

## From a Whisper to a Roar

Interview Summary	
<b>Name:</b> Sue O' Sullivan	<b>Date:</b> 10.01.2020 <b>Age:</b> 78
<b>Key issues:</b> Women's Liberation Movement, Red Rag, Spare Rib, Sheba Collective, Women's Health Movement, HIV, Lesbian visibility, HOWL.	
<b>Narrative summary</b> Born in Illinois to a fairly liberal family, Sue met her husband whilst studying in London and had two children. She found parenthood very challenging but her husband was a particularly devoted father.  She became involved in the Women's Liberation Movement through a small local group and was part of the first conference at Ruskin College. The movement transformed her world view and set her on a different life path. She began to find herself passionately attracted to other women and, when she eventually had her first relationship with a woman she knew it was 'the point of no return'. Ultimately she left the family home, but maintained extremely close links with her children and former husband that many future girlfriends found difficult to deal with.  She became involved in the Red Rag journal started by women in the communist party and then became part of the Spare Rib team. This was an intense and sometimes bruising experience that prepared her for the rest of her political life.  Sue was invited to become part of the Sheba Press collective which she found a fabulous experience and particularly enjoyed the 'mixed race' principle upon which it was run where Black and Asian women were in the majority.  In the early 90's Sue moved to Australia with her partner at the time and, building on her involvement in the Women's Health Movement group for HIV positive women, she ran courses for nurses there.  She discusses how attitudes have improved in some ways, but that there is a long way to go particularly for lesbian visibility. She is very supportive of trans rights, which places her at odds with some of her old feminist colleagues, but still fears that a lesbian identity is at risk of no longer being recognised.  Sue is currently involved in HOWL (History of Women's Liberation) which is an exciting project to collect the voices of early Women's Liberationists.	
<b>Length of interview:</b> 1 hr 17 mins	



Susan: Okay. So, just for the historical record, I'm going to say that this is an interview with Sue O'Sullivan, for the From a Whisper to a Roar Oral History Project, conducted by Opening Doors London, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Today is 10 January, 2020. This is Susan Rudy speaking, and I'm interviewing Sue O'Sullivan at Southern Street in London, which is my home.

Susan: I'm going to start with a really broad question and then we can go wherever you want. Could you tell me about your early life and how you came to an understanding of your sexual identity?

Sue: Okay. Well, it's so long ago that it's a good thing you're talking to me now. You may be the last person to talk to me about it, because I'm so old.

Susan: When were you born?

Sue: I was born in Illinois, on March 12, 1941.

Susan: Oh, my goodness! I thought we were the same age!

Sue: I'm pushing 80.

Susan: Are you really? You are an inspiration!

Sue: I'm going to be 79 in March, but I call it pushing 80 because I like saying it. So, I want to have a year and a half, at least, where I can say, "I'm pushing 80." People are so bored with it now, that I know.

Susan: That's brilliant.

Sue: It's fun.

Sue: So, that's when I was born and where I was born. I moved with my, I'm just looking for a tissue. Hang on. I've got one.

Susan: I've got some downstairs if you want me to get them.

Sue: No, no. I've got one.

Sue: We were living in, my parents were living in my mother's home state of Illinois after they'd gone to college and everything. But we moved from there to Storrs, Connecticut. Which is what we called "Chicken Farming, Connecticut." It's not suburban Connecticut. It's sort of scrubby woodland, lots of chickens. It's not near a city, so I grew up in the countryside.

Sue: The University of Connecticut is located in Storrs. It was a state university, which in the United States often meant that it was an agricultural college. It had made the transition, I'm not sure when, in the '20s, or '30s. My dad had his first university job there.

Susan: So, he was a professor?

Sue: He was a professor. He taught in the School of Business. He was a Quaker wannabe, in the end of his life, poet. How did they ever get into that? I don't know.

Sue: But it was a fabulous place to grow up, because it was the woods. Contrary to the popular opinion of many people who look back and think, "Oh, my God. The '40s and '50s, girls couldn't do anything." We lived free and wild. I'm not saying, it wasn't my family. They weren't particularly free and wild. They were, but not particularly.

Sue: It was all of us. We could run around in the woods. We had our little fat-wheeled bikes, and we were off, from the age of, I don't know, nine, all day, all the way up. It was just lots and lots of fun.

Susan: Did you have siblings?

Sue: I had two younger brothers.

Susan: And your mom, did she have a profession?

Sue: No, my mother was always rather bitter about Women's Liberation. She felt that she was being put down. Sorry, this thing whistles[interruption].

Sue: She did teach. I think it was primary school, for maybe one, or possibly two years, and she hated it. Then she became a full-time mom, and she did lots of voluntary work. She was in the League of Women Voters. She was a very bright, interesting, interested person, but she felt a real conflict when I became a feminist. She felt she was being put down all the time.

Susan: I think that's a really important question for us, still. What do you do around women's work, still? Women feeling like feminism doesn't value it. That's a real problem.

Susan: We've only got two hours. Maybe because you're one of the few people who we are able to talk to, who also had an early life that included marriage and children. Can you give us a bridge between that time and, you said that you became a lesbian in 1977. Is that the terminology you would have used? Bring me to 1977.

Sue: Yeah, okay. I was married.

Susan: At what age?

Sue: I got married, let me see. We got married in '63, so I was 22, or something like that.

Susan: By that, you were in England, or in London?

Sue: Yeah, I had come for a junior year abroad from the college that I was in, but it really wasn't a junior year abroad. There was no formal program, so you had to work it out yourself.

Sue: So, I kind of winged it. I wasn't into lying, or anything like that. I think I simply hoped that, along with the two friends I came with, that I would find my way into the LSE, or something. But I never even actually filled in a full application. What kind of fantasy land was that? What kind of fantasy land was the college, and my parents, and everybody else living in?

Sue: But I was in the dance department at the college that I was at. I immediately enrolled and went to a dance class five times, four times a week.

Susan: Wow.

Sue: I was very serious about that.

Sue: Then one of the three friends was going to the LSE for the year. So, I used to go and hang out with her at the LSE, and so did the other friend, Christy, who did nothing.

Sue: It was while there, it was through that, I don't need to explain how, that I met John, who was to become my husband. I'd never been a big "faller" in love person, but I dated. I had a kind of dramatic affair with an older man in New York, who picked me up when I was 18, and there after graduating from high school with friends.

Sue: I kind of fell madly in love with John. He was such a sweet, interesting guy. He came from a family totally unlike mine, working class, Left wing, father Communist Party, mother Labour Party, many arguments between them.

Sue: But I was romantically very much in love. Although I went back, I went back to college after the year was over. We all continued this fantasy that I'd had a proper junior year abroad, until it came time to get measured up for whatever you call those, the things you wear at graduation.

Susan: Oh, the gowns, yeah.

Sue: Gowns. There were some quizzical looks. I finally got called into an office and asked, did I have the transcripts of anything. And you just said no. I did go to dance, because I was majoring. At the place I was at, you could major in dance. You didn't call it a major.

Susan: Was this in London? What was it called, then? What was it?

Sue: It was a very artsy college.

Sue: Right outside New York. It's Sarah Lawrence College.

Susan: Oh, I've heard of that.

Sue: Yeah. So, somehow I thought, well, I really was doing what-

Susan: You were meant to do over here.

Sue: ... I was meant to do, but no, I didn't have anything.

Sue: So, anyway, I went back to London in the summer after what was supposed to have been my senior year in college, but in fact, was my junior year. It was because I had missed the year.

Sue: We had already explored by letter, because that's what you did, that we were in love. I went back, and I went to his parents, and then we got married in September of 1963. Spent two years in Camden Town.

Sue: I was still dancing at the same places.

Susan: Was he working?

Sue: He was working. He was finishing his PhD and doing supply teaching. We lived in a basement flat in Camden Town. It was fun. It was lovely. We had a very, very nice, good... we were very loving to each other. There was nothing horrible about it.

Sue: Then we went to New York, to live in New York. I had finished my degree, and then I taught for a year, nursery school in New York City, because I had no proper education degree. John got a job at the New School for Social Research. So, we had this incredibly exciting time in New York.

Susan: I bet!

Sue: It was an SDS time, the whole anti-war, Vietnam, and we were involved in all that. No, we had two years there, then we went back to the States. I got pregnant. I was probably pregnant when we got back. We lived, where did we, oh! We ended up living in Stoke Newington. Oh! Nobody knew where Stoke Newington even was, then.

Susan: Amazing.

Sue: People said to me things like, "Stoke Newington. Is that south of the river?"

Susan: Oh, my God! Seriously?

Sue: No, you don't need a passport for it, the way you do for [inaudible 00:10:44].

Susan: In the '60s this was, still?

Sue: Yeah. If you think, Cally Road at least is central. Stoke Newington was like the back of beyond, then. Church Street, forget it.

Susan: What was Church Street then?

Sue: It was completely depressing, gray. There were none of the things, none of them. It was white, working class, Orthodox Jewish, and some kind of, the sort of beginnings of more and more of the Middle Eastern spread.

Sue: So, it was not without interest, but it wasn't ...

Susan: Not what it is now.

Sue: Yeah.

Susan: Did you get a big, Victorian house? Is that why you moved up there?

Sue: No. We got a flat. We had a flat. It was only, it was so inexpensive, three pounds a week, I think.

Susan: Oh, my God!

Sue: We had a lot of room.

Susan: Did he have a job in London? Is that why you moved?

Sue: Then he got a job at the City University.

Sue: Then I was sort of, I was still dancing, but then, when I had the kids, it was really difficult. Then the Women's Movement started.

Susan: You have three children?

Sue: Two.

Susan: Two? Right, you had two siblings. So, you have two children. How far apart are they? When did you have them?

Sue: They're two years, almost exactly, apart.

Susan: In the '60s?

Sue: One was born in 1968. The other was born in 1970. So, they are now going to turn, our birthdays are all within a week in March. They're turning 50 and 52.

Susan: My goodness. You're actually my mother's age.

Sue: That's shocking.

Susan: It's unbelievable, you look so young.

Sue: It's so shocking to me.

Susan: So, you're living in Stoke Newington, two little kids. How do you find out about the Women's Movement in London in the late '60s, in Stoke Newington? How does that happen, through a pamphlet, or friends?

Sue: Because we had been really involved in stuff in New York, for the two years in New York. That was included quite a few new left men that John got to know. They had wives that I got to know.

Susan: Of course, yeah.

Sue: Those women, in the two years that I was there in the '60s, living in Manhattan, was before the Women's Movement. But when that happened, some of them became very involved.

Sue: So, when we would go back to visit, which we did, due to the generosity of my parents, we would stay at various peoples' flats, or places in New York, and catch up with what everybody was doing.

Sue: I remember being on Saint Mark's Place, on the Lower East Side, which again, was not trendy at that point. Somebody had a flat and they lent it to us. A woman came over, and she was telling me all about this new Women's Liberation Movement. I was there with a three month old baby, and I thought, "Oh, God. I can't get involved in that. I'm too exhausted. It isn't for me."

Sue: Here's this woman who was younger than me, didn't have kids, and it was all exciting and wonderful. I thought, "Oh, no. It's not for me. It's not that I'm not interested, but how could I manage it?" I felt so drudge-like. I was not, when I had my kids, I was not a romantic, "I love it all," mama.

Sue: I lived with a low level frustration, even though John was incredibly involved. He was much more, quote unquote, "natural." None of it is natural, of course. He was willing to look after those kids 24/7. He loved it, whereas I was resentful. I learned a lot of lessons about delayed gratification, but I'd lose my temper.

Sue: I called myself a bad mom. I think now that I was a good enough one, and I certainly have a very good relationship with my children. But it was hard.

Sue: So, the Women's Movement didn't initially attract me. But within months, there were Americans in Tufnell Park, who also had been hearing about Women's Liberation. Two of them were here because their husbands were draft dodgers. They're very important people, for the very early things. They were all involved in anti-war stuff.

Sue: So, we knew them through general leftist things. When I heard that there was a group in Tufnell Park, we called them a small group, then. It wasn't even consciousness raising. It was a women's small group. I thought, "Well, I'd like to see what it's like."



Sue: So I went. That was literally it. You know that thing they used to say in the States? I think [inaudible 00:16:43] the click. It was like, my head was spinning. I couldn't, it was like everything fit together.

Susan: If you could put it into one sentence, what was it that you understood at that moment?

Sue: That it was a manifestation in a very personal way of the personal is political. Although I can see the limitations politically of that as you go along, wow! Does it really go boom.

Sue: So, all the things that I had been feeling; frustrations, and not knowing what it was all about, and what was my life going to be, all crystallized. I was In like Flynn. That was it.

Susan: There's so many things that open up when you understand what feminism means for women. Some of them have to do with not wanting to play that traditional role. Some of it's around sexuality. I remember thinking, "I didn't even know you could desire women. Where'd that come from?" Sometimes, it's a combination. Sometimes it's other things.

Susan: What was it opening up for you that hadn't been there before?

Sue: It was a belonging in my own collective, political-

Susan: Group?

Sue: ... group. I'd learned so much about class, coming here, and being with someone who was working class, and who was left wing. I had come from a liberal, Quaker background. To have that perspective was great. We had a very internationalist view. It was anti the war in Vietnam.

Sue: To suddenly see that there was a whole sphere of life around women, and that I was part of that, and that I could be part of it. I should be part of it. I wanted to be part of it. I had to be part of it!

Susan: Wow. Yep.

Sue: I never fell out of love with Women's Liberation. I may have been frustrated at various points during the years, and had low periods, but never, never did I think, "I want to step away from it."

Sue: I think we're in a minority, those of us being in there for the duration, if you like.

Susan: Two things I want to make sure we get at. What did that mean, in practical terms, for your daily life? Also, who did you get involved with? What groups? What did that look like, in terms of your activism?

Sue: The small group, the Tufnell Park small group, was part of what became very quickly the Women's Liberation Workshop, which was the London Women's Liberation Workshop. There was an office, which was donated. It was a whole house, I think, in Covent

Garden. There was a woman who owned all the early hippie stores in Covent Garden. They probably were gone by the time you got here. Neal Street had a number. They were Asian. They imported Asian hippie stuff.

Sue: She had some kind of connection with someone. She was sympathetic, and she said, "You can have this house."

Susan: On Neal Street?

Sue: I believe that one, I think it was on Earlham Street.

Sue: We had various offices. The very first London Women's Liberation Workshop was in someone's flat, a woman called Lois Gressle. How do you spell Gressel? G-R-E-maybe S-S-L-E. Her obituary was in the Guardian some time ago. She was either Canadian or North American. She lived just south of the river, somewhere like Battersea.

Sue: That's where it started, but then it moved. We went to the Old Charing Cross Hospital, which no longer exists. That's where I'd had my kids, as well. So, the office was in there. Somehow you got these places, in a way that just wouldn't happen now.

Susan: When you say "we," how many women were at the core of it?

Sue: God, there must be accounts of this that would make it [crosstalk 00:21:33]

Susan: Just from your memory, though?

Sue: There was the Tufnell Park group, the Belsize Park Group, the Peckham Rye group, which were very important. The women there had met through the One O'Clock Club with their kids. There were four of them. They wrote a manifesto, which was the first public addressing of, "This is what our women's lives are like."

Susan: Would you have thought of them as consciousness raising? Or would you not have had that language?

Sue: Later. Later. Not that much longer later, but that's exactly what they were.

Sue: There was a, honestly Susan, I'm going to get this all garbled. There's a piece I wrote called Passionate Politics.

Susan: Where was that published?

Sue: You don't know? I have a book. I have a collection.

Susan: Actually, I have to look at your book. I do literature. That's what I do, but I met Evelyn, and I love doing oral history. I did it at a charity, as a job, so I just love doing it.

Susan: I also grew up in Canada. I've worked with feminist writers, but this is out of interest for me. What's your book on?

Sue: Well, it's called, I Used to Be Nice.

Susan: That's great!

Sue: I forget, is it called sexual? Something sexual. I can't even remember the title of it.

Susan: That's okay. Who published it?

Sue: They're gone. They're gone, the publisher.

Susan: Can I get a copy of it somewhere?

Sue: I think you can. I think you can. I may have a copy. I have a few. I am Lucky in my flat, so I've got two garages and I don't have a car or drive.

Susan: So, you have room for it. That's amazing. I'd love to have a copy, yeah.

Sue: But I think that article, which was published in Feminist Review, I was on the Feminist Review Collective. I wrote that in the early '80s. It's so funny to think that we were already writing our history.

Susan: Yeah, good for you, get it into the historical record.

Sue: So, it's quite a lot of stuff. It was in Feminist Review, but it's in this collection of mine.

Sue: There are other accounts of it. But what happened was that, as we were coming together as the Women's Liberation Workshop, the groups were starting up in different parts in London. We had a big march, I think it was International Women's Day March, in March. It was snowing and it was freezing cold.

Sue: There were lots and lots of women there. It was obviously just coming together at that moment, all over the place. After that demo, the groups shot up in London, from maybe, I don't know, eight groups to 40 groups.

Susan: Whoa!

Sue: I may be exaggerating, but they were all over the place.

Sue: I can't quite remember how the Workshop started out of that. But we had a manifesto. We'd begun to talk about things in a more national way. There was a meeting at a lefty conference, new lefty conference in Sussex, I think.

Sue: Out of that, a number of women came together in London. We drew up the first Women's Liberation demands at that meeting. That included some well-known people like Juliette Mitchell, and a lot of different people like that.

Sue: So, that's where the Workshop was forming. Not from us in the little groups, but from a parallel development on a more national way.

Susan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, back to the personal, it being so political, what did you look like then? Did your presentation of self change at that point, or not? Who looked after the kids? Did you take them with you? What did that actually look like?

Sue: It's funny, because I had a party before. I have a party every year, before the holidays. People come together across quite a wide spectrum.

Sue: I don't know if you've come across Barbara Taylor.

Susan: I know Barbara from Queen Mary [university].

Sue: Yeah. Well, Barbara was there, and Norma. Barbara said to my really close friend, Ruthie Petrie, who she's friendly with. She said, "You know, the first time I saw Sue, it's so incredible to think of it. She looked like an urban, or a suburban housewife."

Sue: Ruthie told me this afterwards and I said, "Oh. Well, that's kind of weird. Hmm, huh." Then I thought, "That's bullshit." That is not what my presentation was like. I went to Sarah Lawrence College.

Susan: I was going to say, you were in New York City, for heaven's sake.

Sue: I was a dancer. I was Bohemian, from high school. When I went on the road, I decided I was not a hippie, but I was a Bohemian.

Susan: Yes.

Sue: Bohemian. I never presented like ...

Susan: So, why did she read you that way?

Sue: I don't know. I think she's thinking of someone else.

Susan: Oh, she might have been, absolutely. So, what did your hair look like? What did you like to wear?

Sue: I had long hair.

Susan: Yeah?

Sue: Straight, from college, which I kept for a long time. I never wore hippie long skirts. Somehow, I always tripped over them. So, I wore what I think now of, but I didn't then, as edgier clothes; slightly stylish, but a bit Bohemian. So, a lot of black tights, a lot of black, mini skirts, and lots of trousers of all kinds. I particularly liked velvet flares, but that's sort of hippie, but I didn't like that.

Susan: Do you have a photo? I meant to ask you for a photo from back in the day.

Sue: Oh, right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Susan: I have to take a photo of you before you leave today, too, but if you could send us one, that would be wonderful.

Sue: I had hair with bangs, and long, straight hair. I considered myself, I think I was very flat chested and slim, "dancery."

Susan: Right. Of course, yeah. Were you still dancing after you had your children, by the way?

Sue: Yes. I'll tell you about how that ended.

Sue: Yes, I had that view of myself. I didn't view myself as particularly femme, or feminine, but I suppose looking back at the photos, if you were judging on stereotype scales, I was. I certainly didn't dress in a way that I thought was for men. It really wasn't, and I didn't wear makeup.

Susan: Did your emerging feminist consciousness give you any permission to change how you looked, or dressed, or any of that, or not? Or had you done that from earlier?

Sue: I would have done that from earlier. We had some, Michelene Wandor was around a lot. She developed a quite prescriptive, judgemental thing that women shouldn't wear low cut this. I didn't because I didn't, and I wasn't going to. That wasn't what I was interested in.

Sue: There were discussion from China, I'd been to China, like, "How would it look if you more or less had a feminist, not uniform, but if you just had Chinese work clothes that you wore all the time?" People talked about things like that.

Sue: But no, I didn't. I don't think I changed the way I dressed at all, because I think I was fitting in. I wasn't a dungaree work shirt person, but I had my Army jacket. When I had kids, I felt I became this drudge. In fact, John and I used to joke that two people was better than one, but you both became drudges.

Sue: So, they were two years apart. We were of the generation and type that weren't going to impose rigid rules, and stuff like that. So, there were those years where I felt like a slob, but I've got pictures and I look completely presentable. But my hair was always greasy, and tired all the time.

Susan: Did you take the kids with you? How did you go to these meetings?

Sue: I went, I've just written something for HOWL, for the website, just as an experiment, because we're trying to get going on it.

Sue: I took them to Ruskin College, which was the first Women's Liberation conference. Men came, too, so John came, too. In fact, I took them. One of them, I had, I gave birth to two weeks later. One of them, Tom, was just about two. He was going to be turning two.

Sue: John, the men who came were all lefties. They were supposed to be running the creche, which they did. They made quite a meal of it, "Look at us." I'd have to say, boastfully, maybe, that Tom wasn't of that sort. But there were guys there who clearly were getting off on it. Some of them were ones, when I left and became a lesbian, who came around to see John and said, "Oh, now you can see what bitches they can be. You want to join our men's group?"

Susan: Oh, brother.

Sue: He said, "No, thank you."

Susan: Tell me about this transition time.

Sue: There was a lot of stuff about lesbianism coming through from the States, in magazines and stuff. Again, my initial feeling was, "There's something that attracts me about that, but look at them. They're all single. They don't have kids hanging around their ankles. They don't have a guy that they really love and respect, who also looks after the children all the time. No, it's not for me."

Sue: But of course, it was there, in my head. After having taken my kids to a couple of conferences, they were not happy. They didn't like it. I kind of thought to myself, "It's fabulous to have creches, for women who don't have any other choice."

Sue: But I could see what happened to me. You felt you had to go in, and visit the kids, and have lunch with them. I wanted to be free.

Susan: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Sue: So, they were overjoyed with the fact that they never had to go back to a creche. John was quite happy, very happy. He used to take them to work. He would take, when Tom was a baby, he'd take them in one of those little seat things that you can put on a table.

Susan: Yeah, I remember those.

Sue: He would take Tom in. Tom was this wide eyed baby, who'd just look around the whole time. It became impossible to do that later, but that was the kind of thing he did, that I didn't want to do.

Sue: So, those photos. If you look at some of the early Women's Liberation stuff; not even necessarily lesbian, but that includes some images of lesbians, they're often long, blonde hair, slim ... just didn't seem to speak to what I could do. Again, it wasn't what I could imagine doing.

Susan: How did you get there so early? In 1977, how old were you?

Sue: Oh, I was pretty old. What happened was, we were then having Women's Liberation conferences. I was teaching in Holloway Prison.

Susan: Really?

Sue: I was in the Education Department. I don't know. It was easy then. Really kind of weird, progressive people taught there.

Sue: So, I was teaching dance. I was teaching about Women's Liberation, too.

Susan: Your kids would have been, what, maybe 10 or 12?

Sue: A little bit younger than that.

Sue: I began having a passion for this woman who was in our small group. I was absolutely crushed out. I just was [inaudible 00:35:35]. I kind of thought, "I'll do anything. I'll do anything." I didn't do anything. Nothing ever happened. I don't know if she was even aware. I think I've said to her since, but she was a long-term, much younger lesbian. She was the only lesbian in our group.

Sue: I just thought, "My God! I've got to do something about this. I've never felt this way before." So, I had these little kids. I was frustrated. I was not a happy Mommy. I had this lovely husband, who I also in the meantime, I don't know. I sort of feel bad about putting this in, but I've said it. I wasn't sexually interested very much anymore.

Susan: Absolutely.

Sue: I would ... He wanted it to be really nice for me, so he would do all sorts of things, and read books about what could he do, blah, blah, blah.

Sue: Then, that was a tumultuous period, internally.

Susan: I bet. I was going to say, was it a conflict for many years about what you should do?

Sue: No, it wasn't a conflict for many years. I said I'd learned about delayed gratification, but I don't think I'd learned a firm enough lesson.

Susan: Good for you.

Sue: We were of the generation that had talked within heterosexual terms on the new left, within feminism, about what was monogamy about? Men didn't own women, blah, blah, blah, blah. We'd never agreed that we could have affairs, and he never had an affair.

Sue: I think before I learned what being married meant, really, there were a couple times people came on to me. I, one time, at a party where we were both at, I can't believe I was so naïve. I'd hardly been married, and this guy kissed me. I didn't react; I just sort of kissed him back. There was John, kind of horrified. I thought, "This is stupid. Why are you doing this? This isn't how you should behave with somebody you love. This is crazy!"

Sue: But I then met someone in prison, in one of my classes, who was ultimately the most fucked up person I think I've ever met. She was, I suppose in the MeToo age, she was 19, I think, and I was, what, in my 30s. But she was an incredibly manipulative, damaged person, who had been in care, and who had learned at some point...I mean she was a lesbian, had been a lesbian since she was a kid, little, 12 or 13.

Sue: She learned how to manipulate these middle class white women, people I've met, many over the years, about four or five women who had, had terrible experiences with her. They were either within the care system, social workers, moi, her teacher in prison. Boy, there I was in lust again.

Sue: I went on a Women's Liberation conference. I went... but I didn't go. I told John I was going to a Women's Liberation conference, and we were all staying overnight in a church hall, or something. I went to this woman, Sue's, place, and we had sex.

Susan: That was the first time you'd been with a woman?

Sue: Oh, yeah.

Sue: I'd been very nervous about it beforehand. I had read all this stuff, so I knew. I knew that I liked [inaudible 00:40:06]. I liked being, someone going down on me, oral sex I loved. I thought, that's what you do. Can I keep it up? Will I be strong enough? The stuff I used to think about, "Should I exercise my tongue?" Seriously. [both laughing].

Sue: Once I had, the thing that I imagined was actually being swept off my feet, and being absolutely drowned in waves of, orgasmic waves, with her making love to me. What I didn't realise was how fabulous it was going to be, making love to a woman.

Susan: Yes.

Sue: It absolutely knocked me out. That was the point of no return, which was right away.

Susan: As soon as you'd experienced it?

Sue: Yeah. Yeah.



Susan: So, did you just go home and tell him? How did you deal with it?

Sue: No, I didn't. I didn't, and I certainly was not someone who'd had any experience of lying. I hadn't been in that many long term relationships with men. It sort of went against everything, to be duplicitous and stuff.

Sue: But again, it wasn't months. It was a matter of, probably about six weeks or something. Then I told him. We sat down with the kids, and I moved to a friend, at that point, because I think I was already involved in a magazine, a journal called Red Rag. Do you know Sally Alexander? She's a historian.

Susan: I know her work, but I don't know her personally.

Sue: I moved to her place in Pimlico. We sat down with the kids. They must have been nine, around then, nine, 10, 11. The little, Dan went running upstairs. We had two floors in a shared house, crying and weeping his eyes out. Tom said something about, I said it's a woman. There'd been a little kind of assumption, "Who is he," or something like that.

Sue: I said, "It's not a man. It's a woman that I'm involved with," or whatever I said. He sort of looked, and he said, "Oh, well, that's good. You won't be getting married, then."

Susan: Wow.

Sue: It was awful. It was awful. I don't know what your experience was, but it was terrible.

Susan: I told my husband first. We were going to sit down with the kids. He went and picked up my daughters, and told them. One was away at college, and he intervened, and went and told my other daughter before I even had a chance to be there. So, it was horrible.

Sue: Oh, gosh.

Susan: Then they both hated me, but I'm not the one being interviewed.

Sue: Oh!

Susan: But how did Tom react then?

Sue: He was always weird. He was funny about it. He'd already decided that he didn't want, maybe the next year, I stayed at Sally's for a month, maybe, four weeks. Then I came back, and we were talking the whole time on the phone. I said to John, "I'm not going to stop. This is something I have to do, I want to do, but I don't know what to do about the kids, and you. How do you feel about all that?"

Sue: He said, God, it was asking for a lot, I think, but I didn't say, "I want you to do this or that." But he said, "All right. I don't want it, but if this is the way it is, then yes, okay. You do what you have to do, but you can stay here."

Susan: No way! So you all continued to live together?

Sue: Yeah, we continued to live together, and I slept in the same bed with him, the whole time I lived with him. But then, with this woman Sue, I would go off and spend, probably never more than, at most, three nights with her.

Sue: It, of course, began to all unravel. It was a disaster, as a number of my relationships with women were disasters. With Sue, it was just a disaster. That was pretty horrible, because for them, I was in a state. I'd be weeping, or something like that. I was trying not to.

Sue: I can't remember the point when I said to John that I wasn't going to have sex with him anymore, but we continued to sleep in the same bed.

Susan: Wow! He was okay with that, too?

Sue: He did it. He didn't take it out on me. He wasn't resentful. He's an incredibly sweet and principled person, and came from a very unusual working class background himself, with parentage questions hanging over, things very unusual.

Susan: So, what you told the kids was that you were going to all live together, but that Mommy was sometimes not going to be at home? How did you do that?

Sue: Yeah, that's what we said. We sat down and talked to them before I went to Sally's for four weeks. Of course, at that point, I don't think either of us knew exactly what was going to happen.

Susan: Right.

Sue: But then I said I was coming back, and that I would be there. I made a commitment, and boy, it wasn't a popular one with future girlfriends.

Susan: I bet.

Sue: That I was going to be committed to when I was going to be there, at that place. The idea that I was still even sleeping in the same bed was anathema to many, to some girlfriends.

Sue: Again, what can I say? I can't blame them. I wasn't someone who was going to say, ever, "I was always a lesbian. I just couldn't. I was forced by society to live a heterosexual life," or, "I didn't realise, because I was so unaware of my true, authentic feelings."

Sue: I never thought that. I didn't think that I'd lived a lie with John, but once I discovered the lesbian part of myself, which may have been there. I had, had dreams previously, but I hadn't been straining on the leash, "I want to be with women," until I did.

Sue: Then there was a short, intense period of trying to get to grips with that. Then once it happened ...

Susan: There's no going back from knowledge.

Sue: Finally, oh I cannot tell you how disastrous this relationship with Sue was. The kids couldn't stand her, not that they spent any time with us. But she would come around to the house when I was there, and bang on the door, and rage around outside. She had a motorcycle. I can remember Tom saying, "Mommy, that woman with the red face is screaming outside."

Susan: It must have been so hard.

Sue: It was. It was hard.

Susan: How long were you able to live that way?

Sue: That relationship went on for about two years.

Susan: You were still living with-

Sue: Yeah. Then I was still living, this was when I had another relationship. I went out, I remember I went, there was a pub down near Euston, which was a women's one. What the hell was it called? Can't remember.

Sue: I went, walked in, walked up to the bar, looked around, and thought, "I can't do this," and went home. I didn't know how to, that I'd decided I wanted to go out. I wanted to be involved. There was no problem, because there was all this stuff bursting out around, all over in the Women's Liberation Movement. There were dances. There were this. I was involved in things where there were lesbians.

Sue: There wasn't really a big problem, but I kept living in Camden.

Susan: Or were you in Stoke Newington by now, or back in Camden?

Sue: No, I was living in Camden. We had moved.

Sue: When we came back, we went to Stoke Newington, in its medieval phase of dreariness. Then we bought a house in Camden.

Susan: Okay.

Sue: That was, Tom was born in Stoke Newington, but Dan was born when we were in Camden. We'd bought a house with friends. We split a house. God, in those days, we paid more than Lawrence and Marjory. We paid \$7,000 and they paid \$4,000, or something. This is a house in Camden Town.

Susan: Wow.

Sue: It was 11 and a half thousand pounds.

Sue: But we had the garden, and I think we had a bit more space. They didn't have any kids, so they had one floor and an attic.

Sue: We finally said to each other... I was going off. I was involved in these tumultuous relationships. I was working. I was at Spare Rib. I think it was actually Tom, and Dan, and John said, when we were all at a meal once, "You know, Mom, you should move out."

Susan: Wow.

Sue: Because I was lying to my parents.

Susan: Oh, boy.

Sue: They would get phone calls sometimes, from my parents. Then they weren't supposed to say Mom is ...

Susan: That's too hard.

Sue: So, I thought [inaudible 00:51:34] how am I going to do this? Then a woman at Spare Rib was living in short life housing in Kings Cross. She was going to go to South America. She said, "You can have my place." That's kind of the way you did things in those days.

Sue: Housing, still, was very easy. That flat in short life housing that I was in for 10 years, it was, again, it was two pounds 50 a week, three pounds.

Susan: Oh, my God!

Sue: It was ancient. There was nothing fabulously-

Susan: But you could live there.

Sue: Yeah, exactly.

Susan: So then, did the kids come and stay with you sometimes?

Sue: No, they never, never did.

Susan: Did you visit them? Did they not?

Sue: No. I used to go back. I moved in, in '81. It was amazing. I realised that I'd never lived on my own. I don't know what you did.

Susan: I lived alone for about two years.

Sue: I lived in college on my own, but I didn't have my own flat. It was just sort of like, "Oh, my God! This is amazing."

Susan: All that silence and space.

Sue: Silence!

Susan: Yup.

Sue: I had a neighbour downstairs, a guy I liked, he was nice, a really nice guy, and he was totally into meditation and chanting. If I lay on the floor in the flat, I could hear his "Ommm, ommm". I thought, "Oh, my God."

Sue: The kids came to the place. John came to the place. He used to, to bring things over. But I would go back, still. Through that '80s period, I would go back. Sometimes I would stay overnight or something. I'd take my laundry.

Susan: And go do it where there was a washing machine?

Sue: Yes.

Susan: Would you eat dinner with them?

Sue: Oh, sure. Yeah. So, I was still doing a number of days a week when I was going back, and seeing, and sometimes staying overnight.

Susan: By then, it was sort of the new normal. Everybody was okay with it?

Sue: Yeah, they were.

Susan: Wow.

Sue: One time when I was there, when Tom was, quite early on, Tom came running down. He never slept. He was a bad sleeper. He would stay up and listen to the radio. We introduced [inaudible 00:54:13] radio from the time he was about six months old. I'm kidding, but he listened to a book at bedtime. He'd do all these things.

Sue: He came running down, saying, "Mom, they're talking about lesbians on the radio."

Susan: Did you miss them, or not?

Sue: No.

Susan: That's really good for you to say. Good for you.

Sue: I didn't.

Susan: You wanted your space, and you finally got it.

Sue: As long as I knew they were there ...

Susan: And they were safe, and they were being looked after by somebody who loved them.

Sue: ... and I knew that John was completely devoted to them, and had no conflict about that. I'm not saying it was always easy for him, but he had no conflict at all.

Sue: That is where they had their school. They were local. By that time, they were Camden kids. There wouldn't have been room in the short life housing flat, anyway. But I wasn't longing to have them. I was quite happy with my relationship, and stuff. I found it a relief to be away from the full time mother thing.

Susan: Did you feel happier in yourself? Was that something you were so aware of?

Sue: Yeah. Yeah. But I always felt a level of guilt, and I thought, "I don't meet any other women who say this about their kids." They complain like mad, and then they say, "But of course, I'd lay down my life for them. I'd die if I had to be parted for them. I adore them."

Sue: I'm thinking, "Yeah, but where are some of the women who are-

Susan: It's almost the unspeakable thing, isn't it, to feel that way about your children? It absolutely is, yep.

Sue: I do adore them now.

Susan: But you wanted your own life. I completely understand.

Sue: I did.

Susan: Was there an understanding with you and John, that if he met someone, that things would shift in the way that household arrangements worked, around you coming back? How did that work?

Sue: He had some affairs, but for him, he didn't want more children. The women that he hooked up with, not that many, I think one of the reasons they were attracted to him was that he was such a fabulous dad. If they started saying they wanted to have kids, then he'd say no, and they didn't work out.

Sue: But the understanding was there, completely, that, and I maintained, I think in a genuine way, that if he fell in love with someone, I would have to grapple with that. That would only be fair. It would be right.

Susan: There must have been an ongoing warmth and easiness between you, if you could sleep in the same bed.

Sue: No, I know.

Susan: That's a miracle.

Sue: Yeah, but as I say, it played havoc with some of my relationships. The first person, beyond Sue, who I was involved with. I wasn't entirely honest about it. When it came out, the fury and anger were really quite extreme.

Sue: Then I had made a vow that I would be honest, but I don't think in general, I'm not talking about all the people, I wasn't with hundreds. The handful of women that I was with, I would say what the reality was. It was all, the problem with saying truths at the beginning of a relationship is that you'll agree to anything.

Sue: I'm exaggerating, but you know. You have, "Oh, yes. No, that's fine. That's fine." Then of course, it shifts, and it's not okay, or they don't remember that they said, or I didn't say it as clearly as I thought I did, or as definitely. I don't know.

Susan: That's really, I think that the story around having been with somebody you actually liked, and who was lovely and warm, I've met very few women who ever have said that about their ex-partners, male partners. I don't know if it can be so true, but maybe women didn't feel like they could say it. It felt like an unspeakable thing, too, that actually you had a good relationship, and it was good for you, and it nourished you. There are all kinds of ways in which you were happy.

Sue: Yes. Yeah. I feel I've been incredibly lucky to keep that relationship going, although now, we joke to each other, it would drive us both absolutely insane if we had to live with the other.

Susan: That's very funny. What's he a professor of?

Sue: He was a sociologist.

Susan: How did you meet women like Barbara Taylor, then, and Sally Alexander? You must have been in an academic venue.

Sue: I wasn't. I was never in that framework. But the way the early Women's Liberation Movement worked was that everybody was in it together. If you were in it, in terms of history, and everything. Sally was not a professor, then.

Susan: Was she not?

Sue: No. No, she was an activist, and maybe she'd been at Ruskin. Shelia didn't have, Shelia Rowbotham didn't have an academic job.

Susan: Did she not?

Sue: No, they were all kind of, they all slotted in as it transpired. There were some women who did, but not all. So, you were all interested in history. So, you all did this.

Sue: Then, I was on these, because I had discovered that I loved pasting things, and making magazines, and doing all that kind of stuff. I was a socialist feminist. They were all socialist feminists.

Susan: Of course they were.

Sue: So, we would meet at conferences. We became friendly at conferences and stuff. Then there was a journal called Red Rag.

Susan: Which I don't know about.

Sue: Which was a, it was started by women who were all in the Communist Party. But they wanted, I don't know what you know about the Communist Party, but they had a thing about the broad front. They wanted to be connected with people who weren't necessarily in the party, but were progressives.

Sue: So, they wanted Red Rag to be opened up to that. So, a whole bunch of women came into that. That included all sorts of people that I've known, like Elizabeth Wilson, and Angie, and Sally, and just a whole load.

Susan: Do you think any of these women would want to be interviewed for this project?

Sue: They're not lesbians.

Susan: Oh, of course. Are none of them? They aren't, are they!

Sue: No.

Susan: Not even Sheila, no, she's not, is she?

Sue: No.

Susan: Okay. What was that like, too, the mix of a small core of lesbians? What was that like?

Sue: Elizabeth, of course, Wilson.

Susan: I don't know her. Who's Elizabeth Wilson?

Sue: Oh! Google her, too. You'll find 1,000 books by her.

Susan: I don't know her.

Sue: She's a professor.



Susan: Of what?

Sue: Angie Mason, her long, long, long-term partner, she's big time. She's a lawyer now. She's big time on Camden Council.

Susan: Angie Mason, okay. Should we interview them?

Sue: I don't know whether they would.

Susan: Why not?

Sue: Some of them are all a bit kind of [indistinct] of the socialist feminist gone. They're a little bit, not jaded, but life is too weary, maybe.

Susan: I see. You're full of joy. From '81 to now, tell me about that period now, too.

Sue: '81 to ...

Susan: From the time when you were in your own flat.

Sue: Oh, yeah, in Kings Cross. I loved it. I love Kings Cross, by the way. Because people would say, "You live in Kings Cross? Dangerous." I'd say, "Yeah. Yeah, really dangerous. You come home at night, and there's dozens of people around, always. You're not walking down some Haringey or dark street by yourself." There's people around all the time. Yes, some of them are saying, "You want to come with me," but you tell them, "Fuck off!"

Sue: I was thrilled with living. I discovered that I loved living on my own, loved it. Then I was on Spare Rib, and that was an incredibly weird, intense time. That's when my Spare Rib time really corresponds with being a lesbian. I think I went to one bisexual conference. I thought, "I'm not bisexual. I'm living a very peculiar life. I have to be honest about my relationship with John, but I have no desire to fuck men ever again."

Susan: So, do you use the word queer, or do you use lesbian? What do you use in terms of language.

Sue: I use lesbian, but I like queer. I'm quite queer oriented. I'm not a radical feminist. I loathe Shelia Jefferies and that lot.

Susan: Me, too. So problematic, yeah.

Sue: To me, queer has this generosity about it.

Susan: It does. Who are we to not be generous? Where does that come from?

Susan: I agree with you, yeah.

Sue: But Spare Rib was going through these unbelievably tense, horrific, denouncing times, around anti-Semitism, racism, anti-lesbianism.

Sue: We tore each other apart. It was a very, very, very difficult time. I learned, politically, so much during that period. People thought, someone said to me who had been on the Spare Rib Collective longer than I had. She said, "Oh, you're going to be destroyed by this. You'll be destroyed."

Sue: I thought to myself at the time, I sort of went [inaudible 01:05:14], and I thought to myself, "You don't know me. I'm very stubborn, and I'm not going to be easily destroyed."

Susan: And you weren't.

Sue: We were all pushed around. We all grumbled. We all beat our chests. But some of us stuck it out. I learned so much.

Sue: With the lesbian stuff, I've written about it, and people have written about it. We were divided amongst ourselves as lesbians. There were the lesbians who felt that any, any manifestation of what they interpreted as anti-lesbianism was too painful to bear, and that they shouldn't have to talk about it, because why should they educate people about anything? I've always been keen on educating people, but that's the difference.

Sue: But it was like anyone, for instance, who wrote to Spare Rib and said, "You have too much lesbian material in the magazine," you didn't entertain a discussion with them.

Sue: Then there were those of us, there was a small grouping. We were all small groupings; three, four of us, three, four lesbians on the other. There were things we were all crossing lines about all the time. But who said, "If misunderstandings, maybe anti-lesbianism comes from a position of ignorance, then we would like Spare Rib to engage with that. Not to say no."

Sue: If it came from a platform of anti-homosexuality, lesbianism, whatever, then of course, no. We wouldn't say, "Yes, we'll have a debate in the pages of Spare Rib, between the fundamentalist, anti-abortion, lesbian hating group," which was called SPUC, The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to the Unborn Child, something like that.

Sue: So, that was clear. But we wanted to engage with people in the letters pages, in articles, about, for instance, the accusation that lesbians were taking over not just Spare Rib, but the whole of the Women's Movement. That they were seeing lesbians everywhere.

Sue: Well, clearly, something else was going on, and discussing it, even to the extent of doing an article analysis, and saying, "Actually, this is how many articles there were. Let's talk about what's the fear."

Susan: Absolutely.

Sue: The stuff around anti-Semitism, all of these things were raging outside the pages of the magazine, as well.

Sue: So, the anti-Semitism and the racism part was the most, for me, challenging, because it felt the most, in some ways, important. Also, as a white woman, it felt, you had to be really very serious about the accusations, where they were coming from and so on.

Sue: But in the end, I think it really prepared me for the rest of my political life, in some ways.

Susan: Let's say more about that.

Sue: For instance, I discovered some time later, with friends from the Black women's grouping on Spare Rib, that of course, they weren't a united front, either. There were huge differences between them, but that they took this protective, "We're together," view, and everything became polarised; that kind of thing.

Sue: Whereas, to me, there always are contradictions that arise in the various ways in which people do and conceive politics. If you don't give room for those, and allow discussion around them, you solidify into these rigid positions.

Sue: We definitely, as the white women, hadn't thought through what it would mean to actively try to get Black women to come on, and that's what we did. But we hadn't thought through how that was going to feel to those women.

Sue: I'll tell you what we were doing, which is a simplistic way of thinking about it, but it was quite helpful to me at the time. We were inviting them to a table that we'd built and set up, and saying, "We want you to come and join us at our table."

Susan: Yeah, quite right.

Sue: What we hadn't thought through was that maybe those women were going to change the very concept of this table that we'd set, and were so kindly offering places at.

Sue: I went on to work at this Sheba Feminist Press after I left. That was a totally different situation.

Susan: In what way?

Sue: Well, it had been a small publishing collective, set up by white women, but in fact, Black women had joined. They'd gone through some hard times, but they were now a majority of Black women. They had decided they wanted to be a mixed race, what we call a mixed race collective.

Sue: So, they opened their doors to having some white women come on. I was asked to go onto that collective. It was always an understanding that, to have, for instance, we had a rule the whole time I was there, and I was there until the end of it, just about. That we were so small that we always had to have a majority of Black women.

Susan: Wow.

Sue: So, that would mean four Black women and three white women. Because if it went the other way, it was like the slippery slope. It would just too easily slide back into not being a situation in which Black women felt that they really had their place of importance, and decision making, and stuff.

Sue: We all decided things together. We argued. We fought. We had problems around race, sometimes, but God! It was a fabulous thing to come to after Spare Rib.

Susan: Was that in the '90s? When was that?

Sue: No, that was in the '80s. I left Spare Rib in '84. I went in '79 and left in '84.

Susan: Then Sheba was after that?

Sue: Sheba, and then I took... a friend was doing some completely non-feminist magazine. It was a social work thing. I was a maternity replacement for someone on that. Then someone, a friend of mine, Pratibha Parmar, who's, Pratibha's a film maker now.

Susan: I know her name. I don't know her.

Sue: She had been involved on Sheba. She called me up and said, "Let's have lunch. I'm friends with your friend, Sona. Sona said I should talk to you about this, and that, and let's have lunch." I said yes, and we had a really good time. She said, "Well, would you think about joining the Sheba Collective?" So, I did.

Susan: I see. Was that for a really long time?

Sue: No! That was '84. The maternity replacement wasn't that long, six months maybe. Then I went to Sheba.

Sue: Then I moved to Australia in 1992.

Susan: How come?

Sue: Because one of my dearest Spare Rib friends, who I'm still incredibly close with, Susan Ardell. A friend of hers came to visit her in London, who she'd known in the days when she'd lived there, which was back in the late '70s. She'd had an affair with this woman, Mitch.

Sue: Mitch came to visit. We just had this whoa thing. Then we got together, and she came and lived here for four years, and then I went and lived there for four years.

Susan: Then what? You came back?

Sue: Then it went all pear shaped. I rushed back here. I can remember shrieking and saying, "If I see another fucking eucalyptus tree, I'll go mad!"

Susan: Wow!

Sue: I was there for maybe six years.

Susan: Wow, that's a long time. Were you in your 40s then? How old would you have been?

Sue: I turned ...

Susan: 50s, if you were born in '41. In the '90s, was this?

Sue: Yeah. I had my 50th birthday when Mitch was here. That was my Australian girlfriend, who I went to live with, and who was here. She was here when I turned 50.

Sue: I was living in short life housing in Kings Cross. I and another woman, who was from Spare Rib, Susan Hemmings and our birthday is in the same year. So, I devised this plan that we would have a huge benefit birthday bop at Camden Town Hall. It was called, A Spring Cruise.

Sue: We had amazing music. We raised money for Sheba. Was I involved in HIV stuff then? I think it was just for Sheba.

Susan: Were you doing feminist stuff in Australia, too?

Sue: Yeah. Yeah.

Susan: Publishing stuff, activism?

Sue: I was teaching nurses, at a technical college, because I was working around HIV by then.

Susan: How'd you get involved with that?

Sue: Through the Women's Health Movement that happened concurrently with, it was part of the Women's Liberation Movement in the '70s, in the mid-70s, late-70s, all into the '80s.

Susan: Yeah. [inaudible 01:17:24]

Sue: Right, okay. I mean we did self exam. We did all that hopping up onto tables, with mirrors, and torches, all that stuff.

Sue: I just decided, because I'd been teaching in Holloway, I was then teaching. I decided to shift. I was still doing the movement, dance stuff, but I was teaching health. So, I decided I really enjoyed teaching about women's health, too.

Sue: I thought, "Women's health just opens up everything." All you have to do is start. You're talking about bodies. You're talking about sexuality. You're talking about motherhood. You're talking about reproductive health. Fabulous way of connecting with women about things.

Sue: So, when HIV came along, someone at Spare Rib had contacted me, because I was mainly responsible for the health articles. She was HIV positive. They were setting up a group of positive, for positive women, and would I be interested in doing an article about it. So, I think we did an article. But we also then began working, some time later, on a book about HIV positive women.

Sue: When I went to Australia, that was the hook to get me in, to be able to work, that I had this expertise on that. So, I was teaching nurses, in the sociology department, because they all had to do a university degree by then.

Susan: Right. You know what? I'm going to say this to you. It's 12:30.

Sue: Oh, my God!

Susan: But at the end of the interview, since we're close enough, I want to give you time to answer this. I always like to ask, what haven't I asked you about, that I should have asked you about? Or what would you like to tell me?

Sue: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.

Susan: But you think I need to know [crosstalk 01:19:42]

Sue: Yeah. Tell me more about the project, too.

Susan: Well, in terms of the number of women?

Sue: Yeah.

Susan: It came from Evelyn, as you know. She wanted to try to, I think, mark the fact that there actually have been women in the homosexual liberation movement, and to just make sure that the historical record reflects that.

Susan: I think that, in her view, I think this is actually something I'd really like to hear from you about, too. She has a view, and we disagree on this, that women's voice are increasingly being heard in the public sphere. My own view is that it's the other way around.

Susan: But we're collecting these stories to try to figure out whether that's true. So, her view is really one of progress, that things have changed for the better for women, and women have been heard.

Susan: I think I'd like to ask you about that. What do you think, in the present, of the situation for women, and how does that compare to your memory?

Sue: You mean women, or lesbians?

Susan: Lesbians, actually. Women who are gay.

Sue: Yeah. I would have thought that there was a long, long, long way for lesbians to go, to get recognition in the media, in the public sphere, and that gay men dominated that, breaking through story. Of course, we have the Vanity Fair cover of K.D. Lang, that kind of stuff, which was really quite unusual, and oh! Exciting! Blah, blah, blah.

Sue: But I do think that lesbians are, there's not as much coverage, I think. It's why I would hang onto the name lesbian, as well as being very sympathetic to queer, because I think you really have to keep on speaking that.

Sue: Now, I have been historically involved in, I suppose what you might call non-traditional butch/femme stuff. Do you know Joan Nessle's work? Well, Joan's a friend.

Susan: Oh, really?

Sue: A personal friend. In fact, she lives in Australia because I introduced her to the woman she's been with since.

Sue: We were all very interested in that on Sheba, our mixed race collective. We were almost all lesbians. We were all involved, or thought about, we published Joan here. We were the British publishers for Joan. We were interested in that area of butch/femme.

Sue: I have an ex-girlfriend who was butch, another person who's quite well known, Jill Posener, who was a photographer, did all sorts of graffiti stuff. She's lived in California for years.

Sue: When the whole trans thing began, she had younger trans-friendly, or longing people, women who were longing to go that way, or thought they were, saying to her.... she had a breast reduction. She had huge, huge breasts that always bothered her. I felt for her, because of things like running, and comments when she was younger.

Susan: Yeah, that's my partner. She's [inaudible 01:23:37]

Sue: Coming up to her and saying things like... when she came back to visit after the breast reduction, "Well, what happened? Why aren't you transitioning? Why do you have any breasts?"

Sue: That happened, and yet, I am on a different trajectory around trans than most of, a lot of the women that I know. I'm very open to it.

Susan: Me, too.

Sue: The non-binary stuff, which, it isn't me, but so fucking what!

Susan: Live and let live, exactly.

Sue: I have friends who are Black, who have children, who are non-binary. [inaudible 01:24:35] is, he's with someone who defines as they, as non-binary. I think he's probably heterosexual, but so what. They're calling themselves non-binary, and it kind of is a challenge. It's not bad.

Sue: So, I feel really supportive, and I feel somewhat beleaguered within whatever there is of old feminists organising, which is so anti. But on the other hand, I think it is true, that in this whole discourse, lesbians are the ones who have fallen through-

Susan: The cracks, yeah.

Sue: ... the cracks.

Susan: It's an identity that's at risk of not being recognised anymore.

Sue: So, I think there's a real dilemma. I'm trying to be involved in helping, helping myself to figure it out, and being part of some possible challenge, or whatever you want to call it, engagement, with this Davina Cooper, who's a lawyer person. They're doing a project, the Redefinition of Gender. It's around what's the gender, blah, blah, blah act, and defining things around gender; what is needed in law, what isn't needed. It's interesting to me.

Sue: For instance, there's a big conference at the end of the month, that I didn't know about until yesterday, called, This conference is set up by A Woman's Place, which is, apparently, it's immediately sold out. They are basically Labour Party socialist feminists, but they've attracted everybody else, because I think they're anti-trans.

Susan: I bet they are.

Sue: They say they aren't, but the way ... I think there's a careless way of talking about it.

Susan: No, I think it's the political difficulty of our time. It's lack of solidarity. I just don't understand it. Who's that serving? Not any of us.

Sue: But there is this thing about lesbians and yet, I'm a great magazine lover. I read 1,000 magazines. I waste my time. I'm a slothful person online.

Sue: But when I say magazines, that ranges from serious journals, to the New Yorker, to the papers, the supplements, to Heat Magazine and the National Enquirer. I read them every, single week.

Susan: What's this HOWL? Is that a magazine?



Sue: No. I'll tell you what HOWL is, but I read those things. Lesbians have never, those popular, Heat and National Enquirer are completely schizophrenic. But they have quite a few lesbians in them now.

Susan: Oh, interesting.

Sue: They're not at all nervous about that.

Susan: No.

Sue: They don't surround it with all kinds of disclaimers anymore.

Susan: That's interesting.

Sue: HOWL is the History of Women's Liberation.

Susan: Ah.

Sue: It's a grouping that came together about a year and maybe almost a half ago.

Susan: In London?

Sue: Yeah, but it should be, it's nationwide, ha ha. It is, at this point, we're in the process of setting up a website. It's to collect the voices of early Women's Liberationists, before we all pop our clogs, and to make them available online.

Susan: Great.

Sue: But we also are trying to build a timeline. There are various timelines, but we want to have an extended timeline, a bibliography, all sorts of things.

Susan: Great.

Sue: Now, it's moving, it's like-

Susan: Do you have funding?

Sue: It's like herding feral cats. We move so slowly, because there's nobody in charge. There are people who are convinced that we have to all do it ourselves, the way we used to. I'm saying, "I don't have the same energy. I'm not a web person. Let's get some money and hire some help."

Susan: Absolutely.

Sue: So, we're now at the stage where we're applying for an H ...

Susan: Oh, Heritage Lottery Fund?

Sue: Yeah.

Susan: That's what's funding this project, too. I should give you this if you don't have one of these. That's for information about the Project.

Susan: Yeah, there's Heritage Lottery Fund for this. You should get some for that, too.

Sue: Chris Wall, who I told you about, and then this woman, Jeanette Cooperman, they've had experience. So, we have what we're applying for. We know what we're applying for. It's very limited, but we're just so far at the beginning.

Sue: Last night, we got our Constitution, finally. So, we're going to have permission forms. It's great, because there was a project at the British Library, that I'm on.

Susan: Oh! Are you part of that?

Sue: Yeah. There were, what, 60 of us? I can't remember.

Sue: One of the things I felt at the time, and various other people I talked to did, it was, "Look, this is great, but it's a lot of the old Socialist feminist academics, who'd been involved in setting it up." Where are many of the other voices, of early Women's Liberationists?

Sue: For instance, I'll give you an example. A friend of mine, Nic Humberstone-

Susan: I interviewed her, too.

Sue: I love Nic.

Susan: Yeah, she's fantastic.

Sue: Nic, she lives around the corner from me. I love Nick.

Sue: Nick and a couple of her friends, were in college when the Women's Liberation Movement started. That grouping, they were wild. They ran around their college [crosstalk 01:31:05]

Susan: Her story was amazing, yeah.

Sue: I thought, but that age, that little cohort, big one, big one, they didn't get interviewed for this thing. It's the women of more my age.

Sue: Then there were just a whole lot of women who weren't important.

Susan: Yeah, exactly.

Sue: I know that I got stuck onto the end, because I think Sally said, "Well, you have to interview Sue."

Sue: There was a self-selected grouping, and then people got stuck on, but there were only 60, for God's sake! So, we at the time, said we should begin to try and record. This is a long time after, but that is what this is trying to do.

Susan: As you go on with it, if you need any more interviewers, come to me. I love interviewing.

Sue: Right.

Susan: Yeah, yeah. Just before I forget, when you're talking about Sheba, that these were almost all lesbians, Evelyn said to me, "Make sure you ask Sue if there are any women of colour," that you would be able to put us in touch with. That is really hard to get into this project, too.

Sue: Yes, I know. God! Do I know! That slippery slope is depressing; the one I said. I was so involved in the late '70s, all through the '80s, until I went to Australia, in projects that were overwhelmingly mixed race.

Sue: When I came back, things had started to drop away. I still was involved, but it all feels, in many ways, like that's gone back in time. We had such a self-conscious, in a good way, thing about working together; Black women and white women. Black meant Asian, West Indian. It meant that, at that time. It was a different take.

Sue: My closest, closest friend, [inaudible 01:33:07] Mercer died of cancer.

Susan: Oh, my goodness.

Sue: Of cancer. She was only 38.

Susan: Oh, my God! Seriously?

Sue: Michelle McKenzie; these are all lesbians. Michelle lives primarily in Ghana with her girlfriend, where they can't be out. They run women's stuff.

Sue: So, Michelle and I did a long interview with a woman who was researching Sheba. Because we were the British publishers of Audre Lorde, as well.

Susan: Were you?

Sue: Yeah. So, we really were-

Susan: Really important.

Sue: We were. Tiny but important.

Sue: We did this, I thought Michelle was fantastic when we did this interview. Then she said, "I can't let you publish it, because it's too dangerous for me to be outed."

Susan: Oh, my God!

Sue: Really dangerous. So, I don't think, and she's not here.

Sue: [Manica 01:34:14] is no longer a lesbian, but that would be all right, because she was, but she lives in Sri Lanka.

Susan: Wow.

Sue: Pratibha lives in California.

Susan: So, all those women who were together in London, none of them are here?

Sue: That's right.

Susan: Wow, that's really significant.

Sue: Isn't it?

Susan: Wow.

Sue: No, I don't know if you've seen the reviews for the book that won the Booker Prize, Girl, Woman, Other; Bernadine Evaristo.

Susan: Evaristo? Yeah.

Sue: Bernadine was a lesbian, but she isn't now.

Susan: I don't know her story, but I do know that about her.

Sue: I didn't know her personally. She wouldn't know me from anybody, but I remember her, because she was around Sheba a bit.

Susan: Was she?

Sue: Just a bit.

Susan: I know people who know her. I could probably talk to her.

Sue: She might be able to put you in touch with women who are still around.

Susan: She's a bit younger. She's more my age, I think, or maybe a bit younger than me.

Sue: How old are you?

Susan: I'm 58.

Sue: Yeah, no. I think she's around that same, I think, maybe even a little bit younger.

Susan: Yeah, I think she might be 50, or 52, or something like that.

Sue: Something like that.

Susan: But you remember Bernadine from then, too. She would have been in all your circles, wouldn't she?

Sue: She was around. She wasn't totally involved when I was around. There are women who were, but I've lost touch with them.

Sue: Dorothea Smart, she's a wonderful woman, wonderful. Now, Dorothea might be around.

Susan: How do you know her?

Sue: From Sheba.

Susan: From Sheba, too?

Sue: Yeah. Then there was, oh, what's her name? But she's moved to Canada.

Susan: So, do you think that London became too expensive, inhospitable? Why do you think they all left?

Sue: It's an interesting question, actually. When I list them like that, you point out, it's sort of like, "Oh! What's that about?"

Susan: One or two, you could see individual reasons, but when it's all of them ...

Sue: Those '80s days, there was a whole push to have a Black lesbian and gay centre. There are all these people, all these women I'm talking about were involved in that, but there were all the guys, as well. There was Isaac Julian, who's the famous artist now. [inaudible 01:36:47] brother, [Kabina 01:36:49]. Kabina teaches at Yale.

Sue: Isaac wouldn't, he wouldn't touch, he's a perfectly interesting guy, but he wouldn't be around.

Sue: I'm more in contact with a couple of, Dennis, Dennis, guys.

Susan: But we're only speaking with women.

Sue: I know.

Susan: So, Dorothea Smart would be-

Sue: But I'm wondering maybe whether one of those might ... Dennis might know. If I kept his number from last time I saw him.

Susan: Who's this Dorothea Smart, then?

Sue: Oh, she's a lovely woman.

Susan: Would you be able to put us in touch with her?

Sue: Sorry?

Susan: Would you be able to introduce us to her?

Sue: I'm not in contact with her.

Susan: You're not anymore?

Sue: But you see, I'm going to see, I'm actually seeing Bernadine.

Susan: Are you?

Sue: Nothing to do with friendship or connections. One of my old women from the Women in HIV grouping, lives in Eastland. She's friendly with a couple who are very involved in politics, there. For whatever reason, Bernadine is coming to a reading at one of their houses. Fiona asked me if I'd like to come, so I said, "Oh, I'd love to." So, I don't know.

Susan: You've been chatting with her?

Sue: If I am, whether it's appropriate or not.

Susan: No, absolutely, just depends on how it feels for you.

Sue: Yeah.

Susan: But which Fiona is this? I know a lot of Fiona's who are lesbians. Fiona Colbun? No?

Sue: No, no. This is a Fiona who's not. Fiona Pettit, no, she's not.

Susan: Okay.

Sue: I'm sure she probably would be most anything. I think being HIV positive, for her, has really changed her life in terms of relationships.

Susan: I bet, yeah. I have to get you to sign. Shall we draw it to a close? It feels like a natural close, and I will just say thank you so much. That was absolutely brilliant. Thanks for being so open, and so thoughtful.

Sue: I'm happy to be open.