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Date of Birth: 1991
Place of Birth: Milton Keynes
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Interviewed by: Louise Roche
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Louise Roche and it's the 3rd April, 2018.

Anna Skelton, born in Milton Keynes, 1991.

So Anna, tell me something about growing up in Milton Keynes, what that was like.

Growing up in Milton Keynes was unusual but I didn't know that until I met people at university years later; it was all I knew. My favourite thing was the contrast between Great Linford, where I was born, and the city centre. I would, of course, spend a lot of my time in the village and surrounded by the greenery and the historic buildings but I also loved going to the city centre. My Grandpa would take me round and we'd have a Tuesday tradition of going to the library for the story circle or hour, or whatever they called it, and then going to Thorntons afterwards to get a 'Chocolate Heaven' ice cream. That was definitely a regular thing. It was a more relaxed approach to parenting perhaps...*[laughs]*. Yeah, so I think, for me, it was that amazing sense of convenience, that we could be in this what looked like a remote village and then, ten minutes' drive, go to this futuristic, you know, hall of mirrors-style shopping centre where you didn't get wet. Yeah, the contrast is what I really remember.

And what about your introduction to music? Tell me something about that.

I've always loved music, as long as I can remember. My introduction to music was probably my mum singing in the kitchen, or my dad's vast record collection. And my grandparents really encouraged me learning all of my nursery rhymes – so that would have been playgroup, nursery. But I definitely joined Milton Keynes Music Service when I was seven years old, eight years

old. I think I first went along to a really big mixed choir rehearsal with my mum because I was too nervous to do anything else and then slowly made my way into different recorder groups and other choirs and things like that. And then, after that, I went to join Milton Keynes Youth Choir, equally nervous but really welcomed and, yeah, stayed there for ten years. And we did all sorts: we performed regularly in Christ the Cornerstone; we did music festivals; we sang such a range of music. So that was my real musical education.

And what do you think it did for you as a child?

I think it brought me out of myself, singing in a choir. I think it connects you to other people, you know, regardless of whether it's in a church, whether it's technically religious, it's sort of undeniably spiritual. It's something beyond the here and now; it makes you feel connected; it's sort of like a meditation but it's also fun and energetic. And even in a physical sense, I always remember feeling, on a Tuesday night, if I had a headache, it's going to go away after choir; if I'm in a bad mood, it's going to go away after choir. And I met loads of friends there and it definitely dictated what happened next. I think, my pursuit of choirs since then, my pursuit of music since then, is down to MKYC.

And how did you start writing? When did that begin?

I think that writing songs often comes of listening to lots of songs. I would say, to anyone who wants to write songs, that you have to immerse yourself in music and it doesn't have to be in a pretentious way: 'I'm going to listen to all the most exciting, interesting singer/songwriters.' I listen to so much Destiny's Child and Bewitched and Sugababes and Christina Aguilera, all of the pop stars of my youth, and I just surrounded myself by melody; and I think that the same thing, with singing in the choir, developed my sense of harmony. I remember writing my first song when I was about nine and I didn't play on the piano or on the guitar or anything, I just had it going round and round my head; wrote down the words. But I started writing seriously when I was about thirteen or fourteen and, again, I think I've always been quite lucky that often a small hook will come to me, so a section of the chorus, the words and the music, and then I have to sit down and really work through the rest.

And where were the kind of outlets for that here, for you?

I think there was a lot. I think, at the time when I really started writing, or started singing in that way, you know, accompanying myself on the piano, a friend of mine told me about the open mic night that was being run at Madcap, which... – what was then Madcap in Wolverton – and we went along to the open mic night

and we did some really mad things. We played a medley of Pachelbel's Canon, all the songs we could think of that fitted this particular chord sequence we went through. We thought it was very cool. In hindsight, I don't think it was that cool.

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And after that things sort of just slowly developed, so I think my favourite open mic night for years was the 'Monkey Kettle' open mic night – they're going to kill me for forgetting the name but they made the name really long so we'll have to see what they tell us afterwards – but they hosted that in the Slug and Lettuce and that was really welcoming, really fun and, you know, people who were really involved in other aspects of the, you know, music scene, Matthew Taylor, James [Turle? 00:05:42] and they had a box of sort of school percussion instruments that they would pass around and the person on stage had the power to say, "Open the box," or "Close the box," which I always really appreciated because, if it was a real sing-along song, everyone could join in but, if you wanted to capture the moment of something a little bit more nuanced, then you could keep the silence for the rest of the room as well.

What's that like, though, for somebody who is naturally quite shy, to be performing in those early days? What was that like?

I think I was certainly less shy by the age of, say, sixteen. I think a lot of my encouragement came from singing lessons, so I remember when I was about fourteen, I was accompanying a friend on the piano and she was going to sing for our music teacher. We had to each do an individual performance I think just to, sort of, hear our voices or to get a sense of our ability. And at the last minute this friend said, "I don't want to sing. Can you do it?" So I had to go in on my own and sing and play for this music teacher and she suddenly said, "Ah, you should have singing lessons." And I think the affirmation from her and then afterwards having the singing teacher encouraging me, really built my confidence. But, yeah, there's a huge difference between my approach to an open mic night now and my approach ten years ago. And I think it is...a lot of my confidence is down to the kinds of people who are running open mic nights. A lot of the people we had locally were just friendly, unpatronising, open-minded about it because it's a rough world, that kind of open stage thing, and I think, if I'd been less lucky, I could have been put off performance. But the people here really encouraged me.

Tell me about your music, you know, what kind of music is it?

I would say that my music is broadly folk music, not in the sense that it's traditional folk but it's very lyrically-driven, very melodic – of course, all music is melodic but I like to go for quite big, sweeping melodies some of the time. Other times I'm focussing

more on the words and getting the narrative across. Lyrics are very important to me. I like to make sure there's a clear story but also I follow the kind of 'show, not tell' mantra, so making sure that I work long enough on a song that it's...it's got a bit of an enigmatic quality about it rather than being too obvious.

Would you say that Milton Keynes has ever inspired a song at all, or..?

Milton Keynes has definitely inspired a song. I would go as far as to say all my songs would have some link to Milton Keynes because this is my inheritance, this is where I grew up. But the most explicit link to Milton Keynes was when, in 2014, I was asked to take part in a project which we later called, 'Works on War' and this was part of 'Great War Remembered MK' which was an arts project with all sorts – with drama, with dance, with visual arts – and we were the music contingent. We were in this very room actually, many weekends, and we listened back to archives of interviews that were done in the 1980s with people who remembered the First World War and from those interviews we chose our favourite stories and we wrote songs. My song was called, 'Everyone Sang' and has references to Stony Stratford, to Great Linford and to specific people who lived in the area during the First World War.

Fascinating. And do you return to themes in your songs, you know, like when people write, they often rewrite the same...yeah, they're obsessed with certain things?

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I don't think that I consciously return to themes in my songs but you...I find I listen back and they're there. One of the themes I probably return to is choirs, choral music. I find myself quoting bits of Latin that I've had to sing in my, you know, my university choir or I often use other people's work as inspiration so, at the moment, I'm doing a postcard project where I write songs about postcards, so either about the image on the front or the message on the back, or a combination. And usually that's...you know, results in lots of unrelated songs but actually there's a kind of theme running through of missives, of messages, of perhaps the shape of the postcard itself. Yeah, so literary references, choirs, sort of musical references themselves. I like to be quite playful with it I think and maybe hide things that some people will notice more than other people.

What would be your big dream?

Wow, my big dream. I think my ideal would be to have the space and the security and the freedom to really spend more time working on my music. I don't really have the kind of big dream of pop stardom because, you know, the closer I get to...not to that

but to people who are in that position, the more I see the sacrifices people make and I think that I'm so precious about my own music and my own style that, really, I just want to be writing things that matter to me and playing to people who like what I do and who want to listen to what I do. But it can be lonely, touring the country, and I think it can be even harder if you're the one who is the face of this, you know, 'in the charts' single and probably not making the decisions. So for me it's about the music and the recognition from the right people, if I can put it that way.

Milton Keynes: is there anything you don't like about it?

What do I not like about Milton Keynes? I think we have a bit of a problem in Milton Keynes because there's almost an unspoken agreement that we don't talk about what we don't like because the rest of the country are doing it all the time. I remember when I went to university that I didn't really realise Milton Keynes could be unpopular or could be the butt of a joke and every single person I met had something to say: "Milton Keynes; is that where the robots live?"

"Milton Keynes: Satan's lay-by." (That's quite creative but not very nice.)

So, for a long time, I've just been defensive but what I feel at the moment is that that's almost...that is the problem, being defensive is the problem because we somehow expect love and appreciation from the rest of the country or from the rest of the world without necessarily showing them why.

I remember a quote I heard somewhere once about how we should be cats and not be dogs, so dogs ask for affection and demand it all the time; cats don't really care – they walk around being brilliant and they don't really care – and I think we should be more like cats than like dogs. The recent documentary, 'Milton Keynes and Me' by Richard Macer, I found really compelling and I found quite emotive because I could understand this idea that, I was born in the nineties, where this place existed and had a soul, but I think, if you came over here in the seventies as a teenager, it probably was a really weird place to be. And I felt that it was a brave documentary where he made that very clear and yet a lot of the uptake I saw, a lot of the reaction I saw, was so furious that it wasn't a passionately promotional film. And I think that we need to be braver than that; we need to accept nuanced portrayals; we need to understand that we earn the respect of the country, we don't...not every portrayal has to be good because that's not real life and we have to accept the good things, the bad things, the weird things, otherwise we don't try and get better.

What about the music scene in Milton Keynes?

I think the reality about music at the moment is that all around the country things are getting worse. Venues are shutting in loads of places. People don't realise they should be paying for music anymore. I think that Milton Keynes is doing quite well in those circumstances. Obviously we're very lucky to have The Stables but, in terms of my generation, I think really exciting things are happening with MK11 at Kiln Farm, with the Craufurd Arms, not only with the, you know, brilliant musicians we have locally but drawing in bigger names from around the country, from around the world, who are on tour, and linking those people up with more local talent. So I think people are hungry for music, for all sorts of music. There's at least five open mic nights running, off the top of my head, and I'm sure more. When I did the songwriting project for 'The Great War Remembered' I really felt positive about music here – and this was only a couple of years ago – because I was working with other songwriters who were just so generous and so keen to collaborate and I think that's something musicians often get wrong. So I think people are...people are warm here, when it comes to music.

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And what about the future? How would you...this is the fiftieth anniversary, what would you like to see happen in the next fifty years?

In the next fifty years I would like to see Milton Keynes finally sort out its public transport...*[laughs]*. I think things are getting better, really slowly. I heard that we were meant to have a monorail originally, which would be really cool, or like, sort of, Heathrow pod-style things but just regular buses would be nice. And I think sometimes there's an obsession with getting it sorted towards the centre, you know, going from Great Linford to the centre is not that hard but Milton Keynes is this big place that...it's hard to say sometimes where Milton Keynes ends and the outer villages begin and all these places should be connected.

I also think that the city centre has more potential to welcome independent business. I've heard time and time again that the rent is too high for independent cafés, for independent shops, and I think that if we want to shake off our reputation – you know, that the shopping centre is like any other or is like an airport or anything like that – we need to integrate those things a bit more. And I think the same goes for, you know, for clubs. We have good music venues but I don't think many people would travel to Milton Keynes for the nightlife.

Is there anything else that you would like to say?

I think I'd just like to say that I think, ten years ago, people who were growing up in Milton Keynes were leaving and not coming back and I think it's good that that seems to be changing. A lot of

people I went to school with are choosing to make their lives here, choosing to stay here, and not only stay here but really contribute to the arts scene. So a lot of the things I've mentioned about the open mic nights, or the gigs, are being run by people who are in their twenties. And I think that's really what this place needs, is people who believe in it enough to stick around and continue that journey rather than...you know, I think some people used to – and perhaps still do – feel embarrassed to have grown up here and then they'd go off and leave and try and seek out some place that's cooler and better. But the real answer is staying here and making Milton Keynes what they want it to be.

The only one was, if there was something you could change about Milton Keynes. If you could go back fifty years and be like Louise's dad here, what would you have changed?

Criticising Fred Roche in front of Louise Roche...*[laughs]*.

Oh, it's never been done. [Laughter]

What would I change? Okay, I'll try. I think I heard one of the original architects saying once that this idea of having the housing estates separate and, you know, surrounded by trees was almost...it was a double-edged sword because it creates a potential sense of different communities that are linked together but it also could lead to isolation and I think – I wouldn't have the means to do it but...or the creativity or the ideas to do it – but if I could go back and change something it would be to really reinforce that connection. So, in basic terms, that is done by things like public transport but also it's about saying, "Okay, if we're going to have these separate communities, they need to be more alive." So, you know, not just having a local shop in each village or in each estate but having more: making sure there are community centres; making sure there are independent cafés or bookshops or, you know...I know there were lots of things like local post offices that are no longer there so I think making the smaller areas lively but making them as connected as possible to the centre would be important.

People aren't really using the redways that much at the moment and I think that's become a vicious cycle (no pun intended)...*[laughs]*...people don't use them because they think they're dangerous and then they become abandoned, they become dangerous. I do think there should be more signs in the redways though. I've gotten lost many a time walking around and that's not just my poor sense of direction.

Very good.

Yeah?

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Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW