

Blitz: the club that shaped the 80s

Waiting by the Landline

Interview transcripts

1. Interview with Christos Tolera

Duration: 3 minutes 50 seconds

My name's Christos Tolera. I'm now an artist and part-time actor, and at the time of the Blitz, in the late seventies and all that kind of stuff, I was a school boy. I was born and bred in Islington, of Greek-Cypriot immigrant parents.

London at the time when I was, when I first started to venture out. So, there was kind of not a lot going on, but there were a couple of places where you could, you know, go to a pub and there was good music. There was this soul scene going on with people dressing alternatively. We'd already discovered David Bowie, but we didn't really quite know how he fitted into our kind of lifestyle but there was a connection there that a lot of people felt from my kind of, age group and a little bit older. So already at that time I felt like dressing up, but it was a very working class pursuit, the dressing up, and it was very much about maybe hiding where you came from. I don't know.

Well, I had seen these kids who dressed differently, and they had wedge haircuts, and I was about 14. There was a kid in my school, in the sixth form who looked amazing. Looking back at it, it was obvious that he was a gay kid, this Jewish kid, but I wouldn't have known really at the time. He just seemed really cool, and he had a wedge haircut, and he wore these peg trousers and winkle pickers, and he was wearing that in the sixth form because you didn't have to wear a uniform in the sixth form. So, I'd seen that. And there was another kid who wore like these mohair jumpers and winkle pickers, and I just became intoxicated by it.

So, in Petticoat Lane, you could get peg trousers for £4.99. I remember my first pair I bought there was £4.99, and they were red. Shelly's did the black and white pointy shoes and I bought a Hawaiian shirt, and I was kind of kitted out.

So, I was at school with Martin Kemp and Martin's brother, Gary Kemp was in a band. He was always in a band. It was like a different band every year, right? So, we used to go and

see them, and they were managed by Steve Dagger, and Steve was one of them people who kind of seemed to know where everything was. And then I went with him and Gary to Billy's.

We went, it was about October, or something like that, in 1978. It was like really exotic to me. You know, they were playing Thunderbirds music. They were playing Marilyn Monroe music. There were a couple of people wearing kind of forties stuff and there was someone who looked like Brian Ferry. And I thought, fuck, this is it. And then I heard about the Blitz. And the Blitz was on a Tuesday again. And again, we were 16 and we didn't know how we were going to go. So, my mate worked at Thames TV. It was over in Knightsbridge, but they had a photocopier, at his work, which is like, well, state of the art, what photocopier, what's that? Do copies... Anyway, we copied, we got someone's membership, I can't remember whose, and we copied them.

So, Steve Strange was on the door and I'd seen him before because I'd seen him obviously at Billy's, but also in PX where I'd gone in and

been too scared to sort of go in, felt really intimidated by it all. And also, couldn't afford it, you know? But we sort of cobbled together our look, got a bit of diamante from somewhere, you know, and a black shirt, it was de rigueur, and some leather trousers and there we were.

For me walking in... it did, it changed my life.

2. Interview with Fiona Dealey

Duration: 3 minutes 30 seconds

My name's Fiona Dealey and I studied at Saint Martin's, did a Fashion degree there. I grew up in Hockley, Essex, so I am an Essex girl. And I did a foundation – art foundation – at Southend Tech. So, I started in October, I think it was, 1978. And I was very fortunate because a girl who had been on my foundation didn't want her room at the Ralph West Halls of residence. So, literally four days before I started at Saint Martins, I got the room at the Ralph West Hall.

From the age of 12 I'd been desperate to live in central London. That was my only real ambition. So, to suddenly be going to Saint Martin's, as it was called then, and be right on the edge of Soho was so exciting. Soho was all about the sex industry at the time. There were endless sex shops. So, if we were bored in pattern cutting, we'd be kind of going into sex shops, looking at dildos and all sorts of things.

There used to be a lot of jumble sales back in the day. I had a white Ford Escort van when I

lived at the Ralph West, so it was an awful lot of a lot of people getting back and we'd go to a jumble sale, buy lots of stuff and you could get really great things then, like fabulous hats that were heart-shaped and really great handbags. But, because I was studying fashion at Saint Martins, we were also designing and making lots of things.

When the Blitz first opened, I was still living at the Ralph West, and we would sit on the bus going into college and it would be like what are we going to wear? Could I borrow that? Could I borrow this? We'd all go back. We'd be a lot of people helping each other to put makeup on. I got very good at dyeing people's hair, though I've got no experience as a hairdresser, but there was a great chemist in Battersea that sold hair colours in ridged bottles which meant it was poisonous. But you got the most intense colours so I would bleach Kim Bowen's hair, and I would put that on it. I mean we had no experience, so it was a bit hit and miss. But you know, I'd cut people's hair. We just got very good at doing things ourselves.

However, we weren't just dressing like that to go out at night. We were dressing like that all the time. And I'd got very used to people staring at me because of what I wore and because I'm tall, I quite liked the fact that I knew they were staring at me because I looked a bit odd to them. I don't ever remember feeling unsafe on the streets. I feel that when you dress in quite an extreme way, you felt kind of protected because if anyone was going to kind of bash you over their head, everyone would have seen.

What I loved about the Blitz was it was the only nightclub I've ever been to where it was equally gay and straight. So, it was a really great place that I could be with my gay friends and my straight friends. And it wasn't about feeling safe. It was just about feeling we were all included.

3. Interview with Dencil Williams

Duration: 3 minutes 20 seconds

I'm Dencil Thomas Williams. I am currently a retired university professor from Goldsmiths University, professor of Psychology, and an ex-art psychotherapist.

We are going to talk about the Blitz, but apart from the Blitz, I mean, there are lots of different tribes of people. We had skinheads, Teddy boys, Punks, and then the National Front. I even had a boyfriend from the National Front. I didn't even know what the National Front was until someone said 'do you realise who and what he was?'

Well, I gathered the most interest because I suppose I must have seemed quite exotic to them. I mean, like I said, Darla-Jane Gilroy and Sade were the only other Black people I knew at the time. At the time it was very noticeable. You wouldn't see another black person within that perimeter, so sort of from anywhere from Charing Cross Road up to where I live now in Clerkenwell. And if you did, they would be walking around making themselves small and I

didn't really take much notice of it. I was aware that that racial thing was going on, but I just never let it bother me.

It was like a playground. And particularly as like you know, I wasn't used to it sort of being dark night time at 3:00pm. That was interesting, you know, and it meant more going out time and more nightclub time, more bars and everything. And also, being a gay man and all of that. It was an incredible place. It was very alive. It was riveting and people were interesting. And you know, much more different from being in the Bahamas.

But I would wear what I want. You know, I didn't think clothes have a gender. If I like a certain dress, whatever I put it on. As I said, I'm not a drag queen, but would have been the actual garment or the design of it. I like pretty things, I like nice things, hence the Manolo Blahnik shoes. Yeah.

So, I remember I suddenly thought there were like-minded people here at art school. We had wonderful tutors. I remember a man, he was

an illustrator, a man called Colin Barnes, who brought a life model – a young Chrissie Hynde – as a life model. And he would get her to walk across the room really quickly. And you would do a sketch within that time. And of course I could. I thought it was wonderful, wonderful training and you know, sort of wonderful tutors at the time.

I'm sure you would have heard the word 'Charles Fox'. They were having this closing down sale... it went on for years and everything. So, you would go and get the most outrageous paraphernalia from there, like pirate's clothes or whatever theatrical stuff and everything. So that was a great source of, like many people's wardrobe. A lot of people made their own clothes and everything. Again, like Stephen Linard who was at St Martins with me, an incredible designer. I know I would steal things from him and like wear it and he'd say 'where did you get that?' You know, but it was exciting getting dressed up and like I said, the main thing was makeup. So, you could just wear a T-shirt but like, you would look fabulous.

4. Interview with Steve Dagger

Duration: 4 minutes

Hi, I'm Steve Dagger and I am a talent manager and music publisher. My signature clients are Spandau Ballet who I've managed since 1977.

I was born and bred in London. Yes, my family were from the West End, from Soho, and I was brought up in Holborn. At that time, I was studying at London University, doing classes at the LSE. And I was also managing a band which was to become Spandau Ballet. I spent most of my time though, I've got to say, focused on sort of the pop culture of central London. Being born and raised in the West End, I was a child during the 60s and was really a sort of first-hand witness to everything that was going on and we saw all of swinging London going on. And as a sort of 7,8,9,10-year old you... one became very aware of it.

In the mid 70s, Punk exploded into central London. And it was exciting. I thought the Sex Pistols were absolutely fantastic and the great

thing about the punk groups were that they looked like us, they were the same age as the small audience that went to see them. And they looked like they'd come from a council estate as well. They had that look, and they certainly were not, sort of, sunbathing in Los Angeles or, you know? They were not part of what was by then, the rock establishment. They looked like the kids that went to your school.

In 1978, there was a huge feeling of disappointment because we had all thought that punk was our thing. And it and it wasn't, you know? And it had this self-destruct. It was really kind of like an art school installation. And at the time when I was, I was at the LSE, one of my friends, Simon Withers, had just started at Saint Martin's. And we used to often meet in the West End between lectures. Simon said to me in in October '78, he said actually 'there's a club. There's a new club, a Tuesday night club' and he knew somebody that had been last week. It was the first week, last week, and it was quite good, he said we should go. And so, we did. And it was Billy's. So, I said I'm going to bring Gary, and I think he brought other people as well.

And we went the second week, and Gary was equally excited by it. And I said, you know what? There's no band for this yet. This is a moment, we can seize this moment. And I could see his brain whirring and, you know, for a creative person, for a musician and a songwriter to go into a club like Billy's was a bit of a gift really. It was unbelievably underground in that it was something that wasn't reported on by the music press and it was fantastically underground. I mean, it was something that you had to be linked to – certain word-of-mouth chains – to know about it. It was not advertised. It was about as underground a thing as you can possibly imagine.