased for them, you know, that's my life's work. Thank you very much.

Evelyn: Yeah, absolutely. And do you feel the change in attitudes has kept up with it?

Karen: Oh God, nobody cares any more. I mean really. I live in a London bubble so maybe outside of London it's still difficult, I can't say. But here? Nobody cares. My neighbours all know I'm gay. I perform in drag at the street party. I mean, they love it. I'm an interesting, they say... "Oh, we've got lesbian. D'you know what I mean?." It's just great, yeah. So yeah, it's really ... it's lovely. It's bloody lovely.

Evelyn: Tell us about your alter ego, Frankie.

Karen: My altered ego is Frankie Sinatra - King, Frankie Sinatra don't go looking for just Frankie Sinatra on social media because you'll get some dead bloke. King Frankie Sinatra. It's a drag king character. I've been doing it for four years. I wanted to get back into performing and drag is a genre that's very relevant and pertinent at the moment, so I thought, "Oh well, I've done drag before in the '90s, I'll give it another go," and it's going very well, thank you.

Evelyn: Exciting, exciting. And the Rebel Dyke, you've got a live show with Rebel Dykes?

Karen: I do. Well, because to be fair to Siobhan [Fahy], she's busy doing ... We've all got lives, and what I noticed about a year ago that there's no more word about the film and so I was like, "Hey girl, is everything going?" "Oh yes, well you know it's gone a little bit quiet," and then she started doing another film. I was like, "Hold on a minute," and anyway, somebody asked me to do a 20 minute piece about the Black Widows for an event in Southend, and so I put together a 20 minute piece with songs and music, not as Frankie Sinatra, as myself and it went very, very well.

Karen: Then I did that 20 minute piece again at somebody's else's event, just because they said, "Oh, do you want to come and do something?" And then they said, "Oh, that was really good. Is it a whole show?" And I was like, "Yes." It wasn't. (laughing) And they said, "Oh brilliant, why don't you come and do it at L Fest?" I said, "Okay," and that was in April and L Fest was in July, so I thought, "God, now I've got a bigger show."

Evelyn: Got to get a move on.

Karen: So I went to ... amazingly enough, a writing course came up at the City Lit at exactly the same time, which I've been trying to get on for three years, and every time it had been cancelled. But I got on this course and so I wrote the beginning and the end, and then I was like, "What am I going to call it? I should call it Rebel Dykes." I got on the phone to Siobhan, I said, "I've written a show and it's about us. Can I call it Rebel Dyke?" And she said, "Of course." I don't know if she really meant that, but anyway what happened now with that is she was like, "Okay, we've got to finish this. This is now because Fische is doing something," so it's got it back on the table, people

know the expression, we've got badges, we've got tee shirts, it's going to get finished.

Karen: It's just been the wind under its wings really. It's an hour-long show, it's called Rebel Dyke Live and one day it will be in an archive somewhere, I'm sure.

Evelyn: So where did the name Rebel Dyke come from, because I-

Karen: Siobhan. Siobhan. I didn't do it.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Karen: I rode on it.

Evelyn: Because I heard a gay man saying, "Well, they weren't Rebel Dykes then, they were just like those scary women, the scary lesbians by the ladies' toilets."

Karen: I know who that was. That was Rob's partner, Ken.

Evelyn: Yeah.

Karen: Yeah, because no, he said that to me when we met him at that-

Evelyn: London Metropolitan Archive [crosstalk 00:39:06]-

Karen: Yeah. So yes, yes. We weren't the Rebel Dykes then. We didn't have, we didn't need a title. We were us. But yeah though, that was Siobhan. I mean it's a bloody great name. And people know it now, so well done us.

Evelyn: And you identified as dyke rather than lesbian?

Karen: Oh, always we were dykes rather than lesbians, because that was differentiation. The lesbians were those academic ones who didn't understand us, and we were the dykes.

Evelyn: Yeah. Proper order. So, thinking about me coming to do this interview, was there anything you thought of that you would want to say that we haven't touched on?

Karen: I think we've done a blooming marvellous job. Thank you. I think we've done well.

Evelyn: As a final question, thinking of little Karen, all those years ago in Cornwall 'm' dear', what would you say to her?

Karen: Oh gosh.

Evelyn: As big, bad Karen now?

Karen: I don't know. What would I say to her? I mean, it all just sounds so trite, doesn't it? It will get better. Hang on in there. You're not the only one." I mean, there's nothing really that I could say. Oh I feel like I'm back to therapy." (laughing) There's nothing I could say that would let her know how brilliant her life was going to be.

Evelyn: Fantastic. Well, I'm privileged to have had a glimpse of that brilliant life. Thank you so much for your time-

Karen: Your welcome.

Evelyn: ... that's magic.

Karen: Thank you.

Evelyn: Thanks again, Karen.

Karen: I really hope it goes ... Well, now it will. It will go down in history.

Evelyn: History, totally. Right, thank you.



