

9 words for Offsite 9

Bobby Tiwana interviews Ni Singh

Bobby: Hello I'm Bobby Tiwana, I'm a Creative Producer of Live Performance, the occasional short film and a hand full of podcasts about a thing or two. In this podcast I will be talking to contemporary artists commissioned as part of Offsite 9 to complement the touring British Art Show 9 in Wolverhampton. Welcome to 9 words.

Bobby: In this episode I talk to a man of many talents, artist Ni Singh, using eclecticism as a starting point.

Ni: The start for me is music, essentially, I'm a song writer but I'm also a producer. I guess I play a fair amount of instruments.

Bobby: Like?

Ni: Like very digital. Being production based, so I play guitars, I play bass, I play some rudimentary keyboards, enough to get away with but not enough to sit at a piano in a Smoky Jazz Cafe in London. I wouldn't do that. I would I would I would hammer out like riffs and and beats those things. I can probably just hold a little bit of a tune with a with a saxophone, strings are beyond me. I can take a beat, I can hold a beat but my son's a drummer, I'm not. Yeah, it starts with music for me it's not my first artform I suppose, because writing was my first art form and I was kind of like I started in journalism and PR then I got into music very late. So if we start from...I don't know where we start from...do we start from, I fell into music I wasn't formally trained, I didn't go to any...

Bobby: How did you fall into music?

Ni: I left home when I was seventeen, I went to London did a range of things including working in a PR company, writing press releases for dodgy people and I was quite good at it. I went back to college and the only thing I did at college was I did politics, because I was working in London as a lobbyist at the time and very strangely went to college and then I think I was I was singing somewhere

probably in the bath or somewhere and this guitarist said “you've got a voice haven't you” and I went “I don't really know”, I was like it wasn't for me when I was growing up. I was too busy surviving but, he said you should try singing so I started in college bands. But that was when I was like 19 and then I start picking up the guitar which was very late and then started to kind of like put the two together and started writing. So I really start, that's my journey that how it starts with me but to where I am with Offsite 9 that's a journey, but that journey for me is shaped by a lot of things, it's shaped by my childhood and well tragedy as well as the bleeding hilarious and downright surreal. So I started writing in a very very pop way, I was into guitar wanted to be a kind of a kind of indie rock star, got into college bands and play guitars and we did all those sorts of things.

Bobby: So who were your heroes then? Musically?

Ni: Musically my heroes were still around oh gosh, I had those eighties heroes as well so things like Americana I loved The Cars that was really surreal one. I loved Bowie of course, Bowie was always a standard for everyone who does eclectic work I suppose, but also really kind of strange things like very pop-y things. The first record I bought was by Carl Douglas called Kung Fu Fighting, that was a hilarious one. So I like pop music, you know there were Australian bands I really liked things like Crowded House, INXS were fantastic, U2 early U2 I was brought up on that. So a lot of it was very Anglo actually, and for me which is really cos I was brought up a very anglophile way cos my heritage. So when I, I got through that college era and started to, there was a point where I could've gone either way, I was asked back to go into commercial political consultancy by the company I used to work with in London after finished my degree or I could hold my guitars and carry on playing as a scuzzy musician who was not making a lot of money so I did that instead. And that's really but that that's really were it kind of my musical journey started but it didn't end there because what happened to me, was samplers and electronic music were just starting to like really impact on how musicians started to pick up, synthesizer were there from the seventies really actually but samplers you're talking eighties and onwards

and you're talking the ability to loop and that notion of dance music and house and those things so whilst I started in guitar bands I suddenly thought wow there's this real electronic sound here, it's a different sonic-ness than live musicians. So I started really getting into like dance and that kind of genre. But I then I also started listening to, and I hate genres generally so if I say I was listening to world music I would refute that term cos it horrifies me, world music. What I started to listen to was music with an eclectic and non-western feel so for people like Natasha Atlas and Transglobal Underground people like that, Talvin Singh, to people like Toots and the Maytals to people like, dub artists like gosh King Tubby and all those artists that suddenly I start getting into, as well as electronic music as well as my passion for like playing dirty guitars and finding that three or four minute pop song. So that's where the, mix of my kind of palette now, that's the range I suppose.

Bobby: Can you give me any references to the electronic music?

Ni: People like Orbital, the Orb, people like Jesus Jones who were using samplers in a live way. A lot of artists too started, took electronic music a lot of solo artists had started to incorporate it their work too. So even the likes of Bowie, even the likes of U2 were starting to use samplers in their music and people cottoned on, those people really liked to innovate so people like the Orb, Orbital, The Chemical Brothers people like The Prodigy of course, who were using samplers in quite an aggressive way too, quite punky. So those were the people I kind of absorbed as well but I just absorb a lot of stuff, I do.

Bobby: So what's happening for you? You know you've got the guitar; you've got the electronic and you've got the you know the non-anglicised references to music. So what is that palette doing for you? What can you do with it?

Ni: That palette starts with, there's another element to that palette though which starts with lyric and with narrative, so narrative for me is quite important. Whether that be in a three-minute pop song or things which I'm doing right now which are interesting, which are non-lyrical compositions for dance companies or for

commercial music, I've done a fair share of those things. So narrative for me as an artist and a songwriter it all starts with lyric and it always did. But then a lyrical content would be so, for me I like to watch the world from a bi-line and that's another lyric in there too. It's the way that I absorb the world, I'm not a preacher but I am an onlooker who has a very critical eye so it could be people's obsession with retina displays and mobile phone technology and the inability to converse would for me form a narrative, which I have explored in a in a piece of work. That piece of work of course could be verse chorus verse chorus middle eight which is your standard kind of western way of writing songs but I can still do it. But so if we take that lyric and start to build for me then, when I first started all the electronic, electronica I still played guitar mainly so I would always start with an acoustic and a lot of stuff I start with acoustic. But what I really found difficult was that acousticians which I can be if you want me to be and I have done things like the glee club and those acoustic kind of performances at festivals. I find it one quite limiting and two quite lonely so what I started to do was okay let's, I strip out everything, strip out the guitars which isn't a lot to strip out because I'm still I'm still very simplistic in my writing you know and I start to build and sometimes I start to build from boots upwards and then I start to look at sounds on a palette sounds I have, from Arabic strings which is sampled from old Arabic records and my father was heavily into Arabic music because he worked in Saudi Arabia as an engineer for a long time, so he brought me a lot of that and then I also start to look at Egyptian percussion, not that kind of a really interesting eclectic sounds from a lot of gypsy, the Balkans lots of samples like that. So I started to use my sampler in a kind of global way. So I kind of collect this palette of sound which I then utilise and kind of knit into still those I love songs but I love dance music too and that creates some conflict because generally speaking dance music was always non really lyrical you know, it was always about the groove and the emotion and the loop and the sound and the dirtiest basses now. And we go through those days those eras of really dirty bass and the eras of really kind of layered kick drums and those things I find myself being more of a

technician, which I hate by the way, that fascinates me because I think actually lyrically you can still create narrative and infectious melody with your lyric and if you strip down everything I do it would stand up in clubs if you strip down everything I did and reintroduce a guitar it would stand up in an acoustic club. And that's what makes me tick. I love that because I think a song is a song, that's a western thing a song but we have songs from global songs are global songs aren't they, different structure whether that be a pentatonic scale or whether that be Persian or whether that be a very blues-y scale? Well I don't want this to be as technical as it is. It's very technical in terms of music, that's not me at all. Can we talk about doughnuts? [laughs]

Bobby: Have you had any recently?

Ni: No, I stopped the doughnuts a while ago. Sorry, that was a red herring, I'll stop the red herrings as well.

Bobby: But there was always a little trolley on the top of Dudley Street isn't there? That's been there for years, do you remember that?

Ni: So people who don't know Wolves, the trolley you're talking about there was 6 doughnuts for a pound, of course with with inflation that that's still £1, but now you get three doughnuts and that's the, that's the tragedy of life because life gets more expensive as you get old.

Bobby: I suppose that's not bad because I think I was a child, you know, when I remember it probably cheaper than a pound.

Ni: I do remember it being great because as a student I remember we'd rock up and getting eighteen doughnuts for some ridiculous thing. Now I'm just drinking smoothies and...

Bobby: We're on the other side of doughnuts.

Ni: We are yeah the rice cake has replaced the doughnuts sadly in lots of ways. That's gonna get to a point where veganism will take a hold in terms of how we consume but then again...

Bobby: Are you a vegan?

Ni: No, heck. I'm more selective. I would've eaten anything that I could have taken in a fair fight but I mean, you know so don't, didn't eat beef, because cows are quite large. But I did eat pork and I ate chicken but coming from Guyana which is South America, so that's where my background was and Jamaica. But meat was if you went home then somebody would kill a chicken as celebration and that's the meat you had or else it was proper dahl, it was proper rice and peas and only that, it was things which you would you know which British chefs now cook with like cow foot and pigs trotters and those things because actually we used everything and when you're poor, you make it work don't you. On a real level.

Bobby: So what you saying is the chicken would have been special occasions?

Ni: Totally and the best Chicken in the world because actually it was probably the most free range, those elements so I don't really that's all I eat. I love my fish because Guyana's below sea level so we have a lot of fish and it'sss Amazon Basin so we had we had crazy fish. But I got put off by fish in the UK because all I could find at one point was cod and haddock and kippers and whilst I love those, I couldn't find like a fish that is called the gilbaka which is related to the piranha which we eat, which is gorge...we...can...

Bobby: Related how?

Ni: It's the bigger brother, the piranha is the smaller brother.

Bobby: It's got sharp teeth as well?

Ni: Yes it's got sharp teeth but you can't eat those. I lived in Guyana which is the only British speaking country in South America. so that's the surreal nature of Guyana. The BBC would send nature, Natural Historians and Biologist to Guyana to study species so Guyana is the home of lots of things, Guyana is the home of brown sugar. Which is where it comes from, Demerara is a river in Guyana so, and it's the home of the anaconda which is a really big ass snake that you really wouldn't want to take in a fair fight but then you have things like piranha, you have things like your urethra fascinated fish, like something called... my biggest

fear...so I do profiles of all the musicians and all the artist I work with cos it's very artsy what I'm doing at the moment and we do this little profile and I ask, on our website which is almost finished now is, what's your biggest fear so on my profile my biggest fear is quite real. So it's called the marabunta which is essentially a hornet which is the size of your index finger and if you get...so it's like a wasp but it's the South American version and marabuntas are incredibly dangerous because if they sting you in the eye or anything like that you're done in terms of your sight, so I've been stung once.

Bobby: Where?

Ni: A centimetre above my eye so having been, I was at the back of a moped which is how you travel of course in types of countries, I'm not using the term third world, because I hate that term as well, so I had my hands behind my back holding onto this damn Honda 50cc moped for dear life. And this marabunta came at me and I saw it and it went under my sunglasses and then I could, if I had let go of moped, I would have been toast on the road so I just had to let it sting me and then the next day I looked like Mike Tyson. Which was, which fascinated my relatives.

Bobby: And probably did your street cred some good?

Ni: Not in Guyana, street cred weirdly enough, what didn't do my street cred good was, it's very Americanised as a lot of South America is now and they are so into sneakers. And I was a student and I wore the scuzziest sneakers in the world and they would take pity on me. So my street cred was very low overall. Some Reeboks which you're like 5 years old and they had their Nike whatever.

Bobby: So tell me about your roots in you know Guyana?

Ni: So my roots are, okay so whilst my surname is Singh but that in itself is an anomaly because my father is a Hindu, my mother was Catholic and her side of the family and so ultimately Guyana is made up of four or five groups of people, the first group are the Amerindians and the most important Amazonian Indians, it's their land and their land only. And the second are the colonizers so the

Spanish, and the Brits and the Dutch came to Guyana and stamped their personal view of the world on there, including economically cos they were there for coffee and brown sugar and the Spanish were there for gold and there's a song I've just written called Conquistadors which is about that, but that's what the Spanish were there for. Then you have, because of the of the resources in terms of the sugar cane you have slaves were bought from Africa but then you had another group called indenture slaves were brought from India from the 1780s onwards and found themselves in this land of milk and honey which really wasn't because it had things like marabunta. And that's where that melting pot of culture comes from and so Guyana is that kind of land and we, my family came from India in that 1700 era. So great great great grandfather and those those elements mixed with Caribbean slaves or African slaves and mixed with Amerindians and that's my, that's my DNA so there's a bit of all those peoples in our DNA and then what happened to me. We're also a British colony so when the Brits finished with Guyana in terms of Republic and let it go, it became a Communist dictatorship, much like a lot of America, was run in a very strong Marxist way and we struggled with that so we left Guyana, we became political refugees actually so when we left Guyana we left because there was no there was no, there was no future for us unless you were a member of the communist party which my father had to become to have work or you towed the line in those days and so my dad was an engineer he would come back and forward because he was schooled in the UK as an engineer at very late stage, he started his studies when he was 30. But he had to go back to Guyana because he was sponsored by the Communist dictatorship so that's why I was born in North London but then that's why I went back to Guyana as well when I was 8 to 12 months. So that's what happened to me and I spent then 7 or 8 years in that place.

Bobby: And when you left Guyana where did you move to?

Ni: We moved to London, those things like seeing snow for the first time was a reality for me and wearing shoes that was another reality which you have to do that and my father then found jobs,

he was an engineer in Cambridgeshire in East Anglia but then he found jobs in places like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia and Jamaica so when we found ourselves moving with him so we moved to Jamaica and I spent two years in Jamaica. Moved then to backwater East Anglia which really does form quite a large part of how I write from a point of view of being a cultural misfit. Then we moved around, we spent time everywhere really. So I found myself with a lot of schooling really under my belt and went to about 12 schools by the time I was 16.

Bobby: So what does that do to you, having gone to 12 schools?

Ni: It makes you, they were very different experiences to, so going from Jamaica at school where you were schooled in one room to a middle school in Suffolk where you had French being taught at 10 it made me, my education formally suffered quite badly so we're going from very strange syllabuses which were non-western to Western to even, even in the UK they were different schools doing different things, so that that suffered I still don't have a second language because whilst I love language I would be doing French at 1-year, Spanish and then German and then going back to...so I was always behind at stuff, it makes, you create a friendship, a sense of friendship because you have to make connections really quite quickly so that's what it did for me. I'm still quite an open book and I'm quite transparent I like to think that anyway. On the flip side though it meant that you said goodbye to a lot of people and you would and when your younger it didn't really matter so much, actually because when you're 10 11 12 when I moved in quick succession 13 you don't really say hey here's my email and there's no you just kind of tend to go 'see you, were off again'. So much I suppose like military family's kind of that way really. It created a way of me seeing, not fitting into anyone, anyone group of people because I was always moving. So even at University I didn't fit with either the Caribbean society, the Sikh society, which I knew there was an Asian part of me but I'm not Sikh, there's a Caribbean part to me but I'm not, I wasn't born in Jamaica. There's a Brit part of me so I would I would I would fly just above always really and that's what my, that's what happened to me and that's a direct consequence of that kind of upbringing really.

Bobby: So are you able to fit into many places or are you saying you're a slightly on the outside?

Ni: I became, I was only comfortable in my own skin by the time I was 32/33, honestly and that's something to say I suppose but that's finding who you are and going through education to young adulthood to adulthood to career etc. I was only comfortable at that age. When I was comfortable with what I was doing musically because I wasn't just doing western rock kind of pop songs but I was actually mixing them with things. And so the fit in bit I'm happy to fit in but I don't still, because even musically where would you put the vehicle for what I'm doing is called the League of International Misfits and it's that spurious kind of like what is that term and is about that internationalism that comes from me and not fitting in which also comes from me but actually not fitting in and being a misfit is more of a thing which is seen to be a positive now than it ever was before. As a musician I played the Indian Melas, Punjabi and Hindu kids. I'd been playing to those young people who didn't really want to pick up electric guitars at that stage that were listening to very much Bhangra and those things so I've been booked in that kind of cultural festival rush which I never fitted in

Bobby: How were you received there?

Ni: Mixed, in a mixed way honestly because I remember BBC Asian Network saying we don't really know where to fit this, so that's challenging if you're a commercial musician. Yeah, and I was and it was more challenging when music was that genre specific, but music has changed rapidly in a positive nature because of the democratisation of production. So anybody with a sampler and you don't need a sampler anymore, anybody with a PC or an iPad if you want to go that far can make music. Whether or not you can make good music is another thing but you can make music so everybody's making music. I don't act in a way which are limited by a 4-piece band which I have fronted as a Singer really but now I'm limited only by my ability to want to create something which skips over different genres but is meaningful to people whether that be from a lyrical point of view, whether that will that be the

narrative from this like the sonic-ness I'm using and that's different, so not fitting now musically is better for me than it was before. People would ask me to play World music events and people would ask me if we were a bhangra band, people would ask me whether I was a reggae band. Are you a rock band but you're brown, what are you doing with a guitar, in the old days we'd do that in places like Hereford and Wales and when we weren't in this kind of "multicultural" there because we still have a few problems don't we? We would, people would go, now he's presenting Western, Western indie rock bands and that's interesting but it's also puts people you know...

Bobby: Do you think inter-eclectic styles borrowing or embodying many different styles and ideas and influences, is that now the mainstream would you say?

Ni: I think of you look at, it's a mainstream if you look at how solo artists operate and if you look at people like Madonna who for example and as we know Madonna took mehndi and suddenly mehndi became very popular and of course it wasn't popular at all before Madonna and that's irony. But if you see those type of people, it started with the Beatles with cultural appropriation or misappropriation, define that, actually I would say I'm an optimist and I would say you know what if you utilise non-western sounds with respect then you do nothing but create more respect. If you take a sound and you make, you know a tumbi as we know which is like a mouth harp and you drop that with Missy Elliott going 'hey ya', do do do do do do, will Missy Elliot be fully aware of that heritage of that musical element, no she would be fully aware that that's a really interesting. A sonic sound which which kind of will work in a hip-hop track, hip-hop artist do it all the time, some of those artists are doing it with respect some of them go okay, wow it is yeah. So I think it's more because people are producing more like that they are willing to embrace. They don't always embrace it with the understanding, so I know what a sarangi should sound like and looks like and and will work like. I know a Persian santoor is but I'll still use it in a dance sense but I certainly know what I know what tabla and the frequency spectrum of a tabla will do because it's all-encompassing. What always worries me is that,

you don't want to be that person that just steals and robs but you should, if your authentic, be able to go this is my palette, you know. I used lots of Arabic sounds when I started but I had to. I used big Arabic riffs from 70s Arabic tracks [sings]. Its that kind of scale and I use those but so for me to use those I had to look at how that was created in the first place and why and even on vocal samples which a lot of people in dance were using, like a lot of vocal samples from around the world. But so for me I have to know the in-depth, that's where, that's where using a wide palette there's a bit of danger there course there is because the purist would say what you doing?

Bobby: But also I suppose with a wide palette, a very wide palette, you might not know everything to the same depth.

Ni: No, you can't.

Bobby: But does that matter? Because I suppose for me, we talk about cultural appropriation and various artists I like as well get accused of that occasionally. But then if you're, you know being authentic, whatever that means, if your being innovative, pushing the envelope, if you're doing something new with it I think rather than you know just mimicking. It's a bit like cooking and different ingredients.

Ni: It is.

Bobby: That is cultural appropriation at the highest then, is it not?

BS: Yes. Let's take a curry as an example when you say actually national dishes very much, Asian based chicken tikka masala if suddenly we embrace peri peri chicken, which comes via South America from Portugal, if we embrace those things then do we, do we go actually no we are purists we are just going to eat what our national is. Now some nations would do that by the way, but we as Brits because we are and I'm Anglo as well, so we are better at adopting those things, may be that that comes from our colonial background, who knows if we are gonna get deep on those respects, I like to think it comes from the fact that we're open to those things cos actually I've travelled the world and I've travelled a lot in America and it's far, we are far less ghettoized than the American model of integration,

multiculturalism, whichever word you want to use. But so for me, music, whether that be cultural misappropriation, you can kind of spot some of it I suppose, I'm not I'm not avantgarde ambient musical doing electronic music. That's not me. I'm a songwriter so my narrative is important. Now if I was to use, if I was to take for example a sitar sample and then slowing it down, chopping it and warping it and making it something different and then putting it through old analogue circuitry, suddenly you've created something new, does it involve does it involve taking that sample, people do this all the time by the way, that is how electronic music kind of innovates, does that mean they've misappropriated that track? How then do we define something new? I want a sitar if I'm using a sitar to sound like a sitar but I will use it in a different way and I will affect it in different ways. If I want a tabla I want it to sound like a tabla but I want it to be combined with overdriven guitars, but each to their own, that's how I work, that's the only way I really know because that's how I, that's my background.

Bobby: And so if someone else does wants to turn a sitar inside out or to make the tabla sound like lots of thunder, you know, tabla is actually not tabla anymore but it sounds more like soundscape of thunder, heavens opening or something and whatever else, so be it.

Ni: I think so because there's a bit. There's something about artistic licence I suppose and innovation which says well actually, does it fall down to how well you do it, I don't know yeah, maybe, I don't know if that, is that the measure, how well we do it?

Bobby: Does it connect to people?

Ni: Does it make it better? You know actually I think I think I am where I am with that and I think people will shoot down also say no actually. I would object to my Persian santoor being placed within a...but would we we do it all the time with classical music, Indian classical, so let's talk about that so we we still mix still with western classical. Is that a class thing or a culture thing? Because for me there's a little bit of class there, for me because Indian classical is about class in some ways, as well as Western classical music it's about class. So then, but we're ok with mixing the Royal

Philharmonic with Ravi Shankar or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan because actually does it make it more interesting? Yes, it does. Do those artist benefit from it? Yes they do, cos actually if you're an artist then you benefit from having a wider audience. I suppose for me if I could use live musicians in a way which I wanted to, I would use just people but that's about the reality of budget and how we have to operate as musicians. Because I would do that. There's a there's a movement that right now, even when you look at a DJ called Pete Tong, who some of us do know all well in the dance world reverting back to using an orchestra to recreate those dance and house classics; from drum and bass promoters who are reverting back to using an orchestra and ensemble to innovate their electronic feel because that's about more about the experience and taking that experience out the club and putting it into a theatre or a venue. Interesting isn't it, maybe we do that when we're older? I don't know.

Bobby: Perhaps. To understand you know you said your mum was Catholic dad was of Indian Heritage? How do you describe your heritage and what was life like at home? What languages were spoken, you said English was the main language in Guyana and you've also said you don't speak any other languages. Was the language at home English?

Ni: The language at home was English, the language at home was Guyanese patois is different of course because we all know Jamaican patois. So I would flip between Guyanese patois to Jamaican patois, I came back from Jamaica with a Jamaican accent, I was 11 so you pick up accents, when I was schooled so you know. We always spoke English that was our, but we also had a level of when culture is taken from its homelands and is lost or re-found or lost and then re and morphs into something else so there a lot of Indian words that Guyanese Indian's will use, which my wife who is Punjabi will go, no that's this actually you guys gone and taken that made it this. I go well maybe we made it better. Who knows? I don't know maybe I'm just being devil's advocate I don't really believe that, I do sometimes. But if we take culture it gets lost in translation I suppose, my translation was always in English but it was mixed translation. But also Amerindian

words came into our language and food, food is the biggest cultural signifier we have sometimes, so my palette is all about curry, it is all about yams and and and soul food but it's all about Amerindian dishes like cassava and Khajuri based dishes actually at home our biggest language was bloody food because Guyanese people love their food. I came to a very strong multicultural area when I was 20, Wolverhampton. I saw this here I thought wow this is there's a lot of first-generation kind of course my partner was part of that and her marriage was supposed to be arranged and there were a lot of those things still around holding onto culture and holding on to those aspects. For me I just think what happened to me from India to Guyana to Jamaica to East Anglia to London, I thought this is what's going to happen now. And it is happening now and it is happening now and it is happening, we are, I try and do that with my kids I try and make sure they have their cultural anchors. You need that. You need your cultural anchors, they know who they are, they know they are not straight Indian, they know they are Guyanese and what Guyanese-ness means to them, it's different but when I first 20-25 years ago that wasn't the case here in in the West Midlands, for better or worse we've multicultural and integration has happened.

Bobby: So what you're saying is maybe 25 years ago people weren't maybe so self-aware or they certainly weren't be verbal and maybe publicly self-accepting and expressive about their heritage?

Ni: No what I'm saying is that actually there was more in that first generation and that translation into that second generation which was about trying to hold on to that heritage.

Bobby: To that image people hold on to from home as if it's stuck in time.

Ni: Yeah and I think as I've grown up I've seen it's admirable in some ways, it's honourable but it also can be devastating and can be very challenging and I see that in 2nd generation young people who grow up and I see that challenge in terms of who am I? And well I can go clubbing, I can go clubbing but I'll be at the temple the next day. Let's let's talk about that and that happened that happened when you were and that was about that was about actually suddenly your children were consuming stuff with electric

guitars and but were still we were still trying to hold onto the...and that happened with the Caribbean kind of culture as well as Asian and Indian culture. For me as somebody from the bi-line as being eclectic, for good and bad it was it was always something I watched and went okay that catch up thing going on here and I can see how this going to go and we are in a different world now.

Bobby: So you penny dropped for you when you're about 30-32 about who you were, what lead to that, how did that happen?

Ni: I think what happened to me was there was an overlay of confidence about what you do and that confidence thing happened to me to, because I was very unconfident as coming through because you have to kind of like find your way and like I say that could be cultural and that could be about fitting in or it could just be around how we grow and develop and I've no problem with that I think that, what I see is we are forcing a lot of younger generations to be more confident, or perceived confidence at a really young age. I don't think I was ever that...and I see it in my kids that perception of confidence can have challenging mental health issues because essentially what we are saying is you have to behave like that and you need to be really confident. You need to be on your social media at this stage and your childhood is no longer your childhood. It's kind of like everything is through a retina, a lens and those things. So for me I didn't have any of that but what I did have was a lot of a lot of baggage in terms of where do I fit and how do I how do I make sense? And who am I, and the who am I bit is probably around the 30s when I went I'm a bit happier now. I can't tell you and I couldn't be more specific about...

Bobby: Can I ask in your various places that you've lived and excuse my ignorance on Guyana but were there other people that looked like you?

Ni: Yes

Bobby: In Guyana?

Ni: Yes absolutely

Bobby: But not in the Fens and East Anglia?

Ni: No. London, yes.

Bobby: And of course, big cities can offer the anonymity.

Ni: But my parents came from the country in Guyana so my Mum loved that rural idyl. She never liked London, she never liked, we moved from London to the rural backwaters, Bible belt and swathes of sugar beets and those things and I and we were literally the I was the only black kid and I was different to the rest and that was from being chased by skinheads, to dealing with racist teachers which I did, that was actually compounded that you are, you are completely different and we will treat you completely differently to your physical and mental detriment as well. Because my sister, one of my sister's had a breakdown and we were and she was racially bullied but she was very vulnerable and that point for her life meant that she, she had that breakdown and suffers with long-term mental health issues. I would be kept in, in terms of racial bullying because teachers could not guarantee my safety. Schools would not deal with it at that point. They would deal with the way they knew how to deal with it was they have to take you out of the equation. So I would be kept in for that, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So in Jamaica I was, I had a British accent when I went to Jamaica and I was certainly and then I couldn't understand Jamaican patois but give me two years and we talk with that accent now, I'm not gonna because it's like but I can. It's about perception, isn't it? That's our biggest enemy, perception of who if you look at...if I look at Bobby and I see Bobby. I'm creating in my mind a perception of you and the perception of you could be so far off the mark that it could be incomplete, the pictures incomplete. I don't mind that because we all do that on, we do that as human beings we done the street every day. We create perceptions of everyone, whether that be size, weight, hair coloration all those things it's whether or not we have the time of the ability to go actually no, I'm challenging my perception because my DNA is that I will challenge my perception of you. I will have to because I don't want to assume I know anything of you, that could be off the mark. if you look like a goth

and that's another term and a genre, but I won't I won't say that actually you will just be into Evanesence and love just gaming, maybe I'll assume that, I won't do that because that's not about who I am. There are plenty of other people who will and they are, they will always do it and certainly it was done to me in those eras of growing up. I never wanted that for my kids and I don't. Cos all that bigotry in terms of bigotry towards different cultures or difference, people with different sexuality all the differences is about ignorance. If you can give you can have and hold onto a worldview which says I will not assume that I know everything about you by looking at you from a casual glance and that's my DNA and that's what goes through everything and that's a bit philosophical for me and that's what I thought when I was 30 I suppose, that was that transition, yeah, makes sense

Bobby: Indeed. Do your kids carry that, do they have that lens?

Ni: Yeah, they do, they do. When I grew up my father had 100 rules written down. He was part Hindu but he was also an engineer and a techy and we had 100 rules by which we had to live our life those rules, for example making sure that if you don't assume you know about everything about everyone that's rule number 6 if I remember, I cannot remember them all and I wish I had the [padlock] was on, now those rules actually I took with me.

Bobby: Give us another.

Ni: Very much based on humanitarianism. So, erm the smallest things can be the most beautiful things that's another one. The regret I have in my formative years is the ability to take a picture of that damn piece of paper which is now, no longer existence but it was and so but I can, as parents we can, you can interpret all those things don't we. When I interpret those things with my kids, I say you know what, here's what you should think about, I bring up my kids my in a different way, there's no right way to bring up, to parent.

Bobby: Different way how?

Ni: A different way in terms of in a philosophical way of okay. I say to my kids 'are you producers or are consumers?' So I'm a producer

and there's a lot consumption in the world and the world of tech and the world of social media is about consumption, are you a creator I suppose? If you're a consumer all you want to do is...that's okay you know, but actually I'm a producer, I'm a creator and my kids are sick of it. They will say you're a creator, create you know create something, create something good, don't just follow if you can. You know kids want to fit in, you know, I wanted to fit in but it wasn't an option though, so my kids have that option and it's better for them. But then again I would challenge them with that option and you know why fit in when you can make something authentic. So yeah my kids are sick of that.

Bobby: But I wonder if that you know sort of individual authenticity comes later anyway because when you young it's about, fitting is about survival isn't it because kids can be terribly mean to anything different.

Ni: Yes

Bobby: I think you're in good company there

Ni: Of course

Bobby: So shall we talk about your commission. What is the name? What's the title?

Ni: The commission's called Origin Unknown and that comes from again a point of you of okay, it's about knowing that actually there's a massive range of people who do and don't know where their anchors and that's a good and a bad thing and Origin Unknown for me is about, from a musical point-of-you is going actually when you start to look at that and start to unpack that where it comes from then that's when your journey with Origin Unknown starts really so, but it's also but showing Origin Unknown is also that showing the different side and different talent base that exists in Wolverhampton and it was also about start of my my journey in terms of a live and a body of work which I've been sitting on for 4 years because when I was about to do all this, the pandemic started and but also I had some loss before then so Origin Unknown is about also showcasing what that eclecticism is about and so on that bill there are there other artists

so for example a DJ called Jutla who's an amazing DJ from Wolverhampton who is for the last 20-years been creating amazing beautiful edgy beatsy work, flavouring it, Jutla's Punjabi and flavouring it that way and is international and has been on that and has played in Paris and has played in Berlin and played in Hungary and has played in Birmingham, has he played in Wolverhampton for a while? No because there isn't that opportunity. This is a challenging place to work with culturally, make no bones, you have to do your work. And then Neon, who's a young hip hop artist and a poet and has a philosophical way of looking at things and has been a mentee through the Gilles Peterson who is a very famous DJ who has a global palette. So Neon's work is really good you know it's oh and he's a storyteller to and then you've got kind of the, my stuff is I suppose really, it's from a perspective of a songwriter but has a beat bass, a very festival kind of feel to it. So I'm a festival artist and I have done that. That's where my that's where my home is, festivals involve people come together to listen to music which they wouldn't always think they like so that's why the misfits fit well in festivals because we don't fit in a dance tent, well we do but we don't fit a rock stage but we do, we don't fit in an acoustic tent but we can do that, so that that's where the Origin Unknown name comes from and it was showing that actually there's a lot of musical heritage in Wolverhampton but here's a part of it which it's not just about heritage though but about thinking forward to what could happen and this is this is what Origin Unknown is about. But it's not just about music for me because that narrative and the way I work now has had, so for example filmmakers will take the lyric of certain tracks and will take the feel of Origin Unknown and start to map it with imagery and that's what will happen with Origin Unknown too and whether that being a VJ way which is throwing graphics on a screen and whilst music is played, or whether that being a commissioned way, which is a commissioned filmed which will be shot and showcased at Origin Unknown and that's part of it too. But again, it's also an after party for British Art Show Offsite 9, so it's a celebration for all those artists who want to. I'm cynical as well as happy with the opportunities that Offsite

9 has provided: I'm cynical because things after this will have to change, how we kickstart work is interesting, of course to British Art show and Offsite should be integrated more and, in Wolverhampton it's very difficult because everyone works in silos and everyone, there is no support network here for artists apart from Creative Black Country, apart from sometimes the University, sometimes the art gallery, sometimes Newhampton the venue, the Lighthouse. We're struggling, we're struggling culturally, with venues so therefore Offsite 9 and the British Art show has created that spark of togetherness with artists. Whether that's a real togetherness or whether we are just thrown together in this. What we do after that is really interesting for me. But I love seeing the sum of the buzz around Wolverhampton and I wished that buzz was a wider buzz in terms of, we are still art informed and make no bones about it I come from a commercial music as well as artistic producer. So we are still are art informed and we have to go beyond that to survive.

Bobby: Finally ,can you, is there anything you want to say about Wolverhampton about maybe about the people or something about you know demeanour, mindset...

Ni: Ok? Yeah?

Bobby: You know what is distinct about this place?

Ni: So I came from Brixton to Wolverhampton, that's where I lived before I came to Wolves and what struck me and why am I still here? Which is the longest place I've stayed in one place? So it must be doing something and what I do love about it. I love Wolverhampton and the outlying areas and the West Midlands if there's one thing that defines this area and it's a vulnerable thing because it's that not a lack of self-worth, it's not, it's the ability to downplay you importance and your talent and your positive nature and a lot down playing goes on in this in Wolverhampton and there are lots of amazing people here they downplay their work and Wolverhampton as a community downplays what's great about Wolverhampton because actually there's and marketeers have a lot to do with that when you look at accents and all those things, they will paint certainly the Black Country,

Brummies and Birmingham in a brush and it's not always a positive brush. And if you get newsreaders who were born here then suddenly their accent will change and you know because actually what we're saying is Wolves is very, it's very authentic if I say that on a global sense and it's very, it's unique. Sometimes it needs to take itself with a bit more pride We are a city. We don't always behave like a city we behave like a town and that's about leadership though at different levels and I can be a political animal if I want to be and that's about the politic and our leadership and those things and how we, culture is not supported in this town I will say that. And that's that's that's hand on whichever book, it could be, but there's no there's no connecting that together and what you need is a connectivity, what you need to create things which are beautiful and innovative is to have space. Here's where we can support you, the studios are here, here's where here's where you can access this. Here's why and how we are retaining creators in this in the city. I'm talking about culture here. If I'm talking about wider Wolverhampton, it is an amazing place but we are struggling like other amazing places. So our town centres are dying, we're being polarised and that's an economic thing, so polarization is happening so there's a wide gap between those who have and those who have not and that that pandemic has done some of that, pandemic's also brought together by the way didn't they but that togetherness has got to be maintained or else we will just, we will just do what we do in isolation and try and get out. Like I've said I played more outside Wolverhampton, this is my first live event in Wolves for 7 years.

Bobby: Thank you so much Ni Singh. Great talking to you.

Ni: Thank you. A pleasure for talking to you.

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