



Londoners Archived podcast transcript

Episode One: 81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance

Tony Seeley: When the Black community rose up in Brixton in 1981, they simply didn't throw Petrel bombs at the police. They threw them into the very heart of the British society in different to the cries for justice and equality. During three days in 1981, April, South London exploded, and the consequences would resonate across the country, around the world, and down through the successive generations.

Aimée Taylor: You are listening to *Londoners Archived*, a production of the London Metropolitan Archives. And I'm your host, Aimée Taylor. The London Metropolitan Archives stores and looks after over a thousand years' worth of maps, photographs, videos, audio, and documents relating to the history of London and Londoners. More information about visiting the archive and the collections we hold can be found at search.lma.gov.uk.

In this first episode, we'll be focusing on 81 Acts of Exuberant, Defiance, Unique creative collaboration in Brixton, which aims to reflect on the events of 1981. We will be hearing the voices of those involved in 81 Acts, as well as those who have firsthand experience of the events in 81 themselves.

Here's Tony Seeley, 81 Acts co-founder and builder.

Tony Seeley: In 2016 at Black Cultural Archives, there was a gathering of elders, we all gathered upstairs in a room to celebrate and commemorate the 1981 uprisings. And that night

was filled of reminiscence and joy and stories and just memories. And I was just blown away by that evening because it reminded me of my youth. I took part in the riots that were happening on the street. These elders, they were full of just so much joy about talking about the rights and what happened. I asked them afterwards, I said, look, what about, you know, five years time, we're going to have the 40th anniversary. What are we going to do? And they said, well, we don't know. We don't know what's going to happen. I said, look what about if we asked the wider community to get involved? What about if we went out on the streets and met people and talk to people about what the 1981 uprisings meant for them. Cut a long story short, they said, "Go on, go do your thing."

Aimée: And that's what he did, along with the help of community members, including Amanda Carter, who recorded the voices heard in this episode.

The question is...is it a riot? Is it an uprising or is it a revolution? To me, it was a riot. It was a group of angry people, you know, who had had enough of being oppressed, had enough of being treated like a second-class citizen

If you was there, local, you know, it was a riot. Smash the windows, take the stuff, attack the police, burn buildings down. Get all the anger out. That's a riot.

It was all riot at the time it was a riot because I was angry myself. So it was all riot, a rage, you know, you just want to get in there and do something, but going forward, it did, it did some good. It was a revolution.

Aimée: 40 years ago this April over the course of three days, Brixton in Southwest London saw large-scale racial confrontations between Black British youths and the police. In the months and years leading up to the 10th of April, tensions had been high.

I'd seen the police pick this guy up off the road and put him into the back of the van and gave him a hiding, an absolute hiding. You could hear him screaming in the back and this guy went up and was banging on the van to tell them to stop. That was the sort of thing which was going on. The criminalization of young Black men.

Lee: A Black mate of mine was standing outside Woolworths once. He was going to a job interview, an army careers office, he always wanted to join the army. And we said, "Oh, you're mad like." He... straight goer, never got in trouble. They nicked him for sus. He was standing at a bus stop and they nicked him for sus.

And he was going to army careers interview. And he got done, got convicted, standing at a bus stop. So he couldn't join the army. Things like that.

Aimée: Here is Lee Jasper, 81 Acts builder, with an explanation of the Sus Law.

Lee Jasper: now I just remind you what that Sus Law is. That was, being suspected of committing crime to people or property unknown. And the only evidence that you needed against you was the word of a police officer and that police officer could charge you, take you to court in front of a magistrate. He was the only evidence that the magistrate needed, and you

were fined or sent to jail accordingly. That was the overwhelming oppression that was being faced by Black communities through the use of this law at the time.

Aimée: Section Four of the 1842 Vagrancy Act gave police officers discretionary powers to arrest those they suspected of loitering with intent to commit an arrestable offense. A law surviving from the Napoleonic war, it was redeployed intensively from the sixties onwards.

Brixton had been in decline for several years. By 1981, a third of housing in Lambeth, the borough in which Brixton sits, was of a poor standard and the unemployment rate was high. 65% of those unemployed were Black and Brixton had one of the highest crime rates in London.

At the time I was 17 and I was living on [?] road, which was like, like a couple of roads away from Railton road and at Atlantic Road, where most of the action, I suppose you could call, or the rioting had taken place.

Those loads of poverty, there was deprivatization. People find it really difficult to get employment. There was high unemployment. Brixton wasn't the best place to live. There was some, you know areas where the housing wasn't that the best.

The milkman, I remember that, this is long before the riots. His milk float was like a tank. And you still, you still had to come down when the lifts weren't...where mama said, go and get the milk. No he won't come up. He won't leave his milk float. And when you got down there, his milk float was all caged in anyway.

What sparked the riots was the fact that we have the sus laws and Black men were being stopped and they were being criminalized, systematically being criminalized by the, by the system.

The mentality was the, you know, all Black kids are muggers. That's it, they rob old ladies. That was it. Every one of them. That's it. And that was a thing, that was the kind of racist thing back then. Black, young Black blokes mug, old white ladies. That was it. And that's how they went about. So that's how they treated people.

Aimée Taylor: On Friday, 10th of April two police officers were attempting to help an injured young Black man in the back of their car. This action was misinterpreted as harassment and the vehicle was attacked. Extra police officers were deployed, and the incident was resolved, but it's set in motion the scenes which would take over Brixton for the next three days.

There was a like a buzz, people were talking about how the police were stopping men, Black men, you know regardless of their age, whether they were old or young, just stopping them.

Younger Black kids started to gather outside the tube, and it just got more and more. I mean, you just, I don't know why. I just, it was just a funny feeling in the air. I can't describe it.

I've always said it is like Alfred Hitchcock, film, the birds. And all the birds start gathering. I dunno, there was something in the air. The sense you thought, something's going to happen there.

Looking out the window, you know, and, and seeing young men siphon off petrol off cars and then there was a smell of the burning and, and you could see the smoke, properties which were burning on Atlantic Road and Railton road. The police vans coming down the road and just hearing it being hit by bricks. And you had boof boof boof, it was just like, wow. It was really tense, very tense.

There's smoke everywhere, and it looks like them old films at the blitz. That's what it reminded me of them old war films. And the alarm bells, there was just all these ringing, the old-fashioned alarm bells, like must've been hundreds of them. And they was all still ringing, ringing all these bells.

They had a display of Charles and Lady Diana's Royal Wedding crap, all these plates and all them mugs, you know, all these souvenirs, they had a big window display of them and all the windows were smashed.

I always remember Prince Charles' sippy mug staring out with these bricks. That must've made a great image. This sippy couple grinning off their souvenir place in the middle of this madness.

Aimée: By 9:30 PM. On the 11th of April, over a thousand police officers were dispatched into Brixton. By 1:00 AM the area was largely subdued with no large groups except the police on the streets. The day after people began to explore the aftermath.

Angela: And just going down the main road and seeing shops, windows been broken out, the vote was just littered with glass, and there were other people out, you know, just looking around to see what, what, what was going on. And yeah. Seeing clothes and shoes and whatnot, all sorts of things, the sport across the, across the road

it was sad if anything, it was really, really sad that it had to come to, to that. For people to actually realize what was going on and how Black people were being oppressed and so it was an opportunity for the people to make a statement that things need to be better than they been than they were

Lee Jasper: 279 police were injured, 56 police cars were destroyed, 30 buildings were burned to the ground and over 150 buildings went badly damaged. 45 members of the public also suffered damages, and this violent explosion against the profound social economic consequences of social exclusion and racism had a terrible reckoning on the area.

Aimée: In the days and weeks and months preceding the riots, people locally and nationally started to reflect on the events which had taken place.

The reason why the 1981 riot occur in my point of view because of a spiritual thing, it wasn't something that was planned. Something that was planned is different. It's different when you have my generation, every one of them raise up at the same time and go and do something. It has to be a spiritual thing. So we can see the different that is made now.

People don't do that for nothing. They don't do that cause they just want a video. You know what I mean? Some people did. Yeah. It's no, it's no, obviously the jeweler shop went first. You know what I mean? You want your valuables, but that level of, you know, rioting and that, that doesn't just happen overnight, that was a long time coming. At the time it was a riot, and it's still a riot, simple as that.

After the riots, I remember seeing policemen walking around six-handed on the beat.

That was funny, six of them together. Walking. Yeah. Blimey. That lasted a few months walking around six-handed and that was funny. Yeah.

Me and my mates, everyone, you know, Black or white, we agreed the police got their comeuppance. And then after the riots, I think people began to see actually there is something wrong with this police force. Even my mum began to realize that, you know, what the police are like, they're, they're not flipping [???], as you say, it's not...times have changed.

After we had the riots, there was the [Scarman] Reports, which basically highlighted what we already knew, with regards to the racism that people were experiencing at the time. But the fact that there was a lack of opportunities for Black people, the housing wasn't brilliant in Brixton and there wasn't enough of services

Aimée: Here's Lee Jasper with more information on the Scarman Report.

Lee Jasper: Lord Scarman came to Brixton to dispatch, to find out what not happened and write a report on the incidences that took place. And in November of that year, he found that the metropolitan police service was institutionally racist, that the sus law had to be scrapped and replaced, by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, that, that you needed an independent police complaint process. So he created the Police Complaints Authority as a consequence of his recommendations report. And later millions of pounds were pumped into Brixton to tackle the socioeconomic crisis that gave rise to these disturbances, buildings like the Brixton Recreation Centre, the [?]Centre, the Race Today collective on Railton Road, adventure, playgrounds, community centers, nurseries, all were established in Brixton and in many other areas throughout the country, as a result of these disturbances.

Before the riot, we didn't have any say, we was like a shadow moving in the dark. If you check the history you sign out that there wasn't, any Black person working inside Brixton or any form of government buildings there was maybe one or two policeman. The 1981 riots change thing. It makes the system have to make sure you can see no Black people and people of color, in certain position, you know, that is a start. You know what I mean? So therefore, you see able to let our youngsters know, say, even though they think there isn't much things change from our generation, I can assure them that it has.

The people in authority treat you a little bit more respect, not thinking that if one Black person does something, they expect another Black person will be just the same. And I think there was more respect for, for us in a way that you wouldn't look down upon.

Sitting on top of a roof, watching the riots, looking down Railton Road, even though yes, it was on fire, but to work together over the next day. And to feel the appreciation of when you walk into a shop and the white people then show you appreciation and finally respect and understand that you're a human being, and you're part of society that was, see, that was the greatest feeling. Because before that, when we go into shops will be looked upon like thieves and people doing wrongs. We as Black people and people of color, we wasn't recognized, we was like a shadow walking through. The riots have changed things.

Aimée Taylor: The events that took place in Brixton over those three days have gone down in the history books with those both locally, nationally, and internationally, reflecting on both the past Brixton and its future. Here's Tony Seeley on why it's so important, not only to mark the 40th anniversary, but why it should be used as a springboard for continued reflection and change.

Tony Seeley: 40 years later, and the drivers of the Brixton riots of still not properly being understood by society at large let alone dealt with. For the first time in, since the uprisings of 1981, we will tell the unheard stories of this exuberantly defiant act of rebellion that fundamentally change Britain. In 2021, we have an opportunity to reflect, to learn from the past and forge new understandings about how we can secure our futures together. There will be 81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance to mark our way forward in an attempt to explore what has changed over the last 40 years. We will harness the power, creativity, and imagination of Brixton's exuberant diaspora.

Aimée Taylor: Here's Chloe Osborne co-founder and builder talking about the importance of community work.

Chloe Osborne: I think that what we decided is that it wasn't right for us to lead it, is that what it needed if it was going to be something that resonated and not empowered, and that moved us forward as a community...we needed it to be led by the community. We invited people to come and contribute their ideas to test it.

To date there's been 300 individuals that have given their time and their energy and their ideas to becoming part of a driving force that guided this process forward. And it's with those 300 contributions that we've created the process and the values and the Humanifesto. Between April and July of next year, 81 acts of exuberant defiance are going to happen and they are going to be different scales, they're going to use different art forms, they're going to be created and curated by different people act make is maybe an individual artist and activist, a community group, a tenants association group. The idea is that we create something which marks the moment, but it's not art for art's sake, it's how do we use arts as a vehicle to amplify the messages of change that we want to realize.

Tony Seeley: It is an invitation to rethink, regroup and refresh, to rethink our strategies of resistance and resilience, to critically question, how much has changed to learn from the lessons of the past and to incite actions that make the future of Brixton as defiant and brave as its past. Black Lives Matter.

Aimée Taylor: You have been listening to *Londoners Archived*, produced by London, Metropolitan Archives, and parts of LMA's commitment to support all Londoners to preserve and tell their own histories. I would like to thank 81 Acts and everyone who told their stories in this episode. The audio clips heard in this episode were recorded by Amanda Carter, a local community member. For more information in 81 Acts, check out 81actsofexuberandefiance.com

If you're interested in further reading around this topic, then more information can be found in the show notes.

This episode was edited by Hannah Hethmon at Better Lemon Creative Audio.