

Amerah
02/12/2014

Interviewer: Urmala Jassal

Interviewer: I
Respondent: R

00:06 I Hello welcome to the My Route oral history interviews. We appreciate you doing this, and what I'd really like to know is, if you could let us know, what your name is and whereabouts in Stratford Road you live, and then if you could give us a little bit of background about living in Stratford Road, when you lived there, when you didn't live there. Just an idea to get us into the context of who you are and what angle are you talking from.

00:45 R My name's Amerah Saleh, I have lived on the Stratford Road for about eight years, but I've moved around, so I used to live in Balsall Heath, moved to Sparkbrook, to Handsworth to Sparkhill so I've kind of done the full turn. And the Stratford Road I think for me up until recently was always just the Stratford Road, there was nothing unique about it, you've got the Coventry Road, you've got the Stratford Road, Ladypool Road, all of these, and you never think that the Stratford Road leads to Stratford, it just doesn't click with you. Only after I've been interested in doing stuff for my community because I feel like as an artist I talk about giving back to the community and actually I'm so secluded from my own, so starting to research with other people who live on the Stratford Road, from completely different areas on what is the Stratford Road like and how do you tie in each community with each other and getting them to understand that it's all one road because in Solihull and Sparkbrook, you're still on the same path.

02:03 I You just mentioned that you came here eight years ago, settled on Stratford Road, tell me something, when you were born and you were a child, what was that journey getting you to Stratford Road? Tell us a little bit about that.

02:21 R I was born in the area in Balsall Heath, so it's an Arab community, it's really tight knit and I never never knew about the Stratford Road. I think I know people now who are from like Ireland and Scotland that travel to the Stratford Road to get their Asian dresses for weddings, but, because it was always where the Asian dresses were and we didn't wear Asian clothes, so I didn't have any affiliation with the Stratford Road. Ladypool Road was kind of where you wanted to go to go and get a nice curry or if you want to go to a nice Halal restaurant because that was closer to us whereas Stratford Road I think was a bit too far from Balsall Heath.

03:08 I So you didn't identify Stratford Road with somewhere where you would shop and you would go and get some food there. Tell me about where you went

to after Balsall Heath and then how you ended up in Sparkhill.

03:33 R So from Balsall Heath we moved to Yemen and that's where I ended up going for just under two years. When we moved back, probably a week and it was October and everyone had started school and I was meant to be in year 7 so there was all this manicness about getting a school, Queensbridge and all of these and then Moseley, Moseley School, just off the Stratford Road. That was obviously, it's not the perfect school but that was the school that I got into and my mum decided because it was me and my sister that were going to school that she was going to move a bit closer, so we moved to Sparkbrook which is right at the bottom erm just after Camp Hill. And I remember the first day I got the bus to school, my dad walked us onto the bus number 6, considering we did not know this area, we've always known Balsall Heath, our city centre was Kings Heath, so we didn't know anything about town. You know where you go and get food there's Ladypool Road, I had no idea what the Stratford Road looked like. He walked us on the bus at eight o'clock in the morning. To this day I don't know if my dad has clocked that we didn't pay that day when he walked us on because we were that scared and I think the driver must have been a bit, we walked onto the bus and he said bye and the bus just drove and we were like we had no idea where we were going, and it seemed like forever ending journey which it wasn't, it's like ten minutes from Sparkbrook. This is a really embarrassing story. Then we got off, the driver and we saw all the kids with the uniform they got off. After school my dad hadn't given us money to get back home, so me and my sister, my sister was in year 9 and I was in year 7 and we were like what do we do, what do we do? So we just said let's walk because we remembered it was a straight line, let's just walk, and we started walking, it was after school and me and my sister were really frustrated and we were just walking and walking, and it was cold and everything looked like Narnia to us, we had no idea what anything looked like and we were like let's just look for where we recognise because we've got a petrol station right at the bottom of our old house in the road, so we were like let's just look for that petrol station and we got next to Aldi which is now Aldi which we had no idea where we were at that time and we stood by Aldi and there was a little charity shop which I think is closed now, which I think it's changed into a big Islamic Relief but it was a tiny one on the corner right opposite Aldi and we stood there and I remember sitting on the floor because I was like I need the toilet, I can't walk any more, I don't know how far we are, and my sister was like come on we haven't got long left, we'd been walking for ages. It wasn't, it was about a ten minute walk and then we bumped into my uncle's wife in the carpark of Aldi, and I literally started crying. I was like I want go home, I don't know how to get home and she drove us home and yea that was the most embarrassing story of my life. Then you get used to it and it's home.

06:40 I You touched on your dad just now and what I'd like to know is Yemeni community along Stratford Road, what's the story that you know of about that community?

- 06:59 R For me on the Stratford Road I think it's mainly the Asian community. Erm, I think the Arab and Yemeni community are very mismatched all over the place, like now especially now you've got them in Sandwell, you've got them in West Bromwich, all around, like whereas before straight away it was always Balsall Heath and now we're starting to flutter out of Balsall Heath and be like because, what tends to happen is, especially with the Yemeni community and I'm not stereotyping this is my community that I'm talking about, is when you're in that same room, if we've been talking for so long and there's nothing more to talk about, you end up starting to talk about other people, because it makes conversation more interesting, and I think that's what I realised years ago we were like we need to get out of that community and there were just family members that lived there that we weren't talking to anymore, so we moved away, but now they are starting to realise and they are only like ten/fifteen late but they start to move and I think that's where a lot of Sparkbrook has got the Yemeni community kind of the back towards Small Heath, you know from Sparkbrook to Small Heath from the back area, that's all got a lot of the Yemeni community. I think there's not many in Sparkhill, a few but not many and then I think it just gets less and less as you go further along.
- 08:30 I What do you think the Yemeni community has contributed to that area or to Birmingham as a whole?
- 08:41 R Erm I think for me, I don't think the Yemeni community have contributed that much to Stratford Road, I think Coventry Road the Yemeni community have made a lot of and kind of I know that my uncles own shops there and like big restaurants that are successful over there and it's just like that community, you can feel the vibrantness of it, the Stratford Road it's exactly the same but I don't think the Yemeni community helped build that, I think it was a much self-sustaining kind of road because you see each shop just happens to be by a family member, who owns two shops down the road and you very much see that this business owns five shops on the Stratford Road and because it started with the Asian community it's kind of still got that Asian community, the shops are owned by Asians so yea.
- 09:48 I What do you think of the Stratford Road compared to when you first came to live there? Have you noticed any changes?
- 09:58 R I think a lot of the shops have gone and come back as other things and there used to be a pub on the, right opposite the old DVD shop, he's a really good man, right opposite it, it's called Hajees now and it was run down for years. There was just this blank space and then in the last, I'd say in the last three years it's opened up to this really romantic kind of feel and as soon as you walk past you've got like fire and it's really nice and, for that to be in the middle of a really old DVD shop, and kind of like travel agents and stuff like right next to each other and then you've got this really unique, that's what

you love about the Stratford Road, it's just really different. I think there's a supermarket called A1 which first started near Sparkbrook just after Ladypool School, and that was the first twenty four hour one where everyone use to go crazy. We used to walk down there, like, you know when it's like three o'clock in the morning and your friends stay over and you're like let's go down and we used to walk down. No matter where you are, whether you're in Highgate, Ladypool Road, Stratford Road, it's very easy to get to, it's kind of like the back roads, so I think it was a really convenient place to start and now they've opened one on the other side which is a two minute walk from my house, it's even more convenient. I think we're starting to get a few of them chains now, which is really nice, well it's nice or not but it's a good thing for me, it's around the corner. But I think yea the roads I think the street is a lot more busier than it was when I was in year 7, and because it's a main road and I think you've got the 6, the 3, the 2, 31, 37, 5, that's six buses that start on that Stratford Road and I think it's always, I never walk down the Stratford Road feeling like, well you know what's happened it's only an apocalypse, it's never, it's always alive, there's always a shop that's open, there's always boys hanging about the Piccadilly Cinema, that used to be a cinema and now it's a wedding hall, and it's so, everyone I know has got married there, because it's cheap, it's relevant and it's stuff like that, like little things, that used to be a cinema, it's now a wedding hall, got the place that used to be a pub, and then it was run down for ages and now it's a restaurant, it's just yea many things popping up all over the place.

12:41 I You mentioned earlier on about your work and would you say you're a performance poet? So tell me something, do you draw on Stratford Road for your work? Does it inspire you in any way and if so how?

12:57 R Erm I think Birmingham inspires me. I can never put it specific. All credit to the no 6 or whatever bus I'm getting in the morning because that's my free writing time, so anything on that route of the bus will inspire me from how the clouds look from the window to the people having conversations on the bus, so yea so I think the people on the Stratford Road and the community there, they inspire me, I don't think the area inspires me as much. But I think Birmingham does, contradict yourself, yea.

13:37 I What do you think about the next generation in terms of the younger people from that area? What's your thoughts on that?

13:51 R Erm I think if, someone with authority doesn't start giving a damn about the Sparkbrook, Sparkhill, Stratford Road young people, it's gonna be a waste. Erm I know, I don't know them but at the top of my road there's a few drug dealers and when you speak to police and stuff and you're like well my brother's out til nine o'clock, I know he's eight and he shouldn't be out, but in the summer he's out with his friends playing by the gardens and it's like you're at the top of the road and you're smoking and dealing, what's happening? And the police are like oh we just don't get involved, if we don't

see them we don't, and it's like I live right in front of the police station, so it's like absolutely ridiculous to know that, even though with a police station with not even a minute, I take ten seconds from the top of my road, that you're not getting involved in the young people. I'm not saying take them to jail because that's never the answer. I'm saying give them something better to do. If you give someone something better to do, they're gonna hang off that, but, I don't know I feel like there's so many raids that have happened, so many murders or attempted murders that have happened on the Stratford Road, but no ones' taking action, I think everyone is very apathetic, very very, especially the young people because it's the same as success, it's the same as achieving, it's the same as you know your education, you're gonna react to it as your family do, so if your family really want you to be a doctor, you'll either rebel against it but still wanna be something, do you know what I mean, you're not gonna come to a point where you're gonna be like yeah I'll just sign on because your family are pushing you, whereas if your family are all on job seekers, you're gonna wanna be on job seekers. It's exactly the same theory if you flip it on its head, to, you know if my family are really apathetic to the community, you're gonna be like yea, might as well. It's not that we want to be, I think it's just installed in you, especially if the generations that are born in that community, I think once you're born into it it's just like, it's all you know, these people not to care about the place.

16:17 I So you have just touched on crime in the area, and sometimes the area does get negative press because of these activities, but also other tensions around social and political tensions. What do you think about cultural cohesion and social cohesion with all those cultures?

16:44 R Erm I think the more you acknowledge it, the more it will be accepted. It's a very simple answer. I think the fact that the Somali community wanna stay in Somali town and the Arabs wanna stay in Balsall Heath just off the Stratford Road and you know the middle class wanna stay in Solihull and I know the houses are nicer, but you can get some bloody lovely houses on McKenzie Road just off, and it's just like it's all of these that are not acknowledging that there are different cultures, so I think, one of my friends who lives in Solihull has lived there all his life and only just realised that his neighbours are Pakistani, and it's just like, this is your community, like how do you not acknowledge who lives on your road, and it's something as simple as that, like look at the people that are on your street, acknowledge it and there will be acceptance.

17:53 I Do you have any particular memories that you think, you talked about the A1 supermarket and people hanging out there and going down there, have you got any other memories of growing up on Stratford Road?

18:00 R Erm I think having a fair, Sparkhill Fair comes every single year, no fail. I hate it now, used to love it back then and that was the time when all the friends would run down Sparkhill Park, so that I think that's one of the busiest times

as well, like candyfloss and balloons and sweets all coming out of the park with kids, it's crazy. I remember Farm Road Park, I remember that because it's where my mum used to meet our friends and have picnics and when we used to live on that side of the Stratford Road but yea so I think I remember the parks a lot and I've got a big love for River Cole, erm which is Sarehole Mill, I love that because we used to walk that route, I used to do college once a week when I was in school and we'd walk that route from inside, and I think people don't realise where it leads to, but it leads to Hall Green. It's like that starts, it's just really simple things like you know you hang there with your friends and smoke weed but you would never walk to realise that it takes you to Hall Green, but yea I think that park and Pickwick which is the other side just off the Stratford Road, yea, I don't know why parks but I remember them very distinctly.

19:31 I You touched on food earlier on, do you have any memories of food?

19:37 R Erm don't eat cheap food from Stratford Road, that's all I'd say. I'm not a big fan of curries, so I can't be like you know there's this place called that, but I'd say really really don't eat cheap chicken and chips from Stratford Road. I know it's cheap and it's very tempting and you probably will do it once in your life, but it's really bad, aftermath is very bad.

20:06 I Is there anything else you want to add?

20:11 R Erm, no I think I hated, I hated Stratford Road, like in my teenage years I absolutely hated it. I hated what the community stand for, I hated everyone that lived in the community, I hated everything about it and I think only recently I'm really starting to fall in love with it and just the fact that, this is my community and I haven't done anything about it for so long. I became what I always say don't become, which is that apathetic young kid that's like, well no one else cares so why should I care, and as an artist and everything that I stand for is not that, is not being that. So I think recently I've really taken that step of trying to get some projects off the ground, that capture the stories of Stratford Road and to take it back to provide some things for the young people.