

Name: Yaw Asiyama
Date of Birth: 1966
Place of Birth: Koforidua, Ghana, West Africa
Date of Interview: 1st February, 2018
Interviewed by: Victoria Holton
Duration: 00:29:42

00:00:00

Hi, this is the 1st February, 2018. My name's Victoria Holton and I'm interviewing..?

Yaw Asiyama.

And the year of your birth, please, Yaw.

I was born in 1966.

Whereabouts were you born?

In Koforidua in Ghana, West Africa.

So, you've come here via Brixton, to Milton Keynes, according to your notes. What were your first impressions of Milton Keynes, when you came here?

00:00:32

I came here trying to visit family...

[Break in interview to discuss technical issues]

00:01:08

Today is the 1st February, 2018. My name is Victoria Holton and I'm interviewing..?

Yaw Asiyama, or if you want to go the full African it's [unclear 00:01:19]. I'll tell you what it means later.

And can you give us the year of your birth please?

I was born in July, 1966.

And where were you born?

In a little town called Koforidua in Ghana, West Africa.

So, when you first came to Milton Keynes, what were your first impressions of this place?

It was quite interesting. I came with my little brother, my younger brother, Ernie – he’s an artist too – and we came and we looked around and I was really excited. I was thinking, ‘Wow. This is all new; nothing has ever happened here.’ And I was...I mean, I was kind of saying how excited I was and my brother was absolutely dejected. I go, “What’s wrong Bro?”

And he goes, “Yaw, if I ever live here please kill me. This is the worst place in the world.”

And I said, “I want to live here forever.”

And he goes, “Are you mad? What’s here?”

And I go, “Everything is here because everything hasn’t happened yet, so you can be the catalyst for making anything happen.”

And he went back to New York. *[Laughs]*

So what do you, as a person, associate with Milton Keynes?

Newness; I call it a city of second chances. I believe Milton Keynes was created because London...well, the stories are that they needed an overflow out of London. But you don’t want to leave a place you’ve lived unless there’s a reason for you to move on and Milton Keynes must have been the place where people who had a reason to leave – nothing negative, but wanted to give themselves a chance to try again – came to. And when I found Milton Keynes, I found Milton Keynes very forgiving and welcoming because, even though, I mean, those days we used to say you had to walk about three or four miles in the City Centre before you bumped into another black guy or woman. So whenever you saw somebody from...in the city who was darker, you would go. “Yeah.” *[Laughs]* It was a...but I cannot fault Milton Keynes for a welcoming because people knew they were here to try again so they made room for people who were also here to try life again and...

Did Milton Keynes fire your artistic enthusiasms and what way...in what ways?

It did, in every direction. I mean, it’s quite a weird one. Technically, I’m a painter, right, and I think, whoever teaches you encourages you and I had the greatest art teacher in the world. He loved my work so I worked more for him. Deep in my heart I wanted to be a writer but I had the worst literacy teacher in the world and whenever I wrote stuff for him, he’d look at it and go, “My goodness, it thinks it can write.” And so I wrote quietly and hid it. But when I saw Milton Keynes first I thought, ‘What’s this place?’

It was like a empty...[laughs]...empty whatever, a canvas. You can paint anything you want here.

So I started my art and my artwork got picked up. Prior to Milton Keynes I had an art exhibition in Ghana which had been successful and I had an art exhibition...or, my work had been exhibited in New York and so I'd got some good reviews to it. I tried to get into the London art scene but it was very difficult and it was very closed. But Milton Keynes didn't really have an art scene so you could make it whichever way you wanted it to be. I know people challenged, I think, and I know there were great things here but I didn't know that. All the guilds I tried to join at times were trying to find their own feet really, so they tried to make it...to make sure they thought they were getting what they thought was quality. So I kind of realised that because there is nothing here yet you can make it your own way. I did my art exhibitions and stuff and it worked.

00:05:08

So did you join or are you part of any artistic groups or creative organisations?

I created the Arts Collective with a friend called [Sarah Clifford?] What we decided that...[unclear 00:05:24] we decided... – it's a short story, you can cut it out. Okay, this is what happened: I mean, my artwork, I was selling my paintings, people were liking my work. I had an agent in New York so, once in a while, I'd send work to him. Around that time everybody was into afrocentric art but I think the fashion started to change, so I wasn't making as much from that as I had got used to; and I started getting a bit of a following around Milton Keynes and around parts of England, people who liked my work.

And then, one day, I wanted to do an art exhibition. I was talking to the gallery at the library – that was the first MK gallery – and they weren't drastically interested. So, I used to work at The Point in the evenings – in the daytime I used to do menswear...sell menswear in British Home Stores, which doesn't exist anymore – and, the evening, I'd go and work at The Point as a bouncer because I kind of realised that being a bouncer was easy. You didn't have to fight anybody, you just had to talk to people till they felt what they were doing was silly. And I like talking...[laughs]...so if somebody got angry and got really aggressive we'll just chat and the next day they go, "I'm really sorry, mate, I was in a bad place." And we become friends.

Now, what happened was, I asked The Point if I could hold an art exhibition there and the manager of The Point said, "You can but it will cost you four hundred pounds." I didn't have four hundred quid to hold for an art exhibition so I looked around for artists whose works I liked and said, "We're going to do an art exhibition

together at The Point in Milton Keynes. I want everybody to bring a maximum eight works.” And people rushed to bring their works forward, so we went through a very, very intense period of kind of making sure it was a quality we were prepared to show. And we thought, ‘Well, if it’s just art on the wall, why can’t we add poetry?’ – because people come and look, they get bored – and I used to have a fashion design background, so somebody goes, “Why don’t you put a collection together?” And I thought, ‘Wow, that’s not a bad idea. It’ll be fun to do that. But my collection is only going to last ten minutes on the catwalk. I’m only going to make twenty/twenty-five outfits.’ So I started looking at the like-minded people who were designers who had design aspirations and so they also put their collections together.

And so that day we had a great art exhibition. We had live poetry performances; we had a fashion show asking local people to participate to be the models and stuff like that. And when I was finished we thought, ‘Wow, we have probably had the first fashion show ever in Milton Keynes because, prior to that, even though there had been shows, I call them ‘clothes shows’. Clothes shows are when you borrow clothes from a shop and stick it on a catwalk. Fashion shows went from concept to catwalk; is a thought process of a creative. So I thought, ‘We’ve probably held the first ever fashion show in Milton Keynes,’ and being very...*[laughs]*...very limited in creativity, as in finding names – which I still have a problem: I can write a play but I can’t find a title for it. So we called the first show, ‘The Show’ and the second show became ‘The Show 2’ and the third became ‘The Show 3’ and that became the journey of my kind of getting into Milton Keynes arts culture.

Oh, that’s great; that’s really, really good. So I was thinking of your other special memories of Milton Keynes as a place.

I used to love going for walks when I first came here. I used to go to places where I used to feel, ‘This place is going to be different soon.’ And also, I mean, when you’re young, when you’re really young, you go crazier over people...*[unclear 00:08:49]*...but I found my girl in Milton Keynes and I thought...and so when everybody was in a hurry to leave Milton Keynes, I was in a hurry to kind of stay here.

I found my other art – my writing – again, in Milton Keynes because, I think, at one of our art exhibitions, I had a friend called Cathy who I used to...whenever I wrote new stuff I’d show it to Cathy and she’s a painter and she’s really good. And one day we were getting some artwork sorted out and she was saying... – and we were sharing a studio space – and she says, “Yaw, do you know you write better than you paint?”

And I was furious, so then the first reaction, “Well, I paint better than you.”

And she goes, “Uh-uh, no. Listen to what I just said. You write better than you paint. Your writing actually has pictures. I can see everything you’re writing.”

And I say, “Well, my literacy teacher said my work was rubbish.”

And she goes, “Where is he now? He’s not here. Put your work out there.”

So I did my first play and it was quite interesting because I didn’t know who I could cast. But it’s quite interesting, in that, the same community, there’s always some people who’s always...well, somebody who’s always wanted to act or somebody who studied drama but he didn’t take it any further. So we kind of put the first play together and the reaction was really great and I thought, ‘Wow, I do write.’ Well...*[laughs]*...so I just started...just kept on writing, so... I didn’t lose the art because art is always there, it’s my place to go whenever I’m stressed but writing came in.

00:10:24

So I’ve got a note here to say that you are a fantastic cook. So is that part of your [unclear 00:10:29]. Is it Ghanaian cooking that you do and is that from your mother, is that part of your heritage?

It is. In Ghana, my mum had two restaurants. My mum was a quite really astute businesswoman. She had a restaurant; she had quite a few things going on. And we had farms too so, on the farm, my mum only cooked one day a week. That was for you all. If you wanted something else, because we had farms then we had everything; you could go and cook whatever you want. Now the difference between my brother and I – he’s a brilliant artist, by the way, Ernie – but the difference between my brother and I is that he would quite happily eat fried eggs or make egg fried rice every day for seven days; he’s cool with that. I can’t do that. I need to eat something different every day. So my mum would say, “Well, go try it. If it doesn’t kill you, you may enjoy it.” So I’d always create stuff. And I started going to Mum’s restaurants and because...probably because it was my mother’s restaurant, I would ask the chef if I could cook something and he would let me, not because...*[laughs]*. Probably he was trying to save his job or something; I don’t know, I was a little boy and I wasn’t that clever. But I would start cooking, making stuff, and at times the chef would say, “Oh, that’s not so bad, you know. Let’s see if we can sell it,” as a joke and people started buying some of the stuff that was [unclear 00:11:50] till it got to a while people used to go, “Oh, has the little boy cooked any soup today?” or, “Has the little boy made anything today?” So I kind of realised that I could make a living out of that but it’s one of those weird things where it...in life, at times, you forget things that...it just became stuff that I cooked for friends.

Now, being an arty-farty person, usually we're kind of broke, aren't we, if you're not a very clever artist? And I used to write stuff and I used to get lots of artists to come over at times, who come from Leeds, Manchester, whatever; they were crashing my house overnight and then would put a play together or would work on some crazy project or they'll be part of one of my shows coming up. And I used to...just to keep everybody there, I used to cook for them: it was cheaper than taking everybody to McDonald's. But it got to a while, I realised there were more people coming to my house than I needed for my projects and people would go, "Well, but your food, we come for your food. So it got to a while where I said, "Guys, if you're coming, if everybody brought, like, two quid...[laughs]...it will help the budget." And people started coming in and bringing a little bit of money just so I could cook for more people.

Cooking professionally came by accident. I mean, it happened by accident. I used to have a fashion shop in Stony Stratford called [unclear 00:13:05]. I also kind of networked. I've always worked with other people; it's greater than just doing only your stuff. I worked with a young art designer called James [unclear 00:13:16], a guy whose collection was called 'Roughneck Generation'. We were all young, arty people and we had a shop in Stony Stratford called [unclear 00:13:23], so one wall was mine and the other walls were for other arty people. A lady came to my shop and asked me to make a wedding dress for her. I hated making wedding dresses because there's too much emotional involvement. The woman puts it on today, she looks great. Her mother thinks it's wrong so she wants to change it. Her best friend thinks she looks better... So there's too much emotional involvement. And we're getting through this dress and it was killing me but she came to try it on and she liked it. And one day she came to my house to try it on and she goes, "Oh, that smells good."

I go, "Yeah, I'm cooking some dinner for myself."

And she goes, "Can I have a taste?"

So I went, "Yeah, that's cool."

So she asks for some and I fed her and we became friends and we chatted for ages. And, as the wedding was getting closer she goes, "Yaw, I have a problem." And I was thinking, 'Yeah, I know. Don't do that stupid thing: you don't have enough money to pay for the work we've put in your dress.' And she goes, "Oh, my caterer is having a bit of a problem. Can you cook for the wedding?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure." And I go, "How many people?"

And she goes, "Two hundred."

And I said, "Yeah sure," this time slower. [Laughs]

So I called a few of my friends that liked my food and I said, "Look, we've got a wedding gig. The money is brilliant. Let's go cook."

So they go, "Well, we can't cook."

I said, "Well, if I tell you to chop onions and slice can you do it?"
[unclear 00:14:46] "Brilliant, I'll do the cooking, you follow the instructions."

00:14:50

So we went to this gig and we cooked for two hundred people. The girl...so I didn't get to see the wedding. I'm used to going to see weddings of dresses I have been part of but this time I was busy in the kitchen. When they came from the wedding and they came to the reception – I saw my dress; I was happy with the dress – but when people started to eat and everybody's eating and chatting and they get this space where there's absolute silence, people are just eating, and you know they're really enjoying your food. And I was thinking, 'I've made two hundred and two people really happy: the woman, her husband, and the others who were there for the wedding.' And I was thinking, 'There's more joy in this than making a dress for one woman, and it's quicker.'...[laughs]...'and I decide how the flavours have to go and...' So I started kind of leaving fashion because, around that time, shops like TK Maxx and others had come, where you could get a suit for eighty quid instead of something made beautiful for – I don't know – three or four hundred quid, so...and that we had...we'd gone through a bit of a crisis, financially, in the country so I lost my shop in Stony Stratford anyway but I could still do food for people. So the food went in that direction and I loved it. I still do.

That's a marvellous story. Now, what have I...what was I going to ask you here about..? Ah, Milton Keynes, now your opinion, now, of Milton Keynes. What do you think is the great success of Milton Keynes?

Milton Keynes is the cleverest mistake ever. [Laughs] I love it. If you live here you know you want to grow your children here. It's one place where outsiders don't realise the value or greatness or beauty of it, so we're not overwhelmed with everybody wanting to come to Milton Keynes. But if you do, and you're smart, you never want to leave because all the things you want to get access to are within reach anywhere. And if London is the big thing, I'll tell you what, my sister and brother live in London, at times we meet in central London and when we leave I get to my house in Milton Keynes sooner than they get to their homes in London. So, if being able to go to London is your thing, there is no excuse saying that is why you don't live in Milton Keynes. You're close to a canal if you want a place to chill and relax. You have the beautiful parks all around the place. Everybody and everything is really accessible and actually appreciates the separation of industry and trade from homes. Say Milton Keynes...you know what I mean, so in London you can step out of your house and you're in some busy street or whatever. In Milton Keynes, you have to

leave your estate to go to a busy street. So I like that kind of separation.

00:17:45

[Break in interview to discuss technical issues]

00:18:27

Tell us...have a think now about...we've just talked about all the successes and all the good things in Milton Keynes. Is there anything that you feel that is actually a failure here?

I think, like everywhere else, Milton Keynes, from the arty point of view, is beginning to become cliquey and when this happens we lose new art. I meet lots of...I've worked with lots of young artists who have moved to that great place called London because we hardly anymore have a theatre that is accessible to all and...or, we aren't...we aren't creating a new youth culture. In my era – because I think I am a bit oldish now – you can have access to...there used to be a radio station called Horizon Radio. You could take your story to Horizon Radio and if it was interesting and had great...you can't do that with Heart. Before you make a phone call to Heart you have to go through so many thousands of people it's not even worth the hassle. So I don't want us to lose the potential of what we have because what it does is that we lose potentially awesome people to places like London and that's heart-breaking at times.

My sister set up Horizon Radio.

[Laughs]

[Unclear 00:19:45] yeah, they set it up.

Oh wow. They used to call it...I think at one time it was called the Hot FM and that was so cool.

That's what happened when it was taken over by Chiltern.

Yes.

00:19:57

What would you change about Milton Keynes then?

What would I change about Milton Keynes? I think we should maximise the use of space we have here. Any other city in the world would take advantage of the spaces under the bridge. I've been lobbying for years to hold an exhibition under the bridge between the art gallery and Campbell Park, simply called, 'The Exhibition Under the Bridge' to bring out, in those street artists, an opportunity to show their work there so that during times of festivals, as people are passing by, they can see the work of creative young people who didn't have the money or the connections here to be in big galleries. But Milton Keynes does

not utilise space well or does not grant space to the arts well so you have the likes of Arts Central flipping from building to building, which is a disgrace because, when you want to go...and then we have that old Sainsbury building, empty forever, serving no purpose whatsoever because Sainsbury can afford to have an empty building; they have the money for that. If there was a kind of – I don't know – a relationship and a multi-exchange between big industry and little creatives it will be...it will make Milton Keynes as great as it used to be because good, old time Milton Keynes had the...all the groups that used to run Milton Keynes, there was a big corporation that...

The Development Corporation.

The Development...they had hearts, you get me? They allowed things to happen; they wanted things to happen; they wanted things to grow. But in that growth we've left the heart behind and what we're doing is, we're just trying to go...we've got the prettiest buildings, we've got the whatever but we...we're losing our soul. Any city without soul is not worth a city. I mean, I know we kind of were at one time chasing Milton Keynes as City of Culture and stuff like that and my argument for Milton Keynes City of Culture is that we should have been hyping up our entire city. We've got everything but we want soul, whereas other cities that get City of Culture have soul and they're trying to bring something...we have everything but I'm...we're losing our soul because the big players...I mean, I'm not underplaying the value of the big players, they make sure that we have...our rents are paid and stuff like that. The first art exhibition that I did I phoned...I think it was the director of Mercedes Benz – that was before the number you're calling knows you're waiting came into existence and that was before, 'You press one, if you need this': before all that kind of craziness came in – I phoned them and I goes, "My name is Yaw and I want to do an art exhibition and I need you to fund me." And he goes, "We don't do things like that at Mercedes Benz." And I said, "I'll call you every three hours till you do." And I called him every three hours and the fourth day he funded me. And I...if you did that now, you'd be arrested for harassment. But he came to see the exhibition and he loved it and he funded us for three years. And he's still a friend; he's still somebody that I go talk to when I need wisdom from an older person. So the heart was in Milton Keynes but...[unclear 00:22:51]...apparently the need to protect power, the powerful from the weak...[laughs]...the heart is slowly lost...is leaving the city. Let's bring it back.

I have to agree with you on all what you've just said there, actually...[laughs]. So, if we look to the future now, in your imagination, how do you see Milton Keynes progressing in the next fifty years?

In the next fifty years, I think – I can only speak as an [unclear 00:23:21] – there will be a wider diversity of people from whichever ethnicities because that's how the world goes. I hope Milton Keynes is as welcoming and as encouraging as it used to be. I know Milton Keynes will grow and spread into – I don't know – spread till it probably hits the M1 or wherever, we cannot stop that. But when it grows, let's try not to create ghettos. By ghettos, I don't necessarily mean places of poverty. A ghetto is a place which has no knowledge of anything else around it. So it could be a rich ghetto; it could be a certain faith ghetto or a certain community ghetto. It's wrong. Milton Keynes was created so that even in the wealthiest estates there are affordable homes. That should always be the ethos of Milton Keynes, so that it allows a mix and...because, funnily enough, your child learns more from the guy from Romania or Burkina Faso sitting next to them in the classroom than from the teacher who is talking from a book and, if we enter the spaces where we create ghettos, that excludes the rest of us; there'll be no more us.

I think theatre should be made more accessible. We should have at least two more big theatres, apart from the Ambassador's over there because the Ambassador's...I mean, I know I've had a few plays at the Ambassador's so...but they are so exclusive that it's difficult to get a foot in there and so creativity has to leave Milton Keynes to have credibility and that is worrying.

00:25:07

Funnily enough, where there are creative people...you know, schools and everything go crazy about – probably going a bit political here – schools and everything go crazy about having to do maths and stuff like that. Since you left school – and you guys look drastically intelligent here – when have you ever needed to use a tangent of an angle or the cosine or sine or whatever? But you've needed to learn to talk to somebody; you needed to learn to appreciate what's beautiful around you; you needed to learn to enjoy community and whatever. So the future of Milton Keynes should have that constantly in mind.

Milton Keynes gave up great land to allow growth, so the soul of the land is probably community I suppose but we shouldn't forget that Milton Keynes used to be a place that was fertile. I know everywhere you go, you look up, you see trees and stuff like that; it's beautiful. We shouldn't lose that. We shouldn't, in our rush to build houses, ignore the need for grass, trees and stuff like that. We should hold strong. We shouldn't try to be like another city because I don't think there are any...there's any other city in the world like us. We shouldn't try to be anybody else at all; we should be us.

That's a nice ending, actually. That's a nice ending. Try and be like anyone...I think that's a really nice ending. Is there anything anybody would like asking?

I think just maybe one question about aspects of your Ghanaian culture that you've brought to Milton Keynes. How you've shared that with the community in Milton Keynes.

Okay, ages ago I started an event called 'How to eat an African'. It was a tongue in cheek because everybody goes out to eat an Indian or a Chinese and I go, "How come nobody's eating Africans?" So I started a food event which was once every two weeks at Christ the Cornerstone. It was a food club. It was quite fun because people pre-booked, they knew what the menu was and they came in and they got a taste of Africa. It was kind of...I just wanted to make...you see, life is interesting in this way that I'm...people know your value, want to know what you've brought to the bring-a-bottle party, you get what I mean? It is easy to assume somebody hasn't contributed anything to anything but, when you see their contribution is valid, you step back and respect their opinion and I wanted people to know that my Africanness was as important as my Milton Keynesness. Somebody once asked me, "What if Ghana is playing Great Britain in football? Who would you support?"

I said, "Don't be stupid." [Laughs] "Why would you ask me such a silly question? You want an answer; I'll give you an answer. Britain has a great tradition of supporting the underdogs. Ghana versus Great Britain: Ghana is the underdog. I'll follow the great British tradition of supporting Ghana." Is that a fair answer?

So I always kind of mix my Ghanaianess with whatever I do; it's important. My children see themselves as Brits but they like their Ghana streak in them. My children are all – I've got four kids, by the way. In talking plenty, I've forgotten to say I'm a father and a husband...[laughs]...I've got four kids: three girls and a boy. They all like their Ghanaianess, they're probably of Jamaican heritage and they're also very, very staunch British. It is possible to be all of that. I go to schools and do arty projects with kids. I find the part of my culture that I can add to their culture, to enhance it, because that's how you do it. You don't do a cultural takeover, you do a cultural sharing. So that when you're sitting there eating your fish and chips and you've got some spiced rice plantain on the side, it's an enhancement to your fish and chips, it's not a takeover – you get what I mean? It's like when you buy chips with a curry dip. That's culturally valid...[laughs]...there's that joy in it.

I'm all for that. I like a bit of spice with my fish and chips. I put on sweet chilli sauce on my fish and chips.

Now you're talking. *[Laughs]* I love fish and chips. I think it's the greatest thing. I don't buy it every day because it's kind of...I love cooking too but when I have fish and chips I have to add something to it.

A bit of spice. Anyone else any questions?

I'm happy.

No, I'm happy, I think we've got some really good stuff there. Some great stuff there. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

We've probably got a lot more than three minutes. We might have to make three films.

There's some great stuff.

00:29:42

END OF INTERVIEW