

**Alphonse Santana**  
**Edited LCVA interview**  
**Interviewer: Siobhan Schwartzberg**  
**Transcribed by Siobhan Schwartzberg**

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## **The Equivalent Of University**

**Portrait of Alphonse Santana**  
**Born 1954 in London Borough of Kensington**

**Lives and works in London**

OK, my full name is Alphonso Edward Santana. My mum's maiden name being Victory which doesn't get included. Born 1954, Borough of Kensington, Hammersmith Hospital. Fourth in line. There were five kids. There were eight children as far as I know, three died pretty young. My father Spanish, came here from the Spanish Civil War. Joined the British army Pioneer Corps, Spanish Legion. My mum from Gibraltar, met him here. She was evacuated in 1940 along with the other 30,000 Gibraltarians and initially was housed here in luxury blocks in Duchess of Bedford House, Holland Park, moved to Lancaster Gate where she met my, my father.

### **Home**

My mum creating things with dust and cardboard, you know, out of nowhere really, bringing us forward. But in the house, violent, nasty household really: love from my mum, but just the tyranny of my old man. And in that kind of way, I had an older brother who I think kind of...perhaps because he was the oldest and had to deal with things first, with nobody to support him, grew up a bit differently from me. I'd like to describe him as 'Sonny' in the Godfather kind of, you know: we'll get the guns, we'll shoot them all - whatever is... in his way. I'm not putting him down ... he's grown up very differently.

### **Meeting A Youth Worker**

So around about 13, 14 when we move to a slightly different part of Kensington - just a different estate which comes close to where what we just saw earlier: Powis Square and locations where there's quite a lot of community activism happening and this guy Andy Porter, along with many other people, show up, and a community worker; and I can't remember exactly how it happened, where he found us, or where we found him, but it would have been part of getting the kids somewhere safe to play, and meet and be, and see what good things you can impart to them that might take them out of the rat hole. Somewhere in there, at 12 and 13, 14, I've already...I find myself on a little tiny bit of a playground - not the one Powis Square but Colville along with other kids, and Andy's there and we start, the group starts to become like a group really.

I work on Powis Square as a youth, kind of giving me £5 a week or something for being there and helping out and doing all that kind of stuff. I mean you can't really live on £5 but I'm lost. I'm floating. I don't have, I don't have...nobody's given me anywhere to go. I've..it's in Spanish: no pasamanos, or no hand rail. I'm just, I'm going, I'm drifting all over the place.

So I finish up...somewhere in there, I don't quite know, we grow. We grow up a little bit. Some boys get the girlfriends and the group starts kind of fragmenting and stuff. I go off and start getting work, 'cause I've been told I'm good with the figures and the pen and the paper. I get a job working for Walls, the ice cream people down at Hammersmith, as in doing the accounts and stuff. But I'm sitting three, four weeks or something - I'm in ... an office pressing buttons, adding figures, taking figures away, square balancing it – *please* - in an office where people don't actually interact very much unless you've been there ages. So this is not for me.

I want to be outdoors but I finish up going from that to get a job up in Hanger Lane Tudor Estate, working in a works office where they're printing, and it's my job printing labels, letterheads, and also and ... my responsibility is to work out design-wise, colours, the runs on the printing machine: big heavy duty printer, big sheets of paper, smaller printer, smaller sheets of paper, variation of labels, the best format, the best way of producing all the stuff, least people's hours on the machines, least runs or etc..

I finished up going to work for British Relay cable television, and those days cable - not like now - in those days we used to put up all these big black cables across people's houses. The round box is called echo boxes. The square box is called double deckers and stuff. We used to take a little PCBs, these little tiny boards. So when people were disconnected because they've moved, or ceased wanting the service or something, it was really easy. Ladders go up and your climb up and just pull them out. And the box stays empty. Nobody gets telly in there. And likewise if somebody wants reconnecting, stick 'em in. So that was really a good couple of years of that, working round White City, Shepherds Bush, Kilburn, that was my area of work, going off with the guys at lunch breaks to cafes here, there: Asha Malik, Brian Lilley... a really neat, funny bunch of guys - all very different but there you go.

## **Getting Into Community Video Making**

I started hanging around with Andy and doing the video, getting him right, very, very early on. Which was really neat: electronics, electronics - no problem ...nowhere...I guess if I was younger now I'd take to this like lightning. I understand all that - the inputs, the outputs, this converts that, the transformers to this, yeah, leads in, audio in, audio out. It's really, that's all it's about really, and not getting flustered and finding it all mystifying: when you just take your time, take your time (like you). Take that panel down, oh look there's the jack plug, receiver there. It's all very clever if you know how to pull these things around. So I got in there and straight away, I really liked it. It was...you know I can't really think about it again: ooh, not quite right but I'm making films, or I'm going to be making films, or I'm doing editing, I'm doing camerawork and a lot of it, it's not really hard at all. Those machines were a lot less sophisticated in those days, as witnessed by the stuff that we did. In my time, the video was open spools, reel to reel, and you had to kinda go by the counter. So there was always an element of shift - the tracking going up and down. And the stopwatch - so you had to kind of fine-guess as well as you could, where things went. It was really hard because as you start the machine it goes 'wrrrrrRRR' and then it's got its speed. But there's that 'wrrrrrRRR' which can change everything really, starting up and slowing down.

## **The Powis Square Tape – The First Thing We Edited**

I can't remember what the first things were that we did, although I know one of the big things that we edited were the Powis Square tape, which was done before, the actual stuff

was shot before I was there. It was about a square that I knew a lot about, and all those people, I came to know them because we were playing around and living around there.

### **My Skills Came to Bear in Community Video**

My skills came to bear. I'm not scared of the maths: I can work out one minute fifty; you've got a ten second segment of something and you want to slip it in there, and you want to come out of that because you've got the next piece in there. So I could, I could put that there and I could put the first bit in A, and put the next bit in C, and I could plug it with the B and do it quite successfully - no problem if I messed up, I had enough kinda confidence and stuff to redo it, no problem...and take chances like that. I was very comfortable with the machinery. I was also very comfortable with being on the camera. I soon, 'cause I did stuff, it wasn't very long before you learn, in our days: don't aim the camera at bright source, bright sources of light because it burns the tube - pretty much like a light bulb will on the retina; don't move any great speed, because when you see it on the telly on that limited field that you have on the screen, a movement that you're doing in your own space out here, it's like a speeding car on the screen, you don't see anything; not too much movement, be steady. So I found my own way of having, I used my body as the tripod, I use to lift the viewfinder up. Camera was pretty a pretty solid piece of work – a big box: I used to lift the viewfinder up and press it against my forehead so that I could look into the viewfinder at the same time as still be around and see what else needed or could be caught.

### **Learning about Socialism**

This listening to people in the flesh, and interacting with them, people who are talking about - I guess – socialism, sharing community-ism, communism, anarchy, Marxism and all of that. To start with, as you could guess, 90 percent going over the head. But I'm interested, it sounds...it's touching me in my core somewhere. At home what I'm kinda like getting is 'the dictator rules' and the crown gets taken off the dictator by the next upcoming dictator, and you've got ... to be macho and you got to be male and and punish people when they're out of order and all that kind of stuff. Stuff that never even when I was really young never really sat very well with me. So anyway in this environment with Andy...there's actually stuff that's real, stuff that's happening: he is there, he's not talking about making a living by doing it, or a career. People are opening their doors. People are talking about helping other people get housed, get homes, have their kids brought up, arrange for clubs, creches. The whole gamut and spectrum of stuff - all the social needs.

### **Different Groups, Different Interests**

That whole thing of the video in those days, we were part of the bigger organization: we were affiliated to this community action centre which was like an umbrella organization, and we were working in a short life house given to that organization. We had a room a little room at the top of the house to start with, and then we moved downstairs and we turned it into a slightly more sophisticated studio space. But we were definitely linked, and tied to, a printing press that was there, a photographic workshop/dark room upstairs. There would have been things like Claimants Unions in there, the CAC having its own organizational meetings and stuff, administration. It went on to acquire links with the carnival, Notting Hill Carnival Committees and stuff. So lots of traffic, and sometimes a *super* lot of traffic, an abundance of traffic and people coming. And for me it was a bit like...we'll have to be really careful to not kind of be un-PC in a way, but you just get everybody and their mother, with their political opinions and their, and their group interests, and sometimes it

was the total opposite of harmony and synchronicity. It was...you could fight from the front of the door all the way into the furthest recesses of the building, with women's interests, with marches' interests, with Leninists' interests, with Trotskyists' interests, that and apolitical interests...and we're just we're just mothers trying to find ourselves a room where we can get together and mind our kids together and organise being able to go off to work for the.... Super! So for me, I've always referred to that period from 1975 to 1980 when I left: it's like, I'm convinced, like the equivalent of being in university.

We're all growing, we're all developing. Really intense, really brilliant. So I do things like, I go with Ken to Ireland, to Wexford where the British state was going to be building a nuclear plant, and I go with Ken, totally out of my depth. We get invited over to video an anti-nuclear festival - brilliant festival, brilliant, but in Fishguard we get stopped by Special Branch. My friend Ken had bought some postcards advertising, commemorating the Easter Uprising in Ireland and they come out in the Special Branch search... I think I'm responsible for the Special Branch search because I'm going away, I'm doing video, I'm going away to Ireland and doing video. I'm going on a project. We're going to video an anti-nuclear festival, it's going to be brilliant, we're going to be looked after for a couple of days. It's wet and everything. I've got this kagoul. I haven't got the proverbial pot to piss in. I haven't got a penny to my name. I've got this big kagoul that must have been made for an eight footer and I'm five foot plus - it's almost virtually dragging on the ground behind me. I've got a Tesco trolley with a boom mic - six, seven, eight, ten times the size of that one. All our old, ancient heavy duty video equipment in a Tesco trolley, happy as a bunny, going away on holiday...up to the area where the check in and the check out is, and then I get told to empty my pockets - then I'd put on an old khaki Army top-coat, half coat, half jacket kind of thing - half coat jacket - and which, I'd grabbed it the off a hook, so there's a brush... a proper brush you might see the women using - although I did have long hair - with ninety percent of the teeth missing - a piece of conduit pipe, old conduit pipe from a corner somewhere with a connector on one end of it. It was nothing, rusted, painted: that was in my pocket. Don't ask me why I hadn't emptied the pockets - it had all just been 'go', you know, 'grab, grab, grab, go!' And the woman behind the counter asked me what these were. And I said to her: 'That's a mic stand, anyone can see that's a mic stand...'. I was just being facetious, I just kinda, I'm happy, I'm being a clown, I'm clowning around. That was an expensive clowning session. So she stopped us: 'Get over here!'. Search. To my surprise we were still in, we were in the train station. To my surprise they strip search Ken. You might want to check this with him because I'm convinced he's standing there and he's got his old genitalia floating around in my face, because they kind of got him to strip off, almost here, and then they take me off to a room.

They get the cards, they find the cards. That's why. "Why are you doing this, why you got that why you got that?" So that caused that. The two women who were with us - and I think one was from a video project in Albany, Deptford - they had a little piece of hash, a small piece of hash, really. And they got them for that although they told them they had to come back later on to Wales to appear for that. Me and Ken were driven off in a police car and I still think about it, just like: Wow, pitch black outside in the police car with all the dashboard lit up. Beautiful to see, really; dark outside. I couldn't really see anything except this little tiny bit of ground in front with the headlights rushing by, 80, 90 miles and hour in country lanes and stuff.

## **They Let us Go**

They let us go. They kind of threw us out in the morning and we were miles away from anywhere. It's a good thing, if it had been me I would have been totally lost. I wouldn't

have had a clue. No money, no telephone. Who do I call? Ken organized, calling Andy or something - came out to to Fishguard and got the gear. And we all came over to Ireland.

## **My First Solo Film Shoot**

It was a Asian festival - Asian as in the Association of South Eastern Asian Nations. So it would have been all the...Malaysia, Indonesia and stuff - real theatre, real political stuff. Companies poisoning the waters to thalidomise the mercury, all of that... Brilliant! So my first real big gig really, really me on my own doing this, setting up the cameras and the sound and all of that, and trying and organise it, one bloody camera that you could capture this thing on stage, this big moving thing on stage. The Chinese, Chinese acrobats with the swords and the cutting, the Shaolin and all of that, doing all the dances... fantastic.

## **Looking After My Mum**

I've had a second session, where I've looked after my mom for 20 years. My old man, really horrible man, beat my mom up every day of their life and all of that terrible stuff. He died, he died back in 1979 at the age of 72. And quite happy to say and put it out there: good riddance to rubbish, really ...In the community, we have an expression in Spanish: [...] beacon in the street, light, light of the light ... light of the street, light of society, demon indoors, darkness. And that's what it was like. I'd get stopped in the street: 'How's your dad?' - from people he helped. And I'd sort of say: 'Good riddance, he's dead...' 'What? Don't be so disrespectful blah, blah...' And I'd have to tell them, you know, indoors, walk through the door, two seconds, my mom's on the floor, big eye, big lip, kick, kick, punch punch...get up make me a cup of tea or whatever. All of that for almost no reason at all. We got the clouts. But she was the buffer. Ninety nine, ninety nine... Little woman, no money, no nothing, in rags. So when my old man died I kind of moved home, and I had 20 years of looking after my mom and the nice thing for me was my contribution - my role in the video was one of a number of people, my stuff was kind of subsumed in there. It was, it wasn't necessarily key to holding - the slots and the pigeon holes were already there and it wasn't my mind that created the structure for me to fill various components, parts, spaces. So I guess the brains - if you want - the brains, Andy and Ken and others - it wasn't me, I was just toiling away.

But with my mum I was responsible. I had to organise all the care, interact with the consultants, work out her care plans ...work out carers, work out wages, how I organise paying people, how I go out and get the money, and because I'm out getting the money I'll have to have somebody looking after her while I'm getting the money to pay them. I'll survive all of that. And so, I have to learn to speak Spanish properly because my mom spoke Spanish, we didn't.

## **Working in Art Production**

I was doing stuff as like an art labourer. Going off to these people who got money for doing installations and projects and stuff, who could have me sitting on the floors in their nice big houses out in Gerrards Cross, or Streatham or Croydon or Barnes or something like that - with me working all weekend making geometric shapes, preparing canvases or making wooden kind of structures so installations...and having the confidence to kind of go 'in for a penny in for a pound': so going out and earning decent money enough that I could pay decent money for people looking after my mum, and keep my mum's home going. And still a little bit left over for my daughter...and so feeling really accomplished that...very quietly, out of the loop, right away from everybody I'd interacted with.

## **Back To Community Projects**

And now I'm involved in all these history projects, I do mosaics, I get commissioned. I don't know where that came from, I got commissioned to do a Spanish Civil War mosaic in Portobello, the Kelsoe Cochrane - the guy who got murdered in the races riots here some...I'm doing a commercial one at the moment which is never the same. But I'm involved in lots of little old people doing history and stuff - so nice. And now there's things like this. My past comes to haunt me.