

## Pride History Group Oral History Interview with Johnny Allen

Interviewer: Scott McKinnon

Date of interview: 26 January 2013

Location of interview: Elizabeth Bay

Restrictions: None



Time	Summary	Key words
0000	Introduction	
0020	Born in Glen Innes. The family moved to Manly where he grew up in a working-class family.	Glen Innes; Manly;
0110	Realised he was gay when 14 or 15 and this was a struggle. No support or knowledge.	
0135	He identified with bohemian Kings Cross. People were more sympathetic to his ilk. He went to the Cross at weekends and any opportunity.	Bohemia; Kings Cross;
0225	Johnny went to university and teachers' college.	Rowe Street;
0250	He made lots of friends in the Cross.	Kings Cross;
0310	Attended a Christian Brothers Catholic primary and high school which was strict. The macho environment of high school didn't do much for him. Left school at 15 and did the Leaving Certificate as a private study candidate.	Christian Brothers; Leaving Certificate;
0410	Teachers' College was a wider liberal arts education. Workers' Educational Association was radical. Met with people like Frank Moorehouse there and absorbed radical US ideas from Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Burroughs.	Teachers' College; Workers' Educational Association; WEA; Ginsberg; Ferlinghetti; Burroughs;
0515	Moved away from home after Teachers' College to a house in Paddington – a suburb that was artistic and working class.	Paddington;
0540	Then went to the University of NSW and studied drama. Thought he would be an actor or director. But got involved with underground music and a venue, The Arts Factory at the bottom of Goulburn Street in Surry Hills. Previously the Anthony Hordern stables. It had two halls. One hall was for live bands and the other was arts and crafts and food stalls. They also showed films. A band called the Nutwood Rug an American Band with a farm at Ourimbah. He held regular concerts at their farm for 200 – 300 people. Like a festival with campsites. Dope smoking, sharing food.	University of NSW; Arts Factory; Goulburn Street; Bondi Lifesaver; Nutwood Rug; Ourimbah;
0755	This was happening at the same time as commercial rock festivals at Sunbury and Ourimbah and his festival was a counter to this commercialism.	Sunbury; Ourimbah;
0810	He got a job as cultural director for the Australian Union of Students and his job was to create a concert circuit around Australia and with Graeme Dunstan overseeing the Fourth combined universities arts festival. The arts festival was to be at Melbourne University and they made the decision to take it out of there and start a conversation about alternative lifestyles and it became the Nimbin Aquarius Festival.	Australian Union of Students; AUS; Graeme Dunstan; Melbourne University; Nimbin Aquarius Festival;
0905	Nimbin Aquarius Festival attracted 10,000 people. When touring around the countryside (?with Phil Oakes, the radical folk singer, Rob Cobb the cartoonist) they would gather all sorts of people who were doing interesting things and explained the idea of the Festival as a gathering of minds. After a year they had gathered several hundred people who were volunteers. They included student architects from Sydney and NSW Universities who built the structures for the Festival. The ideas from the Nutwood farm events were brought to the Festival and it was not about a program of bands but people's participation. The Festival was held in 1973.	Nimbin Aquarius Festival; Phil Oakes; Rob Cobb; Sydney University; University of NSW;

1100	After the Festival, Johnny lived up there for about a year. He felt limited by the “macho sort of sexist aspect of the counter-culture” and then went to the US. He spent some time in San Francisco and then New York. Gay culture was at a high point in San Francisco in 1976 and very liberating. It was more woven into the counter-culture there and straight society. Sydney by comparison was homophobic.	San Francisco; New York; Homophobia; Gay Culture;
1315	Gay culture included rap groups, music festivals, film culture. In New York he was absorbed into the punk scene. People like Patti Smith and the freshness of thought. It was not gay per se but flexible in its sexuality.	Gay Culture; New York; Patti Smith;
1400	After a year he returned with these ideas. Sydney was in a recession and he managed to lease the Paris Theatre, at the end of Oxford Street close to the City. He planned to use income from screening films to finance other forms of culture, recreate the multi-media aspect of the Arts Factory and introduce New York new wave e.g. film called <i>Blank Generation</i> ; and work with the few new wave bands in Sydney.	Paris Theatre; Oxford Street; Arts Factory; Blank Generation;
1540	He brought over <i>Word Is Out</i> . Upfront, honest interviews of a range of gay people, simple format. It broadened people’s horizons away from the hackneyed images of gays.	Word is Out;
1640	He had been doing mini-film festivals and decided to build a gay film festival with advice from Dennis Altman and others. It opened with <i>Word is Out</i> . This sort of thing hadn’t been done before. “There was a feeling in the air of breaking through, people were no longer prepared to be straight jacketed by traditional Australian culture.”	Dennis Altman; Boys in the Band; Andy Warhol; Rainer Fassbinder;
1900	“Gay anarcho feminism” was a phrase used to describe the atmosphere in Darlinghurst at the time. There was “a real sense of community”.	Gay Anarcho Feminism;
1940	A few months later he heard that Jimmy Sharman was putting together a season of plays and he invited him to put them on at the Paris Theatre. The theatre was converted to live theatre. This was the middle of 1978.	Jimmy Sharman; Paris Company; Paris Theatre;
2030	Offered a two day a week job as Theatre Co-ordinator at the Stanley Palmer Culture Palace which was funded by the Health Department to assist marginalised communities. This was through Peter Collingwood, the director.	Stanley Palmer Culture Palace; Health Department; Peter Collingwood;
2135	Started up Gay Men’s Rap at Stanley Palmers. Modelled on a group he was involved with in San Francisco. A large group of 50 or so would break into small groups and talk on a topic. It was a way of communicating outside the commercial bar structure. Topics could be personal – like <i>Word is Out</i> – or cultural and political, like gay theatre.	Gay Men’s Rap; San Francisco; Word is Out;
2310	This led to two theatre groups. First, first he had been working on a cabaret strand with Fifi l’amour and with Fifi started <i>Cabaret Conspiracy</i> as a platform for performers they knew. Doris Fish and Mel were comperes. It was held in a space above a garage called Garibaldi’s. It held a couple hundred people.	Fifi l’amour; Cabaret Conspiracy; Doris Fish; Mel; Garibaldi’s;
2625	Second, under the aegis of the Stanley Palmer Culture Palace he set up the Gay Theatre Company. Permission granted to stage <i>As Time Goes By</i> . Dennis Altman wrote an alternative third act set in Sydney. Doris starred together with others from Cabaret Conspiracy. Played a season at the Film Makers Co-op. This was early 1979.	Stanley Palmer Culture Palace; Gay Theatre Company; As Time Goes By; Dennis Altman; Doris Fish; Cabaret Conspiracy; Film Makers’ Co-op;
2730	After the bust of the first mardi gras, the energy had started to rise. There was a cross over between the activists and Cabaret Conspiracy. “Celebration was more	Mardi Gras;

	powerful than confrontation” was his thinking. Mardi Gras was a better way than street demonstration.	
2930	The Cabaret Conspiracy began winding down in the early 80s. Gentrification started to happen. John O’Connell went on to <i>Strictly Ballroom</i> . Jeff Kelso and Lance Curtis (?) and George Smilovici went on to be well known comedians and Elena Kats became Elena Katz-Chernin the composer.	Cabaret Conspiracy; John O’Donnell; Strictly Ballroom; Jeff Kelso; Lance Curtis; George Smilovici; Elena Katz-Chernin;
3120	Michael Matou <i>Sideshow</i> took on some of the performers - Fifi l’amour, Simon Reptile, Boom Boom La Berne.	Michael Matou; Sideshow; Fifi l’amour; Simon Reptile; Boom Boom La Berne;
3150	He began Palms a cabaret venue on Oxford Street. \$2 entry fee less sound hire were the performers’ takings. Then put on specific groups like Sideshow and performers from Melbourne. Did this until the mid 1990s. Then went back to festivals and events.	Palms; Sideshow;
3430	Johnny’s sexuality in the early years prior to going to the US. With the Arts Factory, his gay aesthetic may have had an influence, but the Factory presented to the world as a mixed media music venue. Bands had gay members known to their inner circle. It came to the fore in the Paris years with Ignatius Jones in Jimmy and the Boys. The rock scene was macho heterosexual. It was a struggle for Johnny.	Arts Factory; Paris Theatre; Ignatius Jones; Jimmy and the Boys;
3700	With theatre, some groups had a strong gay sensibility for example Performance Syndicate directed by Rex Cramphorn.	Performance Syndicate; Rex Cramphorn;
3740	He was not comfortable at commercial gay venues.	
3850	Description of the Paris Cinema. Opened in 1915 as the Australia Picture Palace designed by Walter Burley Griffin. Hoyts had covered over this to make it look like other picture theatres. It was in good condition and the film equipment remained. It had been used for live theatre.	Paris Cinema; Australia Picture Palace; Walter Burley Griffin;
4050	The direction he took the Paris was different to any other theatre at the time. The Mandolin and the one on Glebe Point Road were similar, but he introduced cabaret and New York film. A punk aesthetic was new.	Paris Cinema; Mandolin; Punk;
4400	No issue with censorship – once films were given a rating there was not an issue.	Censorship;
4550	There was enough people with shared ideas, shared values in Darlinghurst, so that what they were doing “sat well” with the neighbourhood. They were banned from Garibaldi’s(?) over a flyer depicting Mickey Mouse crucified, designed by David Schofield and they had to use the Side Effects Collective’s space. And a Gay Theatre Company poster by David Schofield with up front sexual imagery offended feminists and was changed.	Darlinghurst; Garibaldi’s; Mickey Mouse; David Schofield; Side Effects; Gay Theatre Company;
4815	The Gay Film Festival in 1978. Johnny saw it as part of building an upfront gay culture and some of the same people were involved in the festival, the Conference in August and the mardi gras in June. Included also was the exhibition at the Watters Gallery. The artists collective at Side Effects, although not gay, there was a feminist strand to it. This was what he had seen in San Francisco and it happened fairly quickly here.	Gay Film Festival; Fourth National Homosexual Conference; Watters Gallery; Side Effects;
5020	He agrees that a film festival would attract a wider audience than purely activists – Patrick White attended - mixing with activists.	Patrick White;
5155	He called the festival, <i>Images of Gays</i> and with Dennis Altman screened films of how gays were represented in the past ( <i>Boys in the Band</i> ). And this was changing with <i>Word is Out</i> . He was interested in the changes that had happened. He also	Images of Gays; Dennis Altman; Boys in the Band; Word is Out;

	screened, <i>Sunday, Bloody Sunday</i> , and <i>Sergeant</i> . He wasn't playing to an activist audience. The lesbian films like <i>Therese and Isabelle</i> did not do well.	Sunday Bloody Sunday; Sergeant; Therese and Isabelle;
5500	Screening gay films in a theatre in a prominent location at that time with a large audience of gays was for Johnny political. It was the first time in Sydney, but was taken for granted in San Francisco.	
5645	His attitude towards politics, "politics is very much about the personal interactions you have and what's possible in the space and the culture around you".	
5730	Memories of the Film Makers' Co-op. It was approached as a more suitable location for a play for the Gay Theatre Company. Seated 80 people. It was run by Mike Jacobs and the Co-op was sympathetic.	Film Makers' Co-Op; Gay Theatre Company; Mike Jacobs;
10010	Johnny refers back to his days at university where his contemporaries were Germaine Greer, Martin Sharpe, Richard Neville etc. "We had a sense of that post war conservative government had been in power for a whole generation prior to us, and there was a new generation coming through who were better educated ... were prepared to challenge the powers that be and we had a feeling of our own rightness, and right to do so."	Germaine Greer; Martin Sharpe; Richard Neville;
10130	How did things change in the 1980s? Slowly. Terms like underground did not mean much anymore.	
10300	He did work for the Bi-Centennial Authority for Newcastle. Previously he had worked for an underground elite and here he was working with a working-class city. The theme again was celebration of certain values.	Bi-Centennial Authority; Newcastle;
10400	He had the Darling Harbour Events Manager job for seven years. His vision was a village green for Sydney.	Darling Harbour;
10700	He then set up a training course in Event Management. He describes how the Aquarius festival was planned and set up, toilets, catering, the stage etc.	Event Management;
11020	The gay festival associated with Mardi Gras is not as political but important for gays to meet up with others.	Mardi Gras;
11155	Gay film festivals have become more commercial.	
11330	Changes in the 1980s with AIDS. Pre-AIDS a revelling in the sleaze and of the moment. People became cautious. It took a while for the theatre and film culture to reflect that change. We lost a lot of icons of the early gay culture.	AIDS;
11540	Johnny took his cabaret into the mainstream with the Australian cabaret festival. The first Festival Club for the Sydney Festival.	Australian Cabaret Festival; Festival Club; Sydney Festival;
11840	When he came back Darlinghurst it was no longer what it was and the gay scene had moved to Newtown.	Darlinghurst; Newtown;
12040	As a child, he had a suburban upbringing, with no gay models of any sort. He felt isolated and lonely. He went to the Public Library of NSW and getting out Ginsberg's <i>Howl</i> and it was mind blowing "there's someone else!" And Genet's <i>Ladies of the Flowers</i> . And Burroughs were three authors who were a lifesaver for him. It was not only about gay sex, but a gay aesthetic. This led him into the early days of the Push, which was pretty macho. There was a gay strand coming up.	Public Library of NSW; Allan Ginsberg; Jean Genet; William Burroughs; Push;
12420	Friends in his bohemian days were not necessarily homosexual but they all had an openness to life, experimentation and vitality, a complete opposite to the suburban environment. "These are the people I want to be with". A continuity between bohemia, the underground culture that became Nimbin, Darlinghurst, the gay scene,	Bohemia; Nimbin; Darlinghurst;

	"the openness, the tolerance, the willingness to think beyond the normal strictures of morality in society."	
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