Mike Sangster Interview

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INTERVIEW—

You were involved in GAE in the 70s, to what extent: Learned about them in university, around 72, heard about it through good friend Robin Metcalfe, went to some of their meetings and started that way.

Dealing with? "Mostly about gay bashing, and things like that. Civil rights issues around gays and lesbians. About having our own bar, our own organization. After what had happened at Stonewall a couple of years before, we had heard about the gay organization in Toronto being set up, so we got set up and organized."

Us, Montreal Toronto and tk first four in Canada set up.

What was it like being gay then? "It was sort of scary. You realize it was illegal to be homosexual. Men and women were arrested. Some friends of mine that were in the navy, they got caught in a sting in Shelburne, at the naval base there. Another good friend of mine, he was drummed out because he was caught. There were things like that going on. Of course, the police could arrest you and put you in jail."

Grew up in Halifax. Started living as openly gay man in university. "I was going to university. I was on the wrestling team. I joined that sport for many reasons. But I was good at it. That's when they started, like I said, the GAE and in the university itself a bunch of gays and lesbians would get together and meet."

GLAD

"There was also a radio program on Sundays, and we were recorded on Saturdays, or Friday and it would be broadcast on Sunday mornings."

Gay and lesbian specific? Yeah. Early 70s.

International news, stuff like that.

Go to protests? "Oh yes, many a protest."

"Especially when we were organizing for gay rights week. That was a very important time in the 80s that came out. The organization was there, Rumours was there, and then there were specific people in the law community, gays and lesbians who were involved, eventually the court case, yeah..."

Most of the things, I was more involved with the running of Rumours, Gala...became their treasurer, served on their board a bunch of times.

-Around for the Turret.

-Thee Club memories?

"A lot of men and women would walk by the Green Lantern building, and they'd look both ways to see who was around and who wasn't. And when the coast was clear they'd duck in, go upstairs to the bar. It was that kind of feeling"

"Yeah, at times" (felt that way). "But for the most part I just walked up."

Dave Grey, Robin Metcalfe his friends. "It was a bunch of people that got together. It was an interesting time. The men, the women, we had specific issues to ourselves. We would not always agree with each other, but we'd come to a consensus. That was the strength of the organization...There are times, it didn't work

Hidleburg: "It was a restaurant, bar, the bar was up top and it was sort of, gay friendly, I would say. There were other places that were gay friendly, but you risked being gay bashed if you met the wrong person in those places. Where as if you were at Thee Club, or at The Turret, you basically felt comfortable enough around people to realize, 'Oh, we're all gay and lesbians here.'"

"I remember one time a friend of mine came in who I knew outside, and I said to him, 'Well, it's about time you got here.' And the big surprise on his face. So I kidded him about his first time, being at the gay bar."

Davids: "It was fun, ~~it was liberating while you were together with other gay men and lesbians. There wasn't the pressure to be straight, pretend. You could let your hair down. I met many lesbians who became great friends of mine.~~ All kinds....it was really a good time."

Davids: "Originally it was on the third floor, then it moved up to the fifth floor." "Not much bigger than this whole...this room and this room together, the dance room." "It wasn't really big at all. It wasn't until the Turret you had a bigger space...the difference was from the Turret was that it was gay and lesbian owned. It was owned by the community itself, the organization...

It was your own space. It wasn't owned by somebody else. It wasn't owned by the mafia or somebody who was straight. It was owned by the community, so the funds that were there could be used for the community. So you could have a helpline, the gay line, stuff like that, that came out of that."

Eventually Turret moved to Rumours, then again to Gottingen. "Where we were for many years. At that time, I guess we were the largest gay and lesbian bar in North America...at one time, because it was so huge."

Turret one big huge room.

Turret: Run mostly by volunteers, Al was on the door a couple of times, and then went over to Gottingen had a staff. "It was run by the community...but there was always politics involved, which was both intriguing and frustrating."

Internal squabling: "Oh yeah, lots of it. Sometimes it was, they couldn't decide on anything."

"Part of it's the diversity of the community. I know our enemies thought we were one united front...one monolith, this huge Gay, Lesbian monolith that was sweeping North America. And we're going, 'If they only knew...'"

Tensions: "A lot of it had to do with the differences of how people view drag queens, minorities that were in the community, like drag queens, leather people and different races. There was a lot of that at the time. There were attempts at one time to ban the drag queens, which was foolish, because half the staff were."

Many drag shows at all the places.

"Drag shows became an important part of the community, still are, but it's just one part of the community."

"Some of them were really, really good. Others were like, 'Oh my...'"

Other Turret events: "Christmastime, New Years Eve, the place would be packed, and Halloween. Halloween and New Years were big days, big nights, at either the Turret or Rumours. You were guaranteed a huge crowd...People coming with all kinds of different costumes."

Movie nights, once in a while.

Rocky horror, "That would be put on once a year, people would throw toast and popcorn at different cues."

Tensions between men and women in that space; "Always. The difference between men and women. We weren't always united in things"

Drag shows, shirtlessness for men became an issue

"I remember us looking into it with our lawyers. The lawyers looked into the whole thing about shirtlessness and said, yup, men can go shirtless. Women could if they were in like, a private club. Which, we were technically. The women didn't feel safe...and I don't blame women for feeling that way. It is about the sexuality and how comfortable you are with it. Some things are a lot more comfortable in doing it than others."

Certain type of Turret lesbian: "It was sort of diverse. There was what you'd call the lipstick lesbians. Then there was the, some would call them, diesel dykes. I remember one, she became a good friend of mine, because she came to the club all dressed in leather riding her motorcycle. Her girlfriends that she tended to have were a lot more feminine."

Certain aesthetic of men? "It was diverse, really. You'd have a lot of men, some were drag queens, some were more feminine then others."

You? "Mostly jeans and t-shirts, tight-fitting jeans. ~~In the early '70s, you wore these jeans that were poured onto your body. You could see a dimple on your legs."~~

Sometimes had a beard. (on his face)

~~"Disco was popular....Disco dancing was, 'wow! you're touching each other! you're holding each other!'~~ Whereas before there was a space between us...Disco and stuff like that, there was much more contact, which I thought made a breath of fresh air.

~~"My favourite song was Midnight Train to Georgia. Great waltz song, get your partner...that was one of the first songs I heard at Dave Grey's bar."~~

Other songs: Boney M, Rasputine, Apollos.

How much time at the Turret? "Thursday, Friday, Saturday nights. You'd start on Thursday night, then Friday and Saturday nights were busy. Thursdays were so-so."

Space helped in non-out life? "Yeah, it sort of did. You'd realize at the end of the week, 'Oh, Thursday night, I can go out! Let me hear down and be with friends I really want to be with.'"

At university until 1974, then working, mostly in construction work. Landed big job in the 80s with WestingHouse. "That's where I was until I retired."

Grandfather worked 52 years with Light and Power

Think often of those days: "I look back, and think about the people I've know—whatever happened to them, because a lot of them are gone because of what happened in the 80s with HIV and Aids. That was, I would say, a gloomy time, a dark time. It hit the gay community quite hard."

Lasting legacy of that time? "The activeness of the community. We didn't have our rights yet and we were fighting for them. Some people had been on the march with Martin Luther King two years before. Other people had experienced things like Stonewall. It was our first attempt to really organize and realize yes, things can happen if you really put your mind to it."

Violence against queer community: "Well...What sits at the back of my head is I wonder when this is going to happen to our community again. When it happens, well, there it is."

"I think the thing that we need to preach to or give to our youth is, be vigilant. Watch out, be vigilant. Things can flip over very quickly. We can lose our rights again."

MENTIONS NAZI GERMANY

"Things can change and people can change."

Hershfeldt, and his archives in gay Germany: "Here was a time that, there was a glimpse, a glimmer of help, of hope and it was taken away very quickly. We were saying we can't have this."

Continually 70s and 80s gay bashes happening. "There were people arrested just for being gay."

"Our future is really up to us. The new generation has to be careful."

ORLANDO: "You don't have the Turret, you don't have Rumours. Those were our safe spaces. Being on the board at Rumours, I remember asking the policemen, why they weren't coming to the gay bar and inspecting the gay bar all the time or checking on us. And he said 'We don't have to come here. You guys aren't fighting. The straight bars up on Brunswick and Spring Garden Road, that's where the fights are. So, they very seldom came around our areas unless they were called. Which was nice, in a sense."

Chris Sheppard: "You can't leave it to...the police aren't there so you've got to stand up" (on fighting back against gay bashers)

Carefree time, in many ways, "But at the back of your neck is this feeling of 'watch out.' This two-headed spectre that was around."

"I think it needs to be known. I think people need to know what happened in the past in here. Halifax is a naval port, a military port, so it's always had a gay and lesbian population. People don't realize that, or don't think about it, but it's always been there."

Remember any older gay men? "Yes! I met this gentlemen, my lover at the time, we went out to his place because my lover knew him and this guy was in his late 80s. He could tell stories about Halifax in the 40s, during wartime and stuff like that and different things happening with the police, both good and bad."

"There was cruising. There were certain bars in the city, anywhere where the navy was, those were cruising bars. When the navy would come into port, most of those men and women were coming back from six or seven month tours of duty, so there was always ;) to be had. That's the way it was. It was a seaport."

"Hipocrosy. The police would go arrest people, and then knock on his back window and want sexual favours. So, there was that."

You're first generation of activist gay elders? "I remember looking in my grandfather's chest, one of these big old wooden chests, and he had pictures of my great uncle, who let's put it this way, he was a world travelloer in his younger years, his youthful years, and it was not said but he was definitely gay. There would be photos of him from Miami, NY, San Diego, San Francisco. Him there on a beach in his bathing suit with his buddy next to him."

"They never told us, but he was living with another man. We called him our step-uncle. They were living together for 30 years."

Turret resurrection party? No, wasn't there.

Stay connected? "Once in a while we'll see each other, either on the street or...couple of years ago went to an..."

"It was a time of exploring. Of learning who you were as a human being, and sexuality was quite a part of it. I'm sure today's teens are going through the same thing and thinking the same thoughts about their sexualities, and hopefully learning healthier things."

"We knew what a penis was, what a vagina was. No one told us. I had five sisters...I remember, my sister next to me was a year younger, and the first time she had her period, 'What's happening?!'"

Al didn't come out till his 40s.

One person who came out just as he retired at 65 from his executive job. "His wife, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and now he felt able to come out, a little bit."