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| **Project: ‘Glasgow’s Highstreets: An oral history…’**Respondent: Sher AllenYear of Birth: 1958Age: Connection to project: Local knowledgeDate of Interview: 22/09/2023Interviewer: Dr Sue MorrisonRecording Agreement: Yes/ NoInformation & Consent: Yes/ NoPhotographic Images: Yes/ No (Number of: )Length of Interview:Location of Interview: The Marie Trust, GlasgowRecording Equipment: Zoom H4n (internal mics) | **Glasgow Story Collective** |
| Time(from: mins/secs) | Description | Transcribed Extract(from- to:mins/secs) |
|  | *Where were you born?* |  |
|  | Lanark. I did live in England a fair bit, but now stay in Scotland again. |  |
|  | *What are your first memories of the highstreets?* |  |
|  | The first memories would’ve been in the ‘60s. Obviously Mum was a big shopper and I think I inherited it from her. As Mum was a big shopper she’d always go into town on a Saturday afternoon it was a ritual. My Dad was sat at home watching the telly and we would go into town and just browse the shops. The most funnest memories would probably of the ‘70s. At Christmas they would take extra staff on and my first job was a Saturday job was in John Smith’s bookshop and they put me in the art department. I was in heaven. Reading up, I think I read more than I sold. We had this uniform of little Laura Ashley smocks and that was heaven and then latterly it was Chelsea Girl on Saturdays and holidays. Boutiques are mainly what I remember there was one on Argyle Street, I think it was along near here called Capricorn and it had white pillars on the outside and it was meant to like pillars on the moon or some sort of planet. It was so different from the shops where your Mum would take you because hers were like Richards shops you know, mainstream. On the boutique floor in C & A they used to have a little boutique on the first floor it was called Clockwork and I was always going in there on a Saturday. I mean the quality must’ve been dreadful but it was styles that you just hadn’t seen or styles that you saw in magazines.  |  |
|  | *Where was C & A?* |  |
|  | C & A was along from here on Argyle Street. It was T.J. Hughes after that. I think its closed now. It was C & A for years and years and years.  |  |
|  | *How did you get your first job?* |  |
|  | The first job was the John Smith’s one. Dad was the security guard and they were looking for somebody and he said my daughter’s looking for a Saturday job and there I was, I just went in and started. |  |
|  | *Did you have any training?* |  |
|  | I have absolutely no idea, I can’t remember. They must’ve trained me on the till and maybe showed me how the stock was kept whether it was in alphabetical order or as I was in the Art Department whether they had all the Impressionists together, I have absolutely no idea.  |  |
|  | Do you remember how much you were paid? |  |
|  | No, but it must’ve seemed like riches at the time. I’d have been 15 at the time so it would’ve been 1973, £2, £2.50, I really do not know, but it was riches at the time. I remember a Rennie MacKintosh new book coming out, a big hardback thing and it was the first edition of that particular book. I remember buying it and paying it up weekly from my wage because I was studying Art at school and latterly studying Art at college. I hate the sight of Rennie MacKintosh stuff now but it was a big thing at the time. |  |
|  | *What else did you spend your wages on at the age of 15?*  |  |
|  | Clothes, make-up and perfume. I’d have bought clothes from the boutiques or the Barras. The Barras was a big thing, me and Mum used to go to the Barras and Mum like me had a really good eye for like vintage and the unusual. They called it vintage clothes and it was a rummage sale or something like that from the ‘20s ‘30s ‘40s ‘50s and she bought me this beautiful black 1920s cocktail dress and it cost 50p. So Mum and I would always go to the Barras and rummage these stalls. So I either got it from her genetically or I learned it from her. I don’t know but I’ve still got a love of rummaging, hence the charity shops. I’ve still got a love of rummaging and by God, I can spot something a mile off. |  |
|  | *What were the Barras like then?* |  |
|  | Oh very different to what they are now. They were loud, they were raucous, smelly, you could smell the doughnuts frying, the fried onions, music blaring from all different stalls competing with each other. I have an over-riding memory of the Righteous Brothers Unchained Melody for some reason, right next door to a stall that sold fresh hot doughnuts straight from the fryer and things that were like clovers, but these were hot ones, fresh from the fryer and I just remember it was next to this music stall playing Unchained Melody and there was guys, like the hawkers outside selling off lace curtains or china, not a £1, not 50p, but 25p to you Mfrs. All over the place it was loud and it was busy but you never felt threatened, it felt safe and friendly. It’s Glasgow, it was the essence of Glasgow back then. |  |
|  | *How did you get the job at Chelsea Girl?* |  |
|  | I don’t know. I know my friend and I went at the same whether she’s heard of it first through another friend, I don’t know, but we both went and we both got it. Saturday jobs, I’d have been about 16 or 17 then. So both of us started, we were both of us on the floor. I’d have been on Coats. Every department started with a capital letter, so you were on Dresses or you were on Coats and I was on Coats and I just always remember people would try things on and you’d follow them around, check to see if they needed a different size and you’d say have you tried it with the collar up or have you tried it with the belt tied at the back? It was always keeping the rails tidy making sure you had at least two of every size out, working with the stock room to get the stock out, keeping the shop tidy and making sure nobody tried anything on without supervision and then I progressed to the till as a packer because it was very very busy on Saturdays. The tills were queued from one side of the shop to the other, so you had a cashier and somebody packing. So I started as a packer and ended up a cashier and that till was busy and when you opened up that till in the morning, that was you until it closed at night. I suppose shops then were busier than they are now although I’m sure Primark comes close but that was continuous. |  |
|  | *Did you have to wear a uniform?* |  |
|  | We did when I first started and the first uniform was, bearing in mind this was ‘74 ‘75, it was high waisted very wide long trousers with a cream shirt with pink hearts on, just like the Chelsea Girl logo, with a brown cardigan with pink edging and a brown belt and then we went to something similar in black and green and then after they did away with the uniforms and just said dress as you would for a night out so you can imagine what some people came in wearing. There were silver platforms, there was silver catsuits, there was Abba walking about the floor. I wore like a floor length linen skirt and floral top because I’d discovered hippie by this time. Latterly I’d go out with my friends shopping and we’d go through the Barras and round the back of the Barras there’s some tenements and there was some shops upstairs in those. So we found this shop and went in, it was like a tenement flat but all the rooms were like the shop but it was hippie heaven. I’d never encountered Patchouli before, I’d never encountered tie-dye before and it was run by this guy Sidney, I’d have been about 12 or 13 at the time and that was when I discovered tie-dye and hippie and patchouli and that was me styled for life. I remember I bought a dress out of there, I was about 14, it was red cheese-cloth, fitted bodice, floor length with the bandura embroidery round the bottom and the bodice, so when plans were getting made for a night out for me it was jeans or a denim maxi with either a tye-dye or vintage top because obviously I used to get vintage things from my Mum as well. So it was either old lace things, think like Stevie Nicks does, so it was either that or complete and utter hippie and big crimped red hair and black black black massive eyes and jewellery. So it was a whole gambit of styles in there.  |  |
|  | *Do you remember any of your workmates at that time?* |  |
|  | Yeh, well my friend Anne, she was actually my school friend we were in the same class at school and I went for my first grown up meal out with her. We went to a Chinese restaurant above a pub in St Enoch Square. I don’t know if the restaurant is still there but the pub’s still there, but with a different name and I had sweet and sour chicken with fried rice it’s funny how you remember things, but it was lovely.  |  |
|  | *What was the fashion you were selling?* |  |
|  | Whatever was the style at the time, you’re talking mid ‘70s but the big thing I can remember at the time was the Bay City Rollers stuff, because obviously we would stock the trend, stuff that we could sell quick and cheap. It was the three quarter trousers with the tartan round the bottom and the Simon shirts with the tartan on the collars and tartan on the sleeves and tartan on the pocket and there was queues waiting to pay for these Simon shirts, they were either £2.99 or £3.99, but you just got to the point £2.99, £2.99, folded it. Honestly I had nightmares about these things.  |  |
|  | *What was your favourite item that you sold?* |  |
|  | Anything that had a retro feel to it because I think there might have been a divaesque round about these long floaty things or silky things, anything that came in that wasn’t the mainstream and if it was off-beat, I liked it because I’ve got my Mum’s mantra, you don’t want to be common. So if it was mainstream like a Bay City Rollers Simon shirt, no way was I buying that. So if something came in and I have a very good, oh that’s different we’ll have some of that please. So if it was long, floaty, romantic, just different or ‘20s and ‘30s, I love ‘20s and ‘30s and cross cut things because they suit my shape.  |  |
|  | *Do you have any good stories about working in Chelsea Girl?* |  |
|  | I was on the till in Menswear and there was two guys in there and remember it was mid ‘70s, big platforms, wide trousers so I’m on the till and a mouse runs across, so the bright boys, heroes, they grabbed their trouser bottoms and ran up the stairs. So I think it might’ve been me with the hoover and Gladys from shoes, we got this mouse in a shoe box up the stairs and across the road. The buses were still running both ways so I don’t think much of it’s chances, and these guys were still holding their trouser bottoms, that was hilarious. Another time, again I’m on the till in Menswear and at the same time I’d been doing some work experience in the summer holidays in the Citizens Theatre and I met this guy Mark Lewis and he was drop dead gorgeous and I’d seen him in something on the Friday night and here he was standing in front of me waiting to buy a shirt. Well that was it, nothing else mattered I standing talking theatre to this guy, oh I loved you in that, complete starstruck teenager thing, well the queue’s up the stairs. The Manager comes down wanting to know what the queue’s up the stair for, the girl on packing she took over the till and I just stood there talking to this guy. It must’ve been a good half hour and because it was so busy the queues were up the stair.  |  |
|  | *How long did you work there?* |  |
|  | I started when I finished college when I was 19 that was 1977, so I must’ve stayed until 1977/78 until I started my full time job in the Civil Service.  |  |
|  | *Apart from the shops you worked in, do you remember any other stores?* |  |
|  | I remember The Ridge Boutique in Goldbergs and another boutique along where Evans is now but it used to sell Biba make-up and I loved Biba make-up and I had some of the bottles for the skin stuff for years and years after that. Black was like the Biba logo, very ‘20s. I loved Biba make-up, I loved all the sludgy dark colours. I loved that and I bought a beautiful black leather handbag from there as well and it was the first time I used my brand new sparkly Access card. Going back, other ones were like Richards shop, because my Mother was a cleaner in there so she got a discount and I remember her buying me a coat out of there for one Christmas, it was floor length black velvet with a hood with white fur round the hood, down the front, round the bottom and round the sleeves and I wore that over an evening dress when my choir was singing in Glasgow Cathedral one Christmas and we were doing the Vivaldi Gloria and the Foray Requiem and I wore that coat over my evening dress and I remember walking home from that with my squeeze at the time and it was snowing gently and we walked home from Glasgow Cathedral to Cathcart Road in this gentle snow after I’d been singing Foray’s Requiem. It was just one of those magical vignette moments in life. |  |
|  | *What did you do for fun in the highstreets?* |  |
|  | Latterly to the various clubs through the late ‘70s ‘80s. We never went to the Savoy or any of the more what you call the 18-20 type clubs. There was one along Sauchiehall Street along near Charring Cross, it wasn’t the Savoy and it wasn’t the Locarno, I can’t remember what it was called back then, but that is what turned me off the idea of wearing white underwear. Dancing with a guy wearing black trousers and the U.V. lights were on and all I could see was a little pair of white pants dancing around the floor. Ever since then it’s been flesh-tone or black underwear just in case of U.V. lights and then latterly there was a club opened down in Clydeside. It was regenerated along the Clydeside and there was pubs and restaurants and clubs right along there. We used to go that and we went to works nights out on, it wouldn’t have been the Waverley, there was a boat moored and it was a club when I went to one of my Dad’s work dinner parties on that and again I remember my outfit. It was a floaty chiffon dress and I had on little sandals and I was still going out with the same guy and I remember dancing with him in this dress. I remember somebody else mentioning Cleapatra’s in the west end, otherwise known as Clatty Patty’s and there used to be another one, I can’t remember the name of it now but it was near Royal Exchange Square and it used to light up the dance floor in squares and that would’ve been late ‘70s early ‘80s.When I was at college in the late ‘70s we used to go to a Chinese every couple of weeks at Charring Cross, an absolute dive. As you walked along it your feet stuck to the carpet and every time we went, we got food poisoning but the food was so good and just tasted good at the time.  |  |
|  | *Do you remember any other restaurants?* |  |
|  | The Cadona Tea house on Buchanan Street, Wullie’s canteen they used to do the most amazing chips. When I was in town with Mum we’d always shop in Woolworths for the cheap make-up, Outdoor Girl and Minor’s Make-up. I always used to buy this lipstick and it was pale pink, I think it was called Chelsea Chic and a pale metallic pink lipstick. My first mascara ever was an Outdoor Girl solid block and it cost me one and tuppence. So we’d go in there, rummage the cheap make-up and then go for chips. I remember they sold food in the basement and before you used to get mousse in a tub it used to come in a cardboard box with a greaseproof wrapper inside it and strawberry mousse never tasted so good as it did out of that. I remember buying that with my Dad for some reason, it’s strange the things you remember.  |  |
|  | *Do you remember the Christmas lights?* |  |
|  | I remember them being big and low and very very warm. I remember standing and it must’ve been under the Heilan Man’s Umbrella you could see the lights along Argyle Street, and you’d see the Santa's, the sleighs and the reindeer's and they must’ve been big bulbs, I just remember there being loads of them. That must’ve been from the ‘60s but I remember them right through. I think it must just be the first time you saw them, you just go wow.  |  |
|  | *Did you go in the big stores at Christmas?* |  |
|  | Obviously Santa’s grotto at Lewis’s that everybody went to. That was my first encounter of upmarket make-up. Arrestee Lauder, bought that when I could afford it when I was married to a rich man. I think I had more fun in the cheap places. Cheap places and the rummaging. It’s like, I don’t know, I think if you’re buying dear stuff and you go into expensive places, you feel like you’re posing whereas rummaging, rummaging is real. |  |
|  | *Do you think the highstreets have changed a lot?* |  |
|  | Oh God yes. Pedestrianisation made a big thing. It made it more of a place to see and be seen rather than when I worked there when you had traffic going both ways. It would take you about half an hour to get from Buchanan Street to Queen Street because the pavements were rammed and somebody else mentioned it to me, the Krishnas going along in their orange robes and their bells. How they managed to get through that I do not know and the smog must’ve been like that and the buildings were black. I remember doing a painting of people walking along Argyle Street. I wonder if I’ve still got that painting. I remember doing that, I must’ve been at college and I remember capturing a man with an Afghan coat, a hat and very wide flares and his platforms and this guy was the key figure in the painting in the middle of all these people bustling about Argyle Street in platforms and floaty dresses. I think I was trying to paint the smell of patchouli. |  |
|  | *What is your favourite memory of the highstreets?* |  |
|  | That’s difficult because there’s a lot. Oddly enough it’s rummaging in the Barras with my Mum and it was the discovery of vintage but you didn’t call it that, it was just rummaging for treasures and walking down from the Cathedral in the snow at night and the clubs as they popped up along the Clydeside because I’ve been in Glasgow all my life and Glasgow changed around me, just seeing it change around me and I still love the highstreets, I love shopping. |  |
|  | *Can you tell me anything about the Tron?* |  |
|  | It was originally a Church and then it closed, and fell into disrepair. There was some sort of fund raising and then some trust took it over I think, and re-opened it as a Theatre and a cafe. 1984 sticks in my mind because of Mayfest and the Tron opened through one of the Mayfests. I remember it as a Theatre with a cafe. I think it’s still got the cafe and I think it still functions as a Theatre. It’s just along the road there. Actually, the cafe’s very nice as I remember it. There’s the Briggait Market that’s down off Stockwell Street. I think it’s closed now but it was open again through the ‘80s into the ‘90s and they had different traders with stalls and different little shops going round the balcony at the top but it only lasted a few years and some of the people from there moved to the Virginia Galleries which latterly closed and moved to Kings Court. |  |
|  | *Is there anything else you’d like to add?* |  |
|  | Just that I don’t want to see the highstreets die. I want to save the buildings and I want them to be kept alive and I’d love for them to have more uniqueness on them. In some way it’s a shame that big shops have closed but in other ways it opens up the door, if the rents were more reasonable, to more independent things, to more unique happenings, galleries and events, openings for perhaps traders and crafts people to work together. |  |
|  | *Sher, thank you very much* |  |
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