

**Andy Porter**  
**Edited LCVA interview**  
**Interviewer: Heinz Nigg**

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## **So much energy came out of it**

**Portrait of Andy Porter**  
**Born 1945 in London (UK)**  
**Works and lives in London**  
**Filmmaker**  
**Community Video Activist**

I grew up in Bromley, which is a South London suburb, right on the edge of the country...the country was next to us...my parents had moved there before the war, from what was called the Medway towns. It was a three-up, two-down house in a suburban street, called Meadway...other things were Cherry Tree Walk, Bourne Vale, and all those slightly bucolic names. And it was kind of a dream suburb for people to live...I remember seeing the adverts for it in the '30s, it was promoted as somewhere to realize your dreams, you know, both town and country in one place....

### **My dad was a civil servant and my mother a housewife (01:06)**

The most distinguishing thing about us is that we were Methodists. And very serious Methodists...and Methodism was a kind of tribe, really. So, although I lived in a suburban street, a lot of the rest of the street went to the tennis club, or did those kind of things, actually, whereas my parents went to the church. My father was a lay-preacher, my grandfather was the equivalent of a bishop, my brother became a Methodist minister, my Dad was the head of the Sunday School, and I used to go to church two or three times a week, and I wasn't allowed to go out and play on a Sunday. So they were quite strict – at that point – quite strict Methodists, they didn't drink. So I always felt slightly outside, or I was aware the family was slightly outside the kind of norms – if you like - of the street.

I think I got from my mother a very big sort of caring for other people...thing. Her, the arc of her relationships to other people is to be caring for them, really. And that's the kind of, as I recognize in my life, that's a kind of power move anyway. And my father I got a very strong sense of moral rectitude. He was very moralistic. He would always get in trouble in the church, where he was a figure for occupying the moral high ground.

### **Leaving the church when sixteen (02:30)**

I have a memory of one really good teacher, who really believed in me and my brain I suppose. He was a brilliant teacher a history teacher, he used to just get up and talk...about history, he was so passionate about it. I was in the sixth form by then.

I went to this Methodist youth club, around 14 or 15 I picked up with 3 other guys, and we had a really good time together in the youth club, and in the town, sort of thing.

You have to take communion, and you take the bread and wine...and he passes down the row...and the minister put his hand on top of you...and I remember thinking, if I actually get a message now, if I actually feel God in some kind of way, I'll believe. And actually I thought, I felt bugger all, basically. And so from that point onwards, although I'm sure it's not as...in my memory...that was the week I kind of left the church.

### **Joining Youth- CND (03:36) Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament**

My parents, to this day, blame a guy called Stephen...I can't remember his second name, who turned up at the door one day, big bushy hair. And it was the greatest door-knocking canvassing I've ever met; because he actually recruited me on the door to join...he obviously came at exactly the right moment for me. So I plucked up my courage to go with him to the Y-CND...meeting that happened every week.

We went on the Aldermaston marches, we sat down on the street opposite military depots. I got arrested when I was 17 for doing that...We went on marches...to, yeah, ended up at Trafalgar Square.

### **Just wanting to breath (04:24)**

I remember people were commenting to my parents...they felt sorry for my parents to have a son like me, basically. But I suppose I could do anything...I just wanted to get out of the place, I felt really...the biggest image I've got of myself at that point, is a teenage image of Friday night, Tamla Motown in my ears, bursting out the door, running across the garden, leaping over the wall, and *out*. It was like I was confined, and I just needed somewhere to breathe...and it was CND, it was black culture, it was music.

I met my now-partner, actually, on a mixture of CND and music outing, to Westcliff-on-Sea in Essex [Southend-on-Sea], following The Pretty Things. And that's quite interesting, in terms of [a] cultural turning point. We went by coach, arranged by the drummer of the band, to support the band, and we went to this little dive in Westcliff-on-Sea, this little club, and the first [laughs], the first band was a sort of Cliff Richard type of twangy-guitar band, and the next band were The Pretty Things, who were really grungy, long hair, greasy looking, R&B band. It was almost like that was the cultural turning point. And that was the point at which I met my partner, my wife of God knows how many years now.

### **After studying English at Sussex University (06:03) I moved to Notting Hill in 1968**

I had no real ambition to be anything in particular, except to possibly be a writer or do something creative or, whatever...And uh, so I signed on at the Labour Exchange, which the guy couldn't believe, I remember the guy at the other end of the Labour Exchange, why, you've got a degree? You could have my job! Eventually I ended up working for the Water Board, digging trenches basically...I then started to, to be honest, to over-identify with the working class that I didn't really belong to anyway. And I did a series of jobs on building

sites, driving lorries eventually, around sort of, and pretended I hadn't been to university. So I suppose, looking back now, I had quite an identity crisis really.

I ended up in Notting Hill...after meeting, I met this black guy called Courtney Tulloch in Brighton, and I used to josh him about being James Baldwin and that kind of stuff, and we got to be friends. And then he moved up to Notting Hill, which was beginning to explode with radical ideas at the time, and he said, why don't you come up? So I came up

I started working on a, what was a black community newspaper with him, actually, as soon as I got there, and got involved with all the community politics...I found myself a home in Notting Hill, and in the community politics of Notting Hill, and something called The People's Association. Doing things like pulling down fences, squatting, pulling down fences around private squares, squatting housing, street demonstrations to create traffic crossings. There was a whole, incredible outburst of community activity around that period of time, particularly in Notting Hill actually.

### **Working with Skinheads (08:10)**

At the same time I'd got interested in youth work, and started doing work informally with a bunch of skinheads from Portobello Court, which was an estate just to the side of Portobello Road. And uh eventually they started meeting round our house, because Sue, in the same kind of way, was interested in young people and teenagers, and have [has] been ever since really. And we used to have 15 or 16 young people, twice a week. When I look back, the poor person [who lived] underneath, clumping about on this very small, virtually one-room flat, on the top of Artesian Road in Portobello...and I'd seen my role as getting them involved in The People's Association and politicizing them in some kind of way! They did get involved in one or two demonstrations, standing at the back...and I did my first bit of audiovisual, which was a total flop, on Super 8, with them – I think I overexposed the film...and went out on outings with them. I became interested in youth work.

### **Community and Youth Work studies (09:22) at Goldsmith's College 1972-74**

#### **First encounter with video**

2 year course. Quite a radical course. I was very over-qualified, you didn't need a qualification to get on with it, it was very much group-based, you were very much about self-initiative. That's actually, interestingly enough, when I learned about video. Because there were 5 half-day sessions on using video, because the Sony Portapak had just become available, and someone at the college had got into it already. I can't remember his name now...anyway, so suddenly this thing arrived...I remember taking it out for the first time, went to the Round Wood Estate in Croydon, and holding this camera and not knowing where to point it. It wasn't a very targeted exercise...but I remember having this camera and being scared shitless of making a fool of myself...because I didn't know quite what I should be pointing at, what I was holding it for, in a way, but that's how I first got involved in video

It was my choice to do that. I'd always been interested in filmmaking from way back, when I was at university, the French avant-garde, Direct Cinema, I'd been aware of, and I loved all that, Godard and Antonioni, I'd got into...alternative filmmaking I suppose, in my head. So I'd always liked the idea of being a filmmaker, really.

Especially because television for me was the prime cultural thing that I grew up with it, it was the hearth in the corner that we watched all the time, that my parents watched. I was always attracted to television, because in terms of wanting to get my message across, or other people's messages across, TV always seemed the vital format, because my parents or people like them didn't really go to the cinema very much, but everybody watched television. The idea that we could get our hands on the equipment, so that we could make television, rather than someone making television about us, I suppose in some kind of way was the philosophy behind it at the time.

**First community video experiments (11:48)  
in Notting Hill - John Hoppy Hopkins  
Founding of West London Media Workshop  
with Ken Lynam and Alphonse Santana**

The first person I ever saw using it was Hoppy – or John Hopkins – who features large in the history in the time, and the history of community video. I'd seen him on skates actually, skating around Notting Hill, with his camera. So that was my first awareness of the Portapak. The seminal document was the Challenge for Change document, which Hoppy had done, and introduced...he wrote for the Home Office about the use of video in community development. That was a seminal document.

I came out of the Youth Work course, and someone in Notting Hill Theatre Workshop, West London Theatre Workshop had got a very cranky bit of video gear, and I said can I use that, and then using that raised some money to...initiate a project using video.

I got a Portapak, and recr...other people came on board...uh a guy called Ken Lynam, who'd been working with older people in the area, and one of the young guys that I'd worked with, one of the skinheads (who will hopefully be interviewed as part of this project) Alphonse, short name 'Fons', came on, who I'd know since he was 12 or 13, came on and worked with us, on a regular basis.

So we formed what became known as, amongst various names, the West London Media Workshop, and we started to devise projects for working with the local community, and making the community aware that they could create their own television, really.

and slowly got to know other people round London, all of whom were having the same ideas of using the equipment for social/art purposes.

**Video tapes about housing conditions (13:38)**

One of the first projects we did, which was very much, very similar to a project we subsequently did with the Murchison [Road] tenants, can't remember the actual name of the programme, but it was about housing conditions in, North of the Borough, where certain redevelopment had gone on, and people were living in horrible conditions – damp on the walls, floorboards falling away...and we did a series of interviews, it was my first experience of doing this, based on the sort of Challenge for Change model. We went round and interviewed and shot material with people in, in their homes, talking about how conditions were affecting their lives and the lives of their families.

They called a public meeting with the councillors, and there must have been upwards of 40 or 50 people there, at the local hall, and we showed it back on a television monitor, and it forced the councillors to confront the conditions, which they were not doing anything about. And in that sense it was very successful.

It had a pay-off in the sense that it was picked up by the BBC, who then...came down and virtually made their own programme, in a much more 'professional' kind of way, which involved their announcer John Stapleton – who's still around I think – waltzing, as I put it, around the streets of Notting Hill with a kipper tie on, introducing people to the poverty of North Kensington over their 6 o'clock news magazine programme.

A bit further along, there was another [group of] people suffering housing problems, and the local Liberal councillor was a bit of a maverick at that point – Ken Raysen – he said he wanted to do a programme with the tenants of that particular community. And he actually – along with myself and Fons, Alfonse, who'd joined us – we went and shot that, the same kind of thing was shot with the tenants there. We still have that tape, so you can see that tape. And that was an interview with women living in the Murchison Road, about how they were being affected by the building works that were going on opposite them.

### **Combining community video with youth work (16:11)**

For survival reasons, 'cos obviously there's only so much you can do with so little money, and living on the dole, they, I don't know if it was the first of its kind, but a whole series of government initiatives were starting up – and this one was called the job creation programme, to particularly get the unemployed, and particularly young people, into some kind of work disciplines, or some kind of working environment, and helping them into work. This was the first of a series of initiatives which continue until this day, actually.

So, we put in a proposal, it got accepted, and we embarked on what I think was a 6 months scheme initially – I think, I can't remember exactly how many months – to create something called News at West 10, which was to be a locally produced news programme, about events and issues in the local community in the West 10 area, which was the kind of North Kensington area.

So we ended up running a youth project. Which was fine, but it...did mean as an experiment in [running] a local television news service, it was not the greatest success. We managed to play back stuff in the local laundrette, but mostly to – and I think this is true of community arts a lot of the time – is that the people that are around during the day are either older people, younger people, and sometimes mums. And so we ended up playing back in, to old people's associations and to sort of adventure playgrounds, those kinds of audiences. So I never felt like it was a fair test of the idea, and of course, I think over the years I've been trying, time and time again, to reproduce that idea somewhere, and still are doing it in some degree, but obviously now on the web, in East London, where I do some work with a guy, a group called The Geezers. Obviously it's a very viable idea, because everywhere now, not everywhere, but many places, because of the advent of the web, have got their own local, locally-produced news, sort of service, yeah.

### **Discovering identity politics (18:33)**

**Ken Lynam and the Irish Video Project:  
The People to People series on Channel 4**

The kind of political culture at the time, had moved from, in some sense on the Left anyway, had moved from a focus on community to the whole issues of identity, which were beginning to become predominant in the culture – you know, race, gender, disability. So they were becoming people's concerns...and I suppose how that was most articulated in terms of West London Media Workshop, was the, what became the Irish in England...two-part film.

Ken Lynam, who was their um, who was one of the people that worked, the collective or whatever that worked in West London, was Irish, and along with a guy called Don McGee, they wanted to do a programme about that generation of Irish people that had come over here, post-war, in the '50s, to build the railways and build the infrastructure of the country. To combat some of the still-existing anti-Irish racism that still existed, and had existed historically. So they actually formed, with me as the only non-Irish member, the Irish Video Project, slightly further down the line. But we were making this anyway, and along trotted Channel 4, who'd just begun to operate.

So suddenly from being a sort of community video group doing stuff just for the communities we were serving, we were launched on the more national stage of Channel 4, and I remember I had to use a colour camera for the first time and suddenly we were having to produce a level of professionalism I think which was rather intimidating at the time.

It was a way of giving that community a voice, and that's what obviously the People to People series was about, on Channel 4. It did through Channel 4, what we were doing on the grassroots level, trying to get people to talk to other people.

**Making a living (20:45)**  
**My job as a video operator**  
**Videos for social agencies**

Channel 4 really liked those films, but they said well, we've done enough on Ireland now. And so there was nowhere else for that to go. So I was, kind of, also had to make a living, because at that time I had two kids, and we were living very much on the poverty line. So I started to work in the film industry as a video operator, just as a way of making some money, and for me it was making some money I'd never dreamed of, out of where I'd come from. So I managed, for a time, to do a bit video operating work and between that doing some independent filmmaking, community-based filmmaking around different parts of London, and particularly with the Albany [workshop] in South-East London. And certainly towards the end of that we made a programme called Beyond Our Ken, which was about the abolition of the GLC. I worked at Albany on that but also I did one on, yes I worked on a number of...And I worked on, much more working for social agencies rather than working from grassroots communities. So I did one for Birmingham Social Services on food provision for the ethnic elderly [coughs], I did one about the mental health community units in the Health Service, I did one about uh counselling in local government authorities. A number of those ones, which were then commissioned by...the best one for me, the most interesting was an early on, Stopover Housing, which was about young homelessness. So I managed to make a bit of a living doing that and not knowing quite how/where to move with all these ideas of community involvement.

**Back to Channel 4 (22:37)**  
**with community style filmmaking**

**on a fictional base**

**Cooperation with Jonnie Turpie**

When the technology became available in the early '90s, what was called Hi-8, a technology that the broadcasters would accept – a non-professional format that the broadcasters would accept for broadcast – it occurred to me that we could actually do some of that community-style filmmaking.

I was quite interesting in developing something that was in a fictional form, so people can tell their stories through a fictional form, and the best way, to work out a way of doing that, through improvisation, so people can do improvised dramas, and then perform these dramas, non-professional people, with a professional crew. I joined up with a guy in Birmingham called Jonnie Turpie, who'd been doing a lot of stuff with young people in new programme-making formats,, and we started developing these camcorder dramas, and over the '90s we did 5 of these, all around the country, with Channel 4 and Arts Council money, developing devised dramas with local writers, local drama workers, but bringing in a professional crew to work with them. And then latterly we then attached with the professional crew a whole series of trainees from those local communities. So although it was done on a community basis, it wasn't long-term community development, it was definitely parachuting in and parachuting out again at the end, but hopefully leaving behind a very strong sense of people having achieved something.

The first one we did was in uh Protestant East Belfast, with young people from there, and the one thing they said is 'We don't want this to be about The Troubles'. The war, some people call it, was still going on at the time. And they were fed up with pictures of marching bands, and [the] background of the war. They devised a story, and that's the environment they lived in, and they came up with a story that involved both marching bands and the background of the war, and helicopters and stuff like that. But it was an amazing experience to do it, because it was a completely new place to me, I learned so much about Northern Ireland, and the youth worker said it's the best piece of youth work he'd ever done. And we worked with an amazing writer, which was one of the reasons why it was such a success, Marie Jones, who went on to write *Stones in Your Pockets*, and become a millionaire actually, and she lived two streets up from where these kids were. And it was an amazing experience, and uh, very successful, which meant that we managed to go on and do four others

The visit, which is probably my favourite of all, we made on the youth wing of Hull Prison, and we were only allowed there 2 hours in the morning, and 2 hours in the afternoon. And we shot this film over 3 weeks with this group of young prisoners, which was a very, I think a very – truthful, actually – representation of life in the prison. And I don't think when it came out, when the kids saw it, they really liked it that much, which is slightly counter what we set out to do, in a sense, because in fact [coughs] I think they would have preferred a much more glamourised version of them being young prisoners, than was actually presented. We did one there, we did one with the Asian community in Birmingham.

That was about a young woman, who works in a fast food, Asian fast food house, cutting up chicken, chicken, chicken and her dreams, her customers. So each customer comes in, she makes up a story about them, so it's about dreams [and] ambitions of young people, Asian young people in Birmingham.

**Back to my region: (26:49)**

**Video work with young people in the East End of London**

**Hi8us South and Midlands**

**UK Sound TV Grime**

I went back almost to regionalism at that point, and, after that sort of national stuff, we set up Hi8us Midlands, and Hi8us South, which was in East London. And then for 10 years I worked with young people in East London, around E3 and E14, making videotapes, making a whole variety of stuff on European money, social regeneration money, Arts Council money, anywhere we could get money from, some reasonable budgets. And so we made dramas, we made documentaries with them, and... some of it was where they were totally hands-on themselves, some of it was professional, we did something called Poplar Film School, where they made all the films themselves, devised and shot themselves, we had something called Beats, Camera, Action! which was music videos, where they used professional crews, but where they were directed by the actual music-makers themselves. And the most interesting thing for me was the UK Sound TV, which was, as far as I know, the first young people's broadband channel, which we ran out of Roman Road in Notting Hill, and that was youth run, that was another great bit of youth work, actually. They did 2 shows in that, as well as having the websites – they did 2 live shows, which they actually streamed. It was great. A live show requires so much co-operation and development. We had so many fallings out, and so many coming back together. And they were providing all the... what do I know, it was all, a lot if around the Grime scene, which I was at best an observer of. So they produced all the artists, created all the material themselves, which was great actually.

In some senses that Hi8us period in the East End... it enabled... it was all that stuff from the late '70s, with the new technology around, and some decent European money, at that point in time, and me being that much more experienced, having a) worked as a video operator in the film industry and understood how you made films and b) my experience in the camcorder dramas. I personally brought much more experience both of working with people, and technically, of how you do that stuff. And I was very, we were very fortunate... we landed in this incredibly dynamic music scene, which was when Grime music, which you may or may not know about, which is like an underground hip-hop in this country, was just burgeoning, just starting. Dizzee Rascal. Tinchy... Stryder was in one of our early films, so there was this incredible... I mean, if you want energy, go to a Grime gig, man. It's just fantastic. I absolutely adored it actually, just because *so* much energy came out of it. And so that energy burst out into everything we did.

### **Brexit and the East End (30:03)**

#### **The Geezers**

#### **BOW: Then & Now**

In the light of current political events in terms of the number of people who've voted for us to leave the European community, and what that vote represents, which for me is less about leaving the European community than the voice of people who feel completely voiceless and left behind by contemporary society, whether it be the money establishment, the social establishment, the cultural establishment or whatever. And you know it's an opportunity for them to make a statement and get their voice heard. And I heard that a lot, because subsequent to working with the young people, which finally got... a) we ran out of money, but b) I think I'd started to embarrass myself, actually at my age, scurrying round the floor, working with 14 year-olds. I'd met these older guys in Bow, one guy in particular. Subsequently, since that period I've been working with this bunch, called The Geezers, who are all, to a person, Brexiteers, and do in some sense represent a, that, the old white working-class in East London, that feels completely disenfranchised by their community being overtaken by other communities, whose sons and children have had to leave, and have chosen to leave, and feel they don't have a voice anymore. And so, we do have a lot of jokes,

because they're obviously aware I'm a kind of Leftie, and they're definitely not Lefties of any sort or description.

I deliver the goods for them, really. I provide, I do their fundraising for them. We made, one my favourite films from the recent past, is called Bow Then and Now, which is when we, I did a series of interviews with the older guys, then they did a series of interviews with younger people from a local school, and they did, one of the trainees did [coughs] out of these interviews – it's about growing up in Bow – and then we put the two different films together. So you get the older people talking about clothes in their time, young people talking about clothes during their time, same thing with housing. Of course they're all old and mostly white; in fact they're all white, indigenous white Eastenders. And most of the young people, with the exception of two of them, are from different ethn...all over the world, basically, or their origins are from all over the world – they're English, but they're from all over the world. And to put these two films together, and to show them back to back was tremendous, and actually won them a prize. So, and then they got invited along to the Royal Society of Arts, they got wined and dined. So, up to a point, they buy into me because I'm delivering something for them, you know what I mean? And um and I've been there, and I consistently do it, and now we have a website that I run for them. So they put up with me like I put up with them, because actually we really like each other, and underneath it all, Ray, who's actually an ex Liberal councillor, but he is actually one of the most community-minded people I've ever met.