

Frankie Armstrong

I want to talk to you very much about the songs that you wrote, especially for Greenham, both then and, and Lily, obviously, that you just mentioned. But shall we start a bit more broadly and just say what originally took you to Greenham, what's your, what, what took you there originally?

Oh, that does go back quite a way. Um, I, for a while I thought I'd train to be a therapist. I'd been a social worker and a singer. And I thought I'd become a therapist. And through a connection there, I met Stephanie Leyland. And she told me about her and Leonie Gooding, and Caroline Waitman, I'm pretty sure I've got their, setting up Women For Life on Earth. And, would I like to join, it was kind of loose joining as it were. So yes, I can be kept in touch. So we used to just get cyclist style newsletters. So it is quite a while ago. And then I remember going to their first new moon party up in London, and just kind of getting a sense of the fact that they were feminist, eco, obviously Women For Life on Earth, eco-engaged, and anti war. So I kind of thought that, that's fine. That's my repertoire. That's what I do. That's so, and I can't remember how or when I heard that the Women for Life on Earth group in Cardiff - I mean, I had no idea I was going to finish up living in Cardiff. Because when was this...

'81 when they first walked.

'81, god, yes. So I heard through the Women for Life on Earth the grapevine that the Women for Life on Earth based in Cardiff, were going to start this walk to Greenham Common, because we'd all heard about the cruise missiles. And were needless to say, very unhappy about that. But there you know, was this fantastic group of women who were determined to you know, make a splash by walking to Greenham and inviting other women to, to join them. And so when that actually started, um, August of '81, word went out - could I mean, I again presume through Women for Life on Earth, but but I know that Leon

Rosselson who I sang with, from time to time - we'd been involved in anti-Vietnam, anti-Chile, well singing for Chile solidarity for CND. So Leon and I said 'Oh, we can go and sing', because they said, you know 'Can we have people to sing, or entertain or do theatre for these women on route to, to Greenham. So Leon and I sang for them in Bristol. Now, the meeting I went to - which more later - the meeting, I went to of the Cardiff, women, in Cardiff in Wales last year, they said, the only place that they really didn't feel terribly well cared for or welcome was Bristol, for which I, I don't think I could, you know, I'm to blame for that. But it was a bit of a oh, dear, I'm sorry about that. But I hope you like Leon and our, suitable songs 'Don't get married girls'. And, you know, we had lots of anti-war songs, and anti nuclear songs, and feminist songs. So I imagine that's what we did all those years ago. So that, that kind of meant I knew what - that the march was happening. Um. And so just I was involved in lots of things to do with the women's movement in London. My, my time sense, what happened what year - I mean, I'd started running workshops in 1975. And did that for a lot of women's groups in the Gay Sweatshop, the theatre company, and I had already done some work with the Women's Theatre Group. So, so there were just lots of women around the feminist arts scene. That, we were all kind of networking and met up at the women's liberation workshop, you're in and did lots of things at Chenies Street at the Drill Hall. I mean, we were just around and about various events all the time. It was a very exciting time to be part of the women's movement.

Is it a different time, do you think? Do you get a very different sense then to now?

Ah, it's difficult to tell because it might be more akin to that still in London. But because aspects of the women's movement is fragmented, in a way because probably all in all, there's more people involved than those of us in the early days. But I think there was an enormous energy for it in those - back in the '70s. So we were, yeah, I was being invited to lots of things that other women were organising, and things that I was organising things. Groups of us got together and sang for like the Trico Strike and the First Women's Art Centre, at the Drill Hall, which I run

workshops at, and Maggie Nichols ran workshops at, and a group of us got together and put a women's repertoire of songs, and we wrote songs for it. So I mean, it was just an incredibly exciting time, which may - you may be precisely what's the equivalent of now, um but being down in Cardiff, you know, I'm not as, as in touch with kind of what's going on up here though. I do, you know, come up and down quite regularly to meet other, other people involved. But of-course, I'd known Peggy 'cause I worked with her in a group, with a terrible name, The Critics Group - that's the, there's I have few regrets in life, but one is that we ever got called, we got dunked with the name The Critics Group - pretty grim. But it meant, Peggy and Sandra Kerr and I had done the, to my knowledge, the first self-consciously women's album - back in the 1960s. We researched it '67/'68 brought it out. The album came out on Argo in '68. So, you know, I was still in touch with Peggy, and knew that she was involved with Greenham too, and had written Carry Greenham Home, and I wrote - and then we started once - I couldn't actually go to the big surround at the base, which was what '83?

Embrace the Base -that huge action? Yeah.

I'd been at the Papworth one that did the whole of Aldermaston and Papworth Common, which was a slightly earlier part of the whole anti-nuclear movement that in a way Greenham was the, you know, the women's contribution, massive contribution to, but there was already a lot of CND stuff going on, and anti-nuclear stuff. So I'd been part of that, but the actual Embrace the Base, I'd already been booked by a woman who herself was a feminist to do a weekend workshop up in Newcastle. And there was already bookings.

That's quite a way away as well, isn't it?

So, yeah, so she and I had lots of conversations - Donna, I remember her name was - about do we did we cancel it? Or really, you know, was that unfair on people who maybe couldn't have got to be the base anyway. And so we said, you know, we were going to go ahead, but we'd tell people who booked that we were going to witness to

Greenham. Yeah, by songs, and maybe write songs or, you know, improvise songs over the course of that, that weekend, which is what we did, it was a very powerful and very moving weekend, I remember, you know, we sang stropy songs, we improvised kind of, you know, we're with you, in spirit song, and as we, you know, just our fears, particularly those who are mothers of fears of the nuclear, you know, invasion in this country coming closer to home, you know. So, so I think we did, we honoured what was going on at Greenham even though we weren't there, and then of-course friends who had been there, you know, told me what had happened, and how it had gone on. And Leon and his wife Rena were in touch with the oh my golly, Angie. And what were they called? This is where my, my age and my memory come - er, who cut the, you know who who actually invaded the base and had done the same at Faslane. It'll come to me when I'm not thinking for it, of-course.

Don't worry, no pressure, no tests.

So, yeah, so there were some who were very strong on direct action. And, you know, actually getting into the base, which they succeeded in doing. So, you know, by that time, we were fundraising, both lawyers for, you know, defense of those who'd been arrested, we were fundraising just, you know, to help with anything that was needed. So I already, you know, I had work booked up way ahead. So, and, you know, I had no sight worth talking about at all. So, you know, for me, it was, I just thought the best thing I can do is help raise funds, help kind of be a spokeswoman or a singing spokesperson. Um. So that's what I did. And I was, I'd go and do workshops in Sweden, and concerts in Sweden, but again, with friends who were very anti-war, and anti-nuclear. So the theme, and I sang quite a bit in North America over those days, too, so the themes came up regularly, and in a way, so I was also a bit of a what's the word for it?

A conduit? An ambassador?

Yes, something like that, that meant I could keep in touch and back in London, I was always back in touch at various events and workshops

and concerts with women who were back and forth from Greenham. So I - it just did feel like although I only went there a couple of times, and got dragged off by the police, but you know, singing, you know 'You can't kill the spirit', at the tops of our voices. And again, thinking of that, I was one of the people with Naomi Littlebear, and I can't remember the others who did the album, the vinyl 'We have a Dream' that Pete Townsend gave us his studio free, and his equipment to do. So, which I can't find - we looked for it, my husband - because I can't see to be sure what I'm reading on any CDs or albums. Um. So, we must have a CD that he made, you know, I can't use all the technology from vinyl to CD, to on Dropbox or the whole sequencing that goes on.

Nor can I!

But that email was where the, the, the song that I wrote very specifically for Greenham. But also after seeing a - John Barton's The Greeks, which he did with The RSC, which had the most amazing speech, at the in the Iphigenia kind of sequence. And I bought the er, script of the play and got friends to read it to me. And there was a fantastic speech to Apollo about the dark versus the light, and why Apollo was the danger.

Oh interesting.

Because of him being in the light and needing certainty this - I can now say a little bit of the beginning, I may not remember it all, but 'Oh, Lord Apollo, God of prophecy, what is to come? What lies in the future? Careful, it is dangerous to listen to Apollo for his light blinds like the sun does. Do you know the story of his Oracle at Delphi where he... killed the dragon there that guarded the Oracle for old Mother Earth. And Mother Earth was outraged and she taught us, she taught women. She, she taught us that truth could come disguised. She's sends us dreams at night full of pith and meaning, to tell us the truth of things past present and to come. But when Apollo heard', yeah, anyway 'Apollo takes away the, the Oracle from Mother Earth. And now we no longer understand the truth in the night, we only listened to Apollo in the light.'

Gosh, that's wonderful.

I wrote, it's on the record that I'll send you, that has the song and the, my speech to Apollo it before it. So I used, because I just thought that was so powerful. It's a slight rewriting from Euripides, but you know it, as I understand it, but I thought it was such a powerful statement, about we only - about Apollo, the rational, you know...

Yes, being out of balance.

And so it was a combination of Greenham women, and that speech that made me write the song Out of the Darkness. And because I was losing my, or had virtually lost my sight too, and so all that, and all that kind of Christian stuff about the light versus the darkness, you know, and I don't know if you've come across, because I did quite - I had a long chat with Marsh, Bryer Marsh, and she knew the work of this man, John Hull, who's a New Zealand theologian and philosopher who's blind, and who really had a big influence on me. Because of talking about, and I guess, that really relates to racism too, you know, the dark being equated with the negative evil, the light always with righteousness and the sacred, you know, so, so that, you know, I've written numbers of songs that explore those issues, but that one particularly was, you know, the that speech to Apollo linked to the Greenham. And then I wrote a song again, which, you know, I sang a lot of a group called Babies against the Bomb, which must have been '81, I think. Yeah, when the Greenham march had started, which I pinched, I heard, and the oratorio 'Or Shall we Die', which the composer Michael Berkeley did with Ian McEwan doing the libretto. And the reason it was called 'Or Shall we Die' was because the phrase that really informs the whole oratorio, because at that time Ian McEwan was very much with a feminist who I knew - was his partner. So I met him through her, and it was 'Shall there be womanly times, or shall we die?' So I wrote to him and said 'Ian, can I pinch your line please for a song I want to write?', and have that as you know - so it's, you know, the first verse is 'They they the dove, they clip her wings, shall there be womanly times, or shall we die? But still she flies and still we sing, there will be womanly times, we will not die'. Oh

gosh, it still stirs me up. You know 'So the missiles wait in concrete to choose, shall there be womanly times, or shall we die? Born of the head, and not the womb, there will be womanly times, we will not die', and so on.

Wow!

And so that got sung a lot because Babies against the Bomb, which was set up by a friend of mine in 1981, and she had a choir. So we got together and I taught them the refrain lines, so we made a little single, as they were called in those days! With a green cover, which had 'Message from Mother Earth' on one side, which I'd written 40 years ago. And it's kind of come back (laughs) into use, if you like. And on the other side was 'Shall there be Womanly Times', so that we sold quite a lot of those for £1 for Babies against the Bomb. So there were all these different networks, that I was kind of involved with and, and running workshops - voice workshops for and, you know, raising money. There was one I remember particularly Jackson's Lane Art Centre on Archway.

Yes, still going.

Is it? Great.

Did a show there last year.

Well, a group, some of us were asked to do a Greenham benefit. And I didn't know the seating I think was ranked - I don't know, anyway, I was in a big um, area just kind of stood in front of the wall with, as I say, next to no sight. Um, and I asked somewhere, you know, I was doing a series of both traditional women's and anti-war, you know, of which there are plenty of traditional songs, anti-war songs. I mean, for me, it was very important to see women's history expressed, and anti-war sentiments expressed through traditional songs from centuries back. So I always mixed contemporary and traditional songs, and Peggy songs, and my songs. And I asked for some water. And so I was brought a glass of

water. And somehow in the process of putting it down on the floor, I must have got disorientated, because I can't remember what I sang. But I finished up with the applause coming from behind me! (Laughs). So I'll always remember that particular concert. And my friend, I had a Swedish friend with me, and he turned me around and said 'Frankie, you can take a bow now, you're facing the audience', and they're all applauding again, and said 'You know, that's fine, Frankie, none of us mind! We're all your friends.' So, but that was, I think, to my knowledge, that's the only time that I've been told that I actually had finished up with my back to the audience without knowing it! Yes, so, yeah, just that sense that you know the, the impact of Greenham went way beyond - you know, when I was touring in North America or Australia, which I was first invited to in '85, to run workshops and do concerts, but, you know, when I'd sing those songs and talk about Greenham. You know, nearly everybody that I met over, you know, in the kind of circles and the kind of folk and world music, and women's, and you know, would know what I was talking about and, and be supportive. So, the word I was looking for was an ambassador. I felt I could be a little bit of an ambassador for the British women's movement, but particularly Greenham.

So, so with Pete Townsend doing that album, you talked about that, I just wondered, how did that come about, that he gave that space?

I've no idea I wasn't the conduit to there. I was just phoned at some point, which is what we used to do in those days, to say 'Frankie, would you be free and interested in coming to sing?' So I can't even, to be honest, remember who...

Even asked you, sort of thing?

...the connection was, but obviously, it was somebody who must have known and asked Pete and got us all together on the same day and at the same time, so that was a pretty exciting thing. Yes, I can't remember if Clapper Claw (spelled phonetically) were part of that. You know, there were various women's singing groups, and cabaret groups and you know, and yeah, so somebody found a copy of it, when

obviously, I'd lent it to somebody else and not got it back - somebody found it in a secondhand charity shop and sent it to me saying 'Frankie, I thought, you know, I'd let you have this as you're on it. I've made a copy.' So anyway, yeah. So as I say, you know, all my, yeah, most of my CDs have, you know, contemporary and feminist and political songs as well as traditional songs.

When do you think that, obviously before Greenham - a lot of women are radicalised by Greenham, whereas you clearly had a political identity, and a set of understanding, and a drive way before Greenham happened. So where where did you, where do you think you got your politics from?

Well, it kind of started, um, I guess, you know, when I was in my late teens, I was already - I don't think CND - but I mean, back then, my late teens, until I moved up to London, I was a Sunday school teacher, but I'd lost god. I didn't believe in god anymore. But I was very fond of the vicar and his wife, at the church that I used to go to, and I was very fond of the kids, they were all girls, I had a whole group of girls who were kind of my Sunday afternoon. So actually, I talked about poverty, and Oxfam, and refugees, and anti-nuclear stuff with these young girls. So you know, and I felt a bit of a hypocrite singing the hymns or the, you know, those horrible little things we used to do at Sunday school - 'I'm H-A-P-P-Y!' But I, as I say, I felt I had quite a strong connection with these lasses, so I didn't mind - but then at the same time, I'd cycle back from the church to get time for the Brainstrust, which would have people like Bertrand Russell and C.E.M. Joad on it, you know, and there I was, I'd left school at 16. But I loved listening, Marghanita Laski, all these real people, kind of addressing the issues of the day, of which the anti-nuclear issue was one. So because my mum was quite a follower of Bertrand Russell, I heard about their Committee of 100. So there I was in a nice little rural market town. But there they were taking direct action - sitting in the road, for the anti-nuclear cause, you know, with Whesker, and Penny - that's when I first heard of Penny Arrowsmith, and then I joined the Bertrand Russell Foundation - anti-nuclear foundation, which I don't know how much that had to do, you know,

back in the '60s, 'late 50s, early '60s, but I'm sure that was partly what set up CND. So I became an early member of CND. And you asked me what my early... that's what I'm answering, I can go off on red herrings!

No, honestly, it's great.

And then, so that, and then I joined the group with Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl, and we started doing a lot of medical aid for Vietnam concerts. And so you know, we sang in St Pancras Town Hall and various - and that was how I got to sing in Trafalgar Square. So the politics at that point, was much more anti-imperialist. Kind of quite Marxist. And Ewan became a Maoist, he left the Communist Party. So that was quite, you know, quite intriguing to at that point, before the cultural revolution. There were some very - I remember going to a weekend that was the Taoist Sho-down (spelled phonetically) organisation who were kind of, you know, political, spiritual, and listening to William Sewell, who was a Quaker who wrote 'I stayed in China', who was a chemistry professor who imprisoned during the Japanese occupation of China. And he stayed on afterwards when nearly all the British academics or people that were teaching out there, or missionaries came back to Britain, but he didn't he stayed on as a chemistry professor and wrote this absolutely fascinating book about the early days. You know, the end of the long march and the impact of the - and people working in small groups all the time, you know, carding groups, but it really did sound like it was ground up, you know, kind of very involving of both the students and the peasants. And he was speaking at this conference, and so was Joseph Needham, who was the greater authority on Chinese art back - so this must have been '66/'67 kind of era. So there was, and I went to the Dialectics of Liberation, heard Stokely Carmichael and Alan Ginsberg and RD Lang, and later got to know RD Lang's analyst. I mean, all the strange and weird kind of weavings at that time, but they were, again, you know, I mean, looking back on what actually happened to China, whoops! But there were some very genuinely interesting things that were worth exploring in terms of the early kind of attempt - and reading Han Suyin, her trilogy, I could just about read with a big thick magnifying glass during the '60s, I

lost my ability to do that in 1971. But I couldn't read - what was it 'The mortal flower' 'The Cripple Tree', I can't remember the name of the third of her trilogy about being in China. And the hope that, you know, the Communist Party brought, and then to move into the women's movement at the end of - into well, I think, you know, there was Bob Hope, and some friends of mine, were actually with Germaine Greer outside The Albert Hall, with all the Miss - you know, for Miss World, that was the first big women's demonstration that hit the headlines. And it was later I met, and became very friendly and worked with, one of the women who was on that. And, and so, you certainly, I remember going and visiting friends of mine in Vancouver, who'd started to get very involved in the women's movement, so then I was given copies of 'Sisterhood is Powerful'. And the tracks as it were, I couldn't read them, but friends read them to me, and, and, you know, picked out the, you know, the key elements, and we discussed, discussed, discussed. So I heard all about these, you know, these books in our meetings and discussions, and then the Women's Liberation Workshop got set up. Then I started running workshops in '75. And that wasn't exclusively women, by any means. But a lot, I mean, Marian Fudger, who was the music correspondence for Spare Rib was at my first workshop ever. So and, and I was working with another woman who was a strong feminist. We did a project from '75, a government funded project, as action research workers - how I got involved in that god knows, but I did. And that's right, yes. In fact, I gave up being in the Women's Theatre Group to take on this job. Because I was offered an interesting well paid job! At the point of which, I remember arriving in New York at one point around that same era with \$5 in my pocket! (Laughs). So yeah, when I was offered this interesting group, and we actually went and did some work with Spare Rib as as kind of organisational consultants, to help them untangle some of the ideological difficulties that had, you know - so as I say somehow Marion Fudger heard about my workshop, or maybe because of we were working with them at that point. I'm not - I can't remember the time, but you know, but she was at my first workshop. Nancy Dogood who ran Sweatshop was at my first workshop. So you know, even just those first ideas about well, you know, I had no idea - I thought I was gonna do one workshop. And here

I am, 43 years later going to be doing a presentation about that at the Guildhall School of Speech and Drama tomorrow. So, but lots of the women who came to workshops 'Would you come to our theatre group? Would you come to our women's group? Would you come to our hospital where you know, we've got um...', because I was a social worker too. And I worked for Scope and Shape and you know, those organisations working with the mental health issues or - so I just got myself doing all those kinds of things, linking - well, and then I was still doing all those when Greenham came along - god, I'm losing the chronology - so '81 Greenham comes along. So that's how come I already had lots of connections of all sorts.

Do you think Greenham would have happened if there hadn't been that groundswell of, of sort of second wave radical feminism that you were part of in the country - do you think Greenham and that are linked?

Oh, totally. Yeah, totally. You know, that, that was what, you know, we swelled up in the '70s. And, you know, I did lots of concerts with, you know, poems and newspaper articles and readings from books on women and alcohol, women and madness made in Bedlam. We'd put together all kinds of programmes on aspects of women's lives, with relevant historical information and poetry and songs. So, you know, there really was this groundswell that went off in, you know, and I was doing big workshops for women at Battersea Arts Centre, you know, it's so, here, we were all kind of interlinked. So the point at which Greenham appeared, you know, we were kind of ready to join in, in whatever way we could really. You know, helping as singers, as lawyers, as women going to Greenham, those who went to Greenham and wrote poetry and wrote songs, and, you know, yeah. And women journalists, who went and wrote it up. I mean, it was just an absolutely extraordinary sense of, you know, we kind of knew that even if we didn't know somebody face to face, we'd know somebody who they knew. I mean, that sense that we were very much linked up, like minded. And obviously, factions started as they do in a movement. But I think, you know, and certainly, you know, I found myself very distressed by having some friends who became a lesbian feminist, you know, exclusive...

Separatist?

Separatists. And that really took me to the therapist.

Oh, really?

A woman therapist, who then put me in touch with Stephanie Leyland and said 'You've all got to do something about the women's and the earth. And what's happening.' I mean, it was Stephanie said she would never have actually set up Women for Life on Earth without the support. And, you know, and Bunty, who was in her late 60s at that point. You see, when did she know? No, she was in her 60, anyway, this Jungian feminist therapist saying 'You've got to get together and do something.' And so for me, seeing right at the centre of this web that is now you, is Bunty, this white haired woman who just sat in her flat, that she rented for heaven's sake, in St. John's Wood, saying to some of us who she called her sweethearts, we were never clients, she said 'That makes me sound like a prostitute. And you're not ill, so you're not patients. So you're my sweethearts.' So you know, she put together - which of course, you know, you're not supposed to do as a therapist, but she brought lots of us who were involved in the arts, or theatre or you know, environmental stuff to be in touch with each other. And that was how - back to my start half an hour ago, or whenever it was, my connection to Women for Life on Earth. So we all kind of...

Lovely cyclical sort of journey.

So even at the centre of, because Stephanie was very important to the early days of Greenham, but, you know, she's still very active in the kind of women's environmental stuff. So that's, you know, that sense, as I say, there's little Bunty in her flat starting this web, which became, you know, this enormous movement. And which you're, absolutely - so glad you're saying younger women need to know about this again. And that'll feed, you know, the Extinction Rebellion too, who honour you, who in turn, it was Committee of 100 who started non-violent direct

action in this - my, my generation. So it's, I think it's, um, I'm so pleased to see this all happening again, because it's been quite difficult. I mean, I haven't stopped working, I haven't stopped teaching, I haven't stopped singing, but the whole scene changed during the '90s. And, you know, I had lots of - I've kept lots of the same wonderful friends from that era. I remember talking to my women friends about the fact that these Marxist fellows seemed all very certain what was right, what was wrong, what needed doing. And I remember talking, you know, to my women, friends saying 'I'm not sure it's as simple as that, you know, I think life's a bit more complex', particularly the friends who were social workers, or psychologists or, you know, kind of 'You know, it's all a bit more paradoxical and complex.' And our values, you know, we'd stick by our values, and I stick by my values today, you know, as being, you know, kind of the same set of wanting, you know, humanity and nature and to, well, the other thing I haven't mentioned, which has been - was a very strong part of my ways of thinking was Susan Griffin's *Women in Nature*. And I wrote songs about that came out of that, too. It's just been republished last year - fantastic book, on, in a way how, you know, from the time that we have history, we have writings of philosophers, and religious thinkers, and then scientists - how women always were over and, you know, there was men, and then there was women and nature to be suppressed and contained, and controlled. And her, she's a poet as well as a researcher and writer. And, I mean, she's Californian, I think I know, I got in touch with her to say 'Can I use some of your words to write songs to?' And she wrote back and said 'Yes, yes, please.' But there's just been across the, the world from America, Europe, Australia, this sense of like minded women willing to support each other as writers, as singers, as thinkers. So, you know, even without being able to read since 1971, people have just read things to me, or sent me tapes or filled me in or, you know, just, we've kept those discussions going throughout the whole of my lifetime. You know, since my late teens.

Wow.

So I'm ignorant about I mean, you know, you can just assume I am incredibly ignorant about lots of things except the things I've

experienced, you know, that I know from people and I've experienced firsthand.

(Edit in tape).

That also brings us to the the song Lily that you wrote only last year, I think, wasn't it?

Yes.

But it also has a sense of - well, please tell us about it, to me it has that cyclical, it goes far back but it comes far forwards, doesn't it?

That's right. Because, as I say, August last year, I went to the gathering at Chepstow, which is just next - it's where this the old Seven Bridge lands on the Eastern side. And that was - the first photograph that the women had of themselves going to - marching to Greenham - was on that bridge. So last August the 27th, which was exactly 37 years to the day - Anne and the other women leaving from Cardiff, they had a meeting in Chepstow village hall, or Drill Hall or something, and invited me to go and sing. I don't know how I got in - somehow, they got in touch with me. And so some of the women who'd actually been on that walk, talked about that experience of leaving in Wales. And then, you know, I did a few of those songs. And then a woman from Women in Wales for Peace, Women for peace in Wales - something a group, who are kind of historical history, women's history group. I think they're based in Aberystwyth, probably the University of Wales, um, spoke about this peace project that they were reviving, because it was so little known that back in 1920/1923/'24, a committee of twenty women got together and sent a petition - a peace petition - to every household in Wales. Now, many of the people in Wales would have lived down mountain tracks. You know, in the rural, the farming communities. You know, it must have been an incredible piece of organising from those original twenty women to spread out, and put a petition through the door of every household in Wales, over 1924 - '23, and '24. And they got 380 - three hundred and eighty thousand six hundred and sixty

something signatures, which was, and the thing that was so astonishing was that most of us didn't know about it. I mean, all the women I've made friends with since I've been in Wales, would call themselves feminists, they'd not heard of it. And they sent - the idea was because they'd heard of the fact that the women in America, were making an enormous petition, and imagine the difference in the population. So I'm not sure how many millions of women, the American petition would have got, but it would have done, and it was sent to Washington, and the Welsh one was sent to Washington to say, no more war. You know, collaborate, we need collaboration from nations, it was part of that whole movement that set up the League of Nations, which led to the United Nations. And er, so you, we knew that all these signatures that got sent to Washington, and they're now in the Smithsonian Museum, the biggest museum in America, you know, where a massive amount is archived. And, and they were there. So the demand or the request, was it, they digitalise it and send it back to us. And meantime, we have another petition going through Wales, of a - which men are invited to, which - whereas the first one was all women. This next one men are being allowed to sign it too. So I sang Lily at an event at the Temple of Peace last November.

And had you written it specially?

And yeah, I wrote it because my grandmother was Welsh. So I didn't, I felt that was perfectly valid artistically, to use her history to just, you know, introduce the song. And like it starts 'Lily, where were you then when the men came back from the trenches?' Er, I mean, I still (becomes emotional) I managed to sing it this week without weeping, but to - twice, I haven't been able to get through the repeat of that at the end, just because, I mean, any of us who have read a lot about the First World War and its impact on community back here, its impact on the men who did come home. You know, the wreckage that came home from that. So none of our family, actually close family, were in either - active in either of the wars - by pure fluke, one was a ship's engineer, one was a metallurgist and actually was probably making bombs in the factory in Whitehaven, which is why I was born in the Lake District. So, I

mean, I'm just so fascinated by, you know, old history, personal history, you know, the era that I've lived in. And you know, although I have a wonderful life, and maybe it's because I do have such a wonderful life, that I feel the tragedy for people whose lives were devastated by, you know, particularly the First World War. Although my, as I say, my grandmother wasn't as affected by it directly. But the project is called the Grannies Project. It's on the website. But stupidly, I didn't bring out how it's spelt, because it's in Welsh, heddych it's H-E- Double D-Y-C-H.

Wow, okay.

But it was because these women talked about it, and then I got a leaflet from them, you know, I went up and talked to them. And then I met some of them again, at the Temple of Peace, they came down to Cardiff for a kind of festival thing on women and, and peace, and the history of the Temple of Peace as well. So the Women for Peace in Wales came down to be part of that. So that's, and I got to sing it at the Temple of Peace recently on a human rights day, but as I say, I couldn't get through. I'm trying to think where I must have sung it just very recently, when I couldn't get through the last line properly! (Laughs). So obviously, it touched a nerve somewhere, you know, about my grandmother, about the fact that, you know, the tragedy of that era for so many women. And for the fact that the women of Wales did this incredible thing. And we didn't know about it, because it was women, you know, and then you know, I was involved with Greenham enough, you know, to have known some of the women that started that, that march. So it just seemed to me, I had to somehow capture, and one of the reviews of that book - of that album, said, I'm going to boast now!

Good.

'The peerless Frankie Armstrong wrote a song called Lily', and, and it the review says something about 'And she speaks to our head, our heart, and our womb.'

Oh, how lovely.

So I just was so touched by that review. I really only these days weep at music and songs and poetry. You know, that's what sets the water works going! (Laughs). Yeah.

Could you tell us a little bit about actually, a few times, of what your actual experience of being at Greenham was like for you - the feeling for you, how you experienced being there, who you met, what happened, what your memories are?

To be honest, I can't remember. I went on a coach with a friend. But I can't even remember which, which friend it was because there was just so, I mean, I was just so - I was teaching assertiveness too for the Women's Therapy Centre, and Mind at that point. I mean, I was just on the go all the time. And so to remember the specifics, I remember I made my way to a coach or somebody - a friend picked me up. And we had a coach trip to Greenham. And as I say, I had no sight then so I just had to hold on to friends' arms. You know, I remember trying to you know, being - I can't remember - I think I was sitting on the ground when some of the supply lorries were coming in or, you know, that was what we were trying to stop at that point - at the gates where the supplies came in. So there was just a whole mass of us singing, You Can't Kill the Spirit. (laughs). And then you know, so I was just kind of surrounded by this, you know, kind of wall of sound that I was in the middle of, until a police, the police arrived. The lorry was stopped. And the police weren't super rough. I mean, I've been on demonstrations before, because I've got my white cane, where they've said 'You shouldn't be on a demonstration if you're blind.' I said 'I've got every right to be on this demonstration. I've got more right to be here than you have!' And you know, and nearly being trampled under horses back hooves wasn't fun on a couple of demonstrations. But, but they just got us under the arms and hauled us out of the way, and the lorry just edged forwards. You know, giving us no choice really. I don't know how it actually got in. As I say, (laughs), when you when you can't really see anything, you're dependent on other people shouting at you 'Oh, the police are going to pick us up!' And you know, it's it's a different kind of

experience, I'm sure from people who couldn't actually see what's going on.

Did that prohibit you from staying at the camp, do you think?

Sorry?

Would your sight have prohibited you from staying?

It would have been I was just too busy.

Oh, right. Yeah.

I just had far too much in my diary, which was contracted, or you know, would - you know, it was just my diary was just full of things I was committed to.

So yeah, so visits would be the only thing that would fit in your lifestyle sort of thing?

Yeah. Yeah. But it meant that I could be of use, by being a singer...

A platform, absolutely.

And helping to raise funds for the legal fees, and the various other things, and I was still doing, in-fact, through the whole of the '80s, well I was singing with Roy Bailey and Leon Rosselson. Leon's, I think, one of our finest songwriters - he's written political songs since the 1960s, when I first met him, and as I say, we, we sang together, at anti-Vietnam things, and anti-nuclear things. Well, we did a big show - not a big show, but we did tour it in America and Canada, and did some on the continent and all over Britain, called 'Nuclear Power No Thanks'. But it was new - we had songs, poems, newspaper cuttings, you know, of all kinds of aspects of what the nuclear industry, and stuff from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And so, you know, I was doing that. We sang together from about '82 to '89, so we were you know, and a lot of our gigs were

organised by CND. Those were the days when we were considered cultural workers, they were actually willing to pay us to come and sing. And, you know, we made records. So, you know, I was doing political singing in one context or another. Um. You know, as well as, and I shifted by '85 I'd shifted from still doing freelance social work, youth work - I ran workshops, and a whole series of things we called Boys Rule Not Okay, at the National Association of Youth Clubs. I mean, as I say, I was just how I, where I got the energy from, I have no idea - because I was just, you know, absolutely doing something for, you know, for one of these organisations, and running workshops, and you know, all the time and, you know, travelling abroad, as well. So, you know, I couldn't really have you know, there were other, you know, Greenham - in a way I was more useful to Greenham on the outside. You know raising money and singing songs, than I would have been actually in the camp.

What do you, why do you think - if you do think this, why do you think it's important for Greenham's message to be passed on to the next generation - the knowledge of Greenham having happened? Why do you think it's an important legacy? If you do.

Oh, I do. Because I think it - you know, for me, it goes back to the Peasants' Revolt.

Yes!

You know, grassroots uprisings, I think, ultimately will be the only thing that has the chance of changing things - and whether it will or not, none of us can know at this stage. But, you know, I think there have been people who've inspired us from John Ball, you know, through, through uprisings at various points - The Luddites, you know, William Blake, just you know, people who's thinking has fed us, and you know, and, I mean, sure - The Suffragettes - my Suffragette badge is in my rucksack on my body warmer. But, you know, the Suffragettes although they did choose to use violence, and I can't gainsay them for having done that, you know, they, they needed to, and, you know - but I do hope you know, and Greenham you know, used direct action and were willing to be unlawful,

and that's, you know, good for them. So, you know, I think they're the brave, bravery of the people who take that kind of direct action and finish up in prison - I just, I take my, they need to be known about, particularly because, you know, more than any time in my life, I feel now is either going to be make or break. I mean, not make finally, you know, there's never going to be utopia for heaven's sake. But, you know, wake up people to the fact that we've got to do something about the planet, or we are going to sink.

Yeah, cease to exist.

And so, so I think for, for younger women to feel that they are part of a history that, you know, which is why, in a way I wrote Lily, to say, you know, there has been all this going on, we don't necessarily, we haven't been told about it, because it was women. I mean, you know, I met Sheila Rowbottom at the point of which, you know, Hidden History came out, and we were involved in quite a lot of various things at the same place at the same time, you know, and that was in part what, again, that whole thing about wanting to put on shows about, you know, women and madness, or how it had been defined - women and alcohol, women and, you know, environment, all those things to show that it's not - there's nothing new. There've been people who've been, you know, concerned about these things, for generations. And we, you know, we must call on their strength, and their inspiration to feel that this thing - there's still things we can do and achieve. I mean, you know, part of Greenham is a nature reserve now, you know, that just has to be an inspiration. The cruise missiles are no longer there.

Yeah.

They're threatened with coming back. But, you know, in a way, it's like, maybe that threat again, will you know, get women - I mean, I guess I'm a kind of funny generation at 78 (laughs), because I have kind of seen seen through it all. But, you know, you're, you'll be much more in touch with, you know, I'm not sure how much women in their 30s and 40s are really knowledgeable and engaged. Um. You know, I mean, surely

they're very you know, I was told - I couldn't get up to the London XR - so much easier than the tongue twister, but friends of mine were, and you know, they said there were people of every generation - people from, and that, and that was exciting. But therefore all the more reason to speak to every generation that we can.

Yes, yes.

To re-enliven, to re-fan the flames! (Laughs). To get us engaged. And maybe, because, I mean, I get most of my news through the BBC, I have to admit, you know, Radio 3, Radio 4, and the World Service, and you know, blogs from various - and talking to lots of people. But after Extinction Rebellion, it was on the tongues of so many people in, in the the BBC media. You know. And I'm sure you know, I knew Jon Snow the too (laughs), back in this early '70s, I knew John. And you know, so I'm sure he was doing what he could on Channel 4, as well. But it really was extraordinary how much from Extinction Rebellion fed into people's conversations.

That's really invigorating, isn't it?

And you know, that doesn't speak to millions of people, but it speaks to a fair number of people, and people who, you know, might well being the kind of people who are, oh you know 'What's this Extinction Rebellion? Oh, they're doing something next week. Oh, I might, you know, find out a bit more about it.' Because the one of the things that my friend in Australia, who - in Brisbane, who went to the talk by the Extinction Rebellion man, said 'You know, one of the things that we can't be infiltrated.' But he said 'We can't be infiltrated because we're transparent, we tell them what we're going to do.'

Which is a Greenham tactic again, isn't it?

Yeah.

We couldn't really be - lots of women have talked to us and said we couldn't be infiltrated, because not everyone knew what everyone else was going to do anyway.

Yeah.

And if we did know, either we did it ourselves too, or we were transparent about it.

So again, that's, that's one of the key lessons that's come through from Greenham. So you know, I just do feel as somebody involved in, you know, in my various ways, in both, as I say, I still think my best role is as a singer, which is why I'll be there with my trio singing Bread and Roses and Lily next Monday.

At an Extinction Rebellion event, is that right?

Yes.

Fabulous. Again, Greenham women were way ahead of their time.

Absolutely.

Having eco sense at the core of their campaign.

Yeah. Well, it was absolutely the core of Women for Life on Earth. That's right. So, you know, it was - I can hear Bunty saying 'Frankie, you've got to get out there.' And, you know, was it somebody had just built the tallest building - office building in Britain - in Liverpool. And she said 'Mens' bloody erections!' She was this beautiful 60 year old, who'd been, you know, the first art editor in films - she gave all that up.

Oh really?

Yes, she'd done the art editing for the two Paul Robeson films.

Oh really? Gosh.

Yeah. So, you know, and then it was her that the, Stephanie, Stephanie, - I met Stephanie through and Stephanie said 'Without, you know, Bunty, really saying, you know, somebody's got to do - Stephanie, you and your friends can do it. You know, you've got to.' So, so I was kind of in the spiders web, this lovely spider.

Ariadne's very first web!

Yeah. Yeah. So it has been, you know, kind of a pretty extraordinary lifetime to live through. I'm a yeah, a bit, a bit retired, I say now (laughs). Sometimes if I think back on the last few weeks, there's not been much of the...

I was going to say, it hasn't felt very retired!

Retirement! But you know, I do still need - I make sure you know, I take - we're going Darien and I are going to WOMAD in a couple of weeks, and we're singing at a festival in the Lake District. And I'll sing - Lily any chance I get to sing Lily. Um. And Peggy was invited to it, to be at it, but she can't, but Sandra Kerr will be there, who's the person - you know, who's my generation, who did the CD with, CD - what am I talking about? Album with Peggy and I back in 1968. So, you know, it's lovely to still have these connections still, you know.

The web is intact.

It is. It is. Which is pretty exciting. And you know, we're not going to live forever, for heaven's sake, you know, quite a lot of us in our 70s or 80s. So, you know, over to you lovely women! But it's true it is, you know.

It is. And the people listening to this, you know, hopefully. Time memorial.

Yeah. And they'll be in the different parts of the world too. So, you know, because it's got to be - it's got to be an international movement.

And it's all of our responsibilities, isn't it?

Yeah.