

QUEER ENCOUNTER: TWIGGY

#QueerEncounter with Twiggy at her home with our respective dogs - Ena and Nick - 11.09.2018 By Elly Clarke



<Twiggy> When people go 'what do you look like without your makeup?' I mean, what's the fucking point, or 'let me see a picture of you with no drag on?' I say well take your shoes off! People wouldn't come to a show to see me on stage, but they come to see me in drag, pottering about pissed... It's a different thing you know. I think Danny La Rue goes to a venue, goes into the changing room, comes out, performs, goes back in and takes it all off again. They wouldn't want to see Dan going into a changing room.

<Elly> And how long have you been doing Twiggy?

<T> Oh God! Since 82/83 so it's a long time.

<E> And it's always been Twiggy?

<T> Yes - which I'm a bit disappointed about to be honest. You know Patti? Patti Bell? It was her and they used to call me Twiglet when I was working in the shop. So that's why it was just abbreviated... There were so many other names... I've just been kind of shackled with this name since then.

<E> And do you have other alter egos?

<T> No Trevor asked me that. Multiple personalities... No there's only that really. But with the drag thing there are three looks that I've got really. There's the club one, which is the huge shoes; I'd say there's like the club thing with all the masks and that. I was only wearing masks because I was fucking lazy. So there's that. And then there's the stage look, which was all variations on a theme. Because obviously I can't parade around stage in those huge boots. But if I was to walk around in big headdresses with some other shoes on... So it's what works for which context. But I'd say there's two or three major looks but there's no deviance or anything totally different...

<E> It's all the same character

<T> Yes... just adapted really.

<E> And did she emerge - that name emerged out of being called Twiglet, and did you then go out for the first time in drag and that was Twiggy?

<T> No I was more Goth, I was just working in a shop. I didn't even think about going on stage or anything.

<E> Do you remember the first time you performed as Twiggy?

<T> I was always called Twiglet and Twiggy but it wasn't advertised. You mean me alone?

<E> I mean you as Twiggy. Did it start as you dressed up to go out?

<T> It was in the 80s and it was New Romantic and I looked like that in the day then anyway. Three hours to get ready to go to college... But if you mean to do actually my own stuff on stage - as Twiggy,

with an outfit, yeah it was probably in the 90s I guess... the early 90s... That's when I was branding myself and putting my name on things and doing stage shows which were advertised as me, hoping to attract an audience! So it was definitely in the 90s. Then all through the 90s everything is just a big blur. But that's the majority of photos that I have. 'Cos everybody was starting to get digital cameras and stuff like that... oh no.

<E> No, it was still analogue then but they were bringing them out.

<T> But I've always taken cameras with me.

<E> What were your first memories of Birmingham if you moved here when you were, what, 16?

<T> Oh god no, I was about 12. '75 - so 9 or 10. My sister was three and she's 5, 6 years younger than me so yeah, must have been Kinder! Child!!

<E> And do you remember your first impressions of Birmingham?

<T> Well we lived in Highgate. Lea Bank - you know where the McDonalds is on Bristol Road, then it goes up to Five Ways, the train station, we lived around there. Nightingale Walk it was. But it was really weird because in Birkenhead in Liverpool there was no black people! It was just white working class... And that was really really strange, I remember that. And then going to a school which was so busy and there was a lot more people here. Because we lived right next to the city centre as well, which was great, everything was within walking distance. I don't know it was a bit of a blur. But as soon as I got a bit older, I'd go ice skating and things like that. And I lost my accent! There's still a bit of a twang apparently now - when I see my folks and that sort of thing. But now I wish I had a scouse accent!

<E> How was it coming out?

<T> I don't know. There was never... I'm the oldest child and oldest grandchild and between me and the next birth - I think it might have been my sister, so there's a good 5 years so I was the first child. And I think you can more or less get away with anything then can't you? I was never conscious of being gay, just nothing. So it had never been an issue with me, and it had never been an issue with any of the other family members.



<E> That's great.

<T> Yes, we'd never considered it.

<E> And in school?

<T> Oh school was different. Yeah. I was usually fighting in school. I think it toughened me up a bit. But for me it's probably better, actually I'd probably prefer that. To make sure that I can... I mean I wouldn't go in search of trouble. It would probably be easier as it always is to avoid trouble. But if you need to defend yourself you do. But if you know you can go down this way and it'll be safer... But I'd never not go a certain way just to avoid something. And the more you're aware of it you think about it yourself and it is probably worth it

to take an extra five minutes - and it probably is.
<E> <story about Gorkitz Park in Berlin and whether you feel brave enough to walk across it at night.>

<T> For me, nothing is set in stone. I will, sometimes I won't. With everything, absolutely everything.

<E> And Hurst Street has not been there forever as that has it?

<T> No no! You know where the Dragon BBQ, that pub, the Wetherspoons and stuff. None of that existed then, the Arcadian, none of that at all. It was just dirty old factories. And Missing was there, but it was called the Australian Wine Bar.

<E> But it wasn't gay.

<T> No. But at the bottom of Hurst Street there was a kind of Gothish place. The further along you went, where Missing is, on that side where you've got Clone Zone and everything now, there was a record shop, Rocker's Records, the Wine Bar - another wine bar! But it was the 80s! And then there was Kahn & Bell, which was the shop - and then it was just desolate. And where those old back to backs, that was like an old cab rank, and a chip shop, a fish and chip shop on the corner.

<E> And was there a gay bar, a single gay bar in your youth?

<T> Yes there was The Jester, which has been there forever, and you know where the Hippodrome is, which is Glamorous now, that was a pub called The Windmill and then it changed to Partners and it got a bit more busy then. And then I think Tin Tins opened but then of course with the drug scene and everything - don't take a picture now!! Me doing my washing!!

<E> I won't do anything with your image - <takes photo> ...But the whole of Hurst Street - that was a kind of decision, no? And was it also the same time that became a very Chinese area?

<T> Anywhere you go in the world, the hookers, the gays and the Chinese.

<E> Yeah, and the artists.

<T> And the artists. Every city I've been in the world this is how it is. I noticed it a few years ago and thought wow, this is insane.

<E> Or it's an immigrant community, whichever one it is. In Berlin it's the Turkish community that lives next to all the sex clubs and stuff...

<T> It's great.

<E> What was the first gay pub that's still on Hurst Street that opened?

<T> There wasn't one. I'd say the only one is Glamorous, and it's changed hands four or five times.
<E> What about The Village?

<T> No, didn't exist. It was an old man's pub. If you look on Google Images, there are black and white images of it. And Eden that was the old White Swan, which was down and out - no one was working then, so it was down and out, grubby, rent boy places. That was that little cross over... You know if you come out of the stairs by Grand Central, you go down the huge huge staircase and there was the Silver Slipper, which is like where all the rent boys used to go, and there was another place round the corner called Station, I think that it might still be there. That was all rent boys and stuff. But there were no actual bars. Tin Tins was just one floor when it opened - where Debenhams is now, and then underneath here was a little bar called M&M's so it was a bit dispersed, but it was developing and then Hurst Street opened, but everything started really small. There was no big corporate takeover, it was just a slow process.

<E> Oh OK, that's good to know.

<T> There was no, you know like in some cities, oh let's make this city...

<E> Like Canal Street.

<T> Or Docklands yes exactly... There was no...

<E> So it was a kind of organic thing that happened and it was just easier.

<T> ...slow but sure

<E> For all the gay bars to be in the same place.

<T> Yes. And then with all the drugs and all that, everyone taking ecstasy in the 90s, the whole drug scene and that changed things a lot, and I often wonder what would have happened if there hadn't have been that, because it did bring a lot of people, big groups of people, together that maybe didn't mix with each other before. ...They were all going to the clubs. A lot of the clubs expanded their size, they moved to bigger venues, well especially the Gale, The Nightingale really did change to cope with the number of people who were coming. But there was no conscious... But now everything is so corporate.



<E> That's the thing, because I'm trying to imagine Hurst Street not being corporate, as it's so corporate.

<E> So when did the real corporate thing happen?

<T> We don't mention names. But there was a big shift. Because the places were getting bigger and they required sponsorship there was Pride as well, that was taking over. I mean the first Pride there were just half a dozen drunks on Hurst Street.

<E> When was the first Pride?

<T> '97 I think.

<E> Half a dozen drunks!

<T> You know, I know I shouldn't whinge about it and it's all kind of useful, but I preferred Pride and stuff when there were just the main ones, when there was like the London one, and people looked forward to it the whole year. And now there's -

<E> A Pride in every place.

<T> Yeah it's... village idiots in the local park and it's lost the value and I just think those people could be pissed any time of the year or day... There's not the value that there was. No one's fighting for anything anymore now, everything's too easy.

<E> Even though there's so much to fight for right now.

<T> Yes.

<E> I went on the anti-Trump march in July: 250,000 people and so peaceful. Everybody knew that one person doing something wrong was going to wreck it forever. It was really moving, actually.

<T> That whole sense of everybody from everywhere. People always say I object to paying. But if you save one pound a week, you've got the money. It's a one off event. But you've got to remember that because of that integration and that mix, that's how things have grown and you can't say oh well I don't approve of it, because you need that historical aspect for it to get as big as it is.

<E> Capitalism on speed in every aspect of life. Homeless people being asked if they have a card reader...

<T> Easy come easy go. Everybody's two or three paycheques away from...

<homeless discussion>

<E> In terms of drag there's this whole new wave

isn't there. What do you think about the new young drag scene?

<T> Well I'm swings & roundabouts. I think it's very nice that the tradition is carrying on, but I've thought about it a couple of days ago and I'm going to speak to a few people and thought if I can just get a couple of stages, even if nobody shows up, just to give them the chance to see that not everything is about RuPaul. And such a shame but it's also made things a bit open but I just think you didn't really need to, that would have happened anyhow... and just the... concentration on it in the last 3 years, considering that show has been around for 10 years, and RuPaul is the same age as me. I just think... You've had plenty of time to sort it out. It's just like dominos, everybody just falling...

<E> Makeup artists behind them?

<T> But It's quite nice I think anything that improves or changes and challenges is quite a good thing, but it's not always the best way of doing it as a short sharp shock doesn't always last... Like, well I wasn't around when it was decriminalised... but Section 28 and then AIDS hit - so there's always going to be a bump in the road... Nothing's going to be good or last in a good way forever. I'm not pessimistic but realistic.

<E> <Thomas Doherty - do you know him? He's a friend of Sean's. And he played #Sergina as well...> <Lady Miss Ikea performing at RuPaul's Werkit Tour in Royal Festival Hall Lobby> Young queer kids with their Mums and also young straight girls with their Mums.

<T> Every so often I'll have a couple of jars and come out drunk and annoyed and say: False hair, false nails, false eyelashes, false tits, false this, as high heels as possible - they're just regular women!... and people go mad at me. I don't know. It's just bizarre.

<E> When I arrived in Birmingham after Berlin people



couldn't read my gender, they either thought I was a boy or was a straight woman. I was either called Sir or I was flirted with by straight men - my gender wasn't readable. Or, I went for a drink at the Ivy actually, just to go and see it, the other day, just to look, and I could have gone there as #Sergina and everyone would have thought I was just dressed up for a normal night out. No one would have known. My drag would have been invisible.

<T> Plain Jane! Just dressed up for a regular night out!

<E> Yes!

<T> Yeah and there's load of silly little niggly things. I mean I was assaulted and attacked so there could be a bit of envy there.

<E> You have been?

<T> Oh yes. Over 20 years. Nothing over the last... Well it could still happen. People still get attacked and blah blah. But things just seem now a lot easier for people - but that's only because of the last 3, 4 years.

<E> True, it's very recent isn't it?

<T> But it will change again. It will change.

<E> For the worse?

<T> Yes... The novelty will wear off. It won't be as



much fun... I've always been a big fish in a small pond, which is fine. I've never been overambitious I'll go and work 4 nights a week in a factory or whatever. It doesn't bother me. I'd always done what I wanted to do, and been quite fortunate that I've been able to do that. But I've also been responsible. Always had my own properties. Have always had at least one or maybe 2 full time or part time jobs as well as doing the drag. I'd always find a way to do that as it's more important to me than doing a world tour.

<E> It's about priorities isn't it. And also about the freedom. I think it's very interesting that you don't want people to recognise you. #Sergina came about out of a need for a pop star for my songs who couldn't be me... <And I like that people don't recognise Elly in Sergina, or see #Sergina in Elly necessarily... I went to India when I was 18 and swore to never be famous for how I look. I never want to be recognised walking down the street. But at the same time I do quite like to be centre of attention every now and then.>

<T> Well then you can switch it on and off... For me I've always done it, rather than thinking never as a way to get money that is a way to be seen. I've always had to do it. If I had to paint something, I would do that. Whatever I do. I mean, I can sit and sew for hours and hours and hours, what I've made will be on or photographed for 20 minutes that's it, and it'll never be seen again. So it's more the creative side and the experimenting rather than the attention. If that makes sense.

<E> Yes exactly! It's the process. It's a meditative process... Tactile, visual.

<T> It'll last for five minutes or five decades.

<E> Of course also you probably had also many outfits that were never photographed at all!

<T> well it's quite nice because then you can duplicate things. Even though it's really difficult. If you don't have photographs you don't remember it really, you don't know what it's done...

<T> I did sell a lot of stuff and I made 1000s. But then I couldn't be bothered to do it this time ... And then there's another guy that I met in Liverpool a few years ago and he lived in Australia, he lives in America now. And he bought must have been 12, 15 hundred quids worth of stuff off me and shifted it to Australia. But it's quite nice that he has that all together now. And it's quite nice that if someone says have you got this that or the other that he has it.

<E> He bought it in bulk from eBay?

<T> No from me. Well, some from me, some from eBay. He paid for an extra seat on the aeroplane and took it back with him to Australia.

<Tea Drinking, Dogs Playing>

<E> And Sean said as well that this building, that they put a lot of people affected by AIDS in here.

<T> There was no where to go in the 90s/

<E> So were there a lot of empty flats in here? Is this Council owned?

<T> It was then but it as transferred to Housing Association, maybe 10 years ago.

<E> But you have the right to stay here? Or you own it?

<T> No I just rent it. But it's quite handy cos I'm not tied down.

<E> But you can't be kicked out right?

<T> No.

<E> So this became...

<T> Pearly Gate it was called... And there are a few people who moved in for six months to a year and you never saw them again. That was that time.

<E> When was that? The 80s?

<T> No, the early 90s. Well, I moved here in 94 and there were still people dying then. It's only the last 10 years that it's slowed down. Do you take milk?

<<Word for word transcript of the first 41 minutes of a conversation with Twiggy that lasted 2 hours. Many thanks to Twiggy for a totally stimulating conversation.>>

- Photographs by Elly Clarke featuring photographs of Twiggy 1995-2005



Twiggy with Sean Burns and Elly Clarke at Missing, September 2018