

LILY CRAWFORD BRITAIN AT WORK

Interview with Lillian Crawford on March 18 2008 by Dave Welsh:

Lily, would you tell me when you arrived in Britain and where you lived? It was February 1951, I don't remember the date now. I came via America to London on the Queen Elizabeth 2. I had a lovely journey from New York here, because I went to see relatives there and then I missed the boat that I booked from Jamaica. And you couldn't stay in America, I had to go out to Wall Street and declare that I didn't work for a couple of days, less than a week, and they booked me up on the Queen Elizabeth. So I didn't have to pay for it but I was seasick there and they were all millionaires, a beautiful place.

And one gentleman there from America, he says don't go to England because it's cold and it's terrible. So I said well I'm British and I'm booked to go there. He says well I'm going to give you my address and I'll write to you, you write to me and I'll write to you and you come back to America and I'll have you as my housekeeper. I say all right and we correspond for a long time. He has a family, he told me all about them and a gentleman wrote to me that I mustn't correspond with Mr so and so anymore, he's my father and he has deceased now, so I break them off.

Tell me about when you arrived in Britain, where did you live? Where did I live? I go to friends from home at 27 Cathcart Gardens South West 5, I don't need to write things down, I have a memory, and I was there with them for a little while. I couldn't work because you were not allowed to work, you got to have someone to keep you for 3 months before you could get a job. I came here with a profession, I was a beautician, because they advertised at home, the children have to go back to college and university because the war was just over. They advertised, I had a good flourishing business, I had just passed my exams at home, because I studied 5 years in skincare and I started my own business. You have to have a license and in the Daily Gleaner was our paper, they advertised from England, they wanted professional people here.

So I thought I'll pack up my studio in East Street and leave some things with the friends that I come here and stay with for a while and then I'll see what happens after 3 months and then go back home. And nowhere would have me because they weren't accustomed to black people. They say they don't know, their staff might walk out on me and I went to a place that advertised in the Evening Standard for people to work. Bartony? was his name I remember in Great Windmill Street, Piccadilly, and I phone up and he said oh yes, I need staff, come along. Jump on the bus and I went there and he asked me a lot of questions about the care of your skin and hair and I answer. And he says you know much more than we do.

And he says how old I was and at the time I tell him, he says you don't look your age at all. I says we were taught to evade wrinkles from when you're 18, so when you get old those veins don't grow up on your skin and that's why I look like that. So he says sit down and he says I would love to have you here because a lot of coloured Americans come over and we do things for them but it's not the right thing, we don't know what to do for coloured people and you would do wonderful here. But I'll have to wait until my staff lunch hour up and find out if they'll work with you. So I says alright, I says Mr Bartony, can I ask you a question? He says sure, I says do you pay your staff or do your staff pay you? And he says a good question, he says well a lot of people don't know much things because they're back in university, now we have a few, employ a few, so I can't take the chance because if they walk out, you and I can't run the business.

Anyway, Morris was at the big building in Piccadilly Circus, I never met him and he says I'll make a phone call. And Morris was Jewish, Bartony was Italian, and he says I'll make a phone call. He phoned up and I could hear and he says send her over to me and he says just go across the street there and go upstairs and there's Morris beauty parlour. They are in Tottenham Court Road now, he's dead, god rest the dead, but his 2 sons run the business in Tottenham Court Road. And I go over there and he says I know what you're going through, I'm Jewish and I've been through what you are going through now but you have to fight on and keep your pecker up. He says I'll have you here and he got me to sit down and he asked me questions about the skin and things like that and I told him and he says fantastic, he says I'll give you a job right away, don't worry about Bartony any more.

And I go there and we straighten the black people's hair with hot comb and style it and it looked lovely. It looks better than what they're doing now with the acid. And he phoned up somewhere and a girl came and I had my instrument on me in a bag and I straighten this girl's hair and he looked and he says this is not hairdressing, this is a miracle. And then I straightened her hair and he styled it, and he said you've got a job here for life. And I go there a few days and he says to me I'm not going to waste your time staying here, I'm going to get a place for you now that you can teach people what you know. And I say alright. I

can't remember if it was Mornington Crescent or somewhere but I love the place, you couldn't get anyone to run it and he says this is going to be your business and a lot of black people come and want to learn hairdressing, you can teach them and I worked there from 8 in the morning until 5.30, sometimes 6, 7.

And he phone over and he says when you close your shop I'll come and pick you up and take you home, so don't worry about the bus and he come in this lovely posh car and drive me to Earl's Court. Then I get a room in Longridge Road from these people because they say they can't keep me at their flat any longer. They had my money and everything and I didn't know what to do. So I get this room but when you go the lady say I'll have you because you look a decent person. This just goes through my head, she says it's £3 a week. I said but you advertise it £1. She says yes but we treat you as a tourist and you have to pay more. But never mind I had a few pounds and I take it.

And I'm with Morris and the place was packed out with people who were here before me and want to learn hairdressing, and I say yeah, so I take it. But the lady who rent me the place – no, it wasn't Longridge Road, it was Warwick Road, where the garden centre is now there were houses there, great big rooms. And she says whatever you do don't catch a cold, so I said well, people don't catch a cold, the cold catch you, and she laughed. I said why, she said because you can't cough here, so I say why, she said the neighbours will be against it. I said do you ever have a cold? She says yes but the sound of your cough will be different to mine.

But I take everything because the only thing I could think of is to commit suicide. I don't know anyone, the only people I know, I leave my things with their parents, what can I do? And she take care of the £3 a week and then I look where they advertise rooms, then I saw where they have rooms and coloured people are accepted at 71 Longridge Road. And I went there and they were Russian or something, Zachariah was their name. They were both suffering from cancer, and he showed me his arm where there was a number on, where the German or the Russian were due to gas them and his wife, and he says we didn't know each other but we were due for the gas chamber and we escaped, and we get married, and I thought what wicked things.

And so he bought the house in Longridge Road together with an English nurse because he stowaway here and people put them up and he says I'll give you a double room on the first floor. It will cost you £3 a week but when you haven't got the money don't worry or you go lower down in the basement and you pay £2 but it's cold and damp down there. So I say I'll take the £3 one and he asked if I'm working and I said yes, I said I'm a beautician and I do dressmaking as well. And he said oh yes, you can do your dressmaking here, do your beautician here. I said no, I'm working with Morris School of Beauty Culture. They were very nice, and when I come home in the evening Mrs Zachariah bring up a hot cup of tea for me and ask if I want something to eat, I said no I eat in the restaurant before.

I saw advertising for hair straightening, put up a card on the board, I don't remember how much it was but it wasn't much money, and she take these phone calls and make the appointment for me. When I come in she show me, she says there's 5 appointments, 5 people are coming. She says to me stop working where you're working with Mr Morris and do your hairdressing here. I said no, I might get into trouble. I said well, I can't work, it's illegal for me to stop working and work here. She says I will tell the government that you are my housekeeper and you can work, you don't have to do anything for me but you can make more money than with what you were doing. Well, I says Mrs Zachariah if I live to be old it will effect my pension. And she says no, it won't because you are my housekeeper and if you leave me I'm going to pay you so much money. I'll tell the government I pay you so much money so it won't effect your pension.

But I never take chances, so I didn't, so when I come home at night, I do these people, nurses from Manchester, Birmingham, who read the paper, the advert in the Evening Standard and phone up and come. And she cook them a meal if they're hungry and put them in the warm room, my warm room, and I work until about 4. The tube never run all night, so we sleep across the bed and I put things on the floor and we all sleep there, make them a cup of tea and they catch their tube to go back to their hospital where they were students. They come all the way on this journey to have their hair straightened.

The girls at the studio that Morris gave me, they keep on I'm not learning nothing. I said look darling, you have to creep before you walk. You can't know what I want, you have to gradually know the way you shampoo the people's hair, you don't pull it, they don't have to go oh! You must learn to do that, learn to use your fingertips, not the palm of your hand or your nails. I says the college I go to in Jamaica, it's 3 months before you could touch anyone, you have to look what your teacher tell you and you bring in somebody, like a student and then you do it on them and that's how she teach them and you watch and I catch on to those things so quickly. Mrs Sterling was her name and whatever she teach me I took it up here and I never forget.

Sometimes I'd have a day off and around the corner there was a girl there, an Indian girl called something or other, I forget her name and she tell me little things you're a pretty girl, you're a beauty Mungaroo? was her name. She said if you were light-skinned people would be crazy about but because your skin is so dark it hide your beauty I said thank you very much and when I passed my exam back in Jamaica I ran my studio.

So you were doing this the beauty and then you went into photography so how did you do that? I go to evening classes, I work in a factory, £3 a week and you can work half an hour overtime, it's 8 to 5 and you can work 8 till 5.30 and have half an hour and that build up from Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday...

So I did that and I read in the paper what the college is about. You just go and join up and if you can't take in what the teacher says, they say well you're not accepted anymore, if you take in they're all over you. It was a place in Chiswick I was working named Evershed and Vignos?, they don't exist anymore, and there was a college not far from there in Chiswick? High Road and I go there and register for photography and the teacher was very nice. He says yes I'll help you and I listen to what he says, Mr Headley? was his name, English gentleman.

Lots of students from Africa and other parts of the world were there and Mr Headley really pushed me in photography. He even teach me to make the night camera, pinhole camera, and he make it up and show me. You make a pinhole in it and put it on a balcony, if you live in a place with a balcony, and the sun rise and you take it over to him, he develop and show you the sun rise and the stars. It was fantastic. I do that – make the pinhole camera and put it on the balcony.

There wasn't coloured photographs here - one day I'll show you a photograph that had colour when I coloured it because when you do colour photograph here - not me but the other people who was doing it - you can't put it in the daylight, it fades, and that was the end of '51, '52. So you had to put it in the dark, otherwise it fades. He says I'll teach you to colour photographs and he tell me of the different things you buy from Kodak or Ilford and how to mix it, and he says it never fades, you could put it in the sunlight, it can't fade because it's fixed and I said I'd love to do it. He give me a few things and I just run through it, mix the dye and run through it. He said did you do this before? I said no, Mr Headley. He said fantastic.

So after that he says I'm going to give you a letter to go to Regent College, it's called Regent University now, it's at the top of Regent's Street. So one day he gave me this letter, he says after class, because they're open until 9, you take this letter down, hand it to anyone because there's so many people I won't give you a special name, and I say alright Mr Headley and I went there and everybody arms up, there's no vacancy, there's no vacancy. I say I haven't come for a job and they say what you come about? I say I've taken a letter and I'd like to see whoever is in charge to give them the letter. She said I'll have it and she ripped the letter open and she said you go to Mr Headley's school? I said yes and she hold me and hug me and she said do you want to start now? I said no, I'll have to take the news back to Mr Headley whether I'm accepted or not and he said yes, he said we were trained by Mr Headley, all the head staff here were trained by him and you may become one of us. They were very nice.

And I go back to Mr Headley and he said you start anywhere, and he says all those people in charge are all my students and they couldn't turn you down, not with this letter. I learn retouching. There was a middle-aged lady there and she give me - the knife is very sharp, you know retouching - and she says I want you to do that with it and get all the hair away from this model. So I said yes and I was going and she was watching and she came over and she looked - you do it under a magnifying glass - and she said you did this before? I said no and she said it's wonderful and I get all the hair off and she takes photos of it and then she bring me another one with no hair on and showed me how to put the hair on. There's a knife there and you do that and it makes a slit in the negative and then when you print it that slit look white and when you print it, it is black and get that hair out and I was doing hair style and she took to me and she teach me everything that I should know.

I still go to Mr Headley's school in Chiswick High Road and then after I go down there and they said they would like to have me full time down there in Regent's and I learn to colour photographs. Then I get to find out a Jewish shop? that we both grow up together in Jamaica - Ferdinand Farraja? and I keep asking the girls that go to nightclubs - I never go to nightclubs or anything - and I says if you go to nightclubs and you heard of a Mr Farraja, you let me know because I heard he had lots of clubs in Soho. I go to one but he says no black people go there, there were brown-skinned girls go to his club. One says yes, Mr Farraja ran a club called Sugarhill in Soho but she said I can't take you there. I said next time you go to the club tell him Lily Crawford is asking about him. She's from Andrews Lane, Kingston Andrews Lane. She was

living in the same house as me, I was up in the attic and the phone ring and he says Lily Crawford? I said Boy! because we call him Boy, not Ferdinand. And he says jump in a taxi and tell them to take you down to the Sugarhill Club. You don't pay any money, they'll take you down there. So I said no I don't want to go to a club. He says why? I says I'm frightened to travel out in Soho. He says alright, are you going out anywhere? I said no, I have to go to work, I work here and I have to go to work so I don't go out.

He says well whatever you do don't leave the house, we close the club at 11 and I'll come. These girls let him in and I heard them talking - he had a very brogue ? accent and I could hear him. I said Boy! He said Lily! and he hugged me and nearly crushed me to death. He said what part of the house do you live in, I said the attic and he come up the stairs. Oh my god he said, I couldn't have you living in a place like this. He said would you like to move out now. I said no. He says I've got lots of houses in Soho and all about, church houses and he rent them, people die and leave it for the church and he rent it out. He become very rich and he married a Jewish girl and had a stall in Berwick Street market, they didn't have children. And he says to me I live in one of my flats in Berwick Street and I'll arrange with my wife to move out of that flat, it's overlooking the market, because it's good for you to just go and buy fresh food because we're used to our fresh food, and I'll give you that flat. I said I don't know her and it might make trouble for her.

He take me to the flat, a beautiful flat, the bathroom was bigger than this room and everything in it, heating, everything, and just a little thing we have to use, he had the works? He said this is going to be your home. So I says Boy, I can't. I says Mr Farraja. He said no Mr Farraja, you are Lily, I'm Boy. He said you don't have to pay anything, it's going to be free for you as long as you want to live here, I couldn't believe it. But his grandmother was a tenant of my people in Andrews Lane, so we grew up together. The only thing he used to do, he used to break my doll legs and then shout Lily Crawford come and take your babies to hospital. I say why? They break a leg, when I go he break the china baby leg.

Did you then get a job in a photography shop? You were running a photography shop weren't you? Yeah, I was still going to the photography school and then part-time I go to the thing that teach me to use the knives in Regent's Street, evening time. I said to Mr Headley, I've got a big flat in Soho, could I start doing this? He said yes if you can get customers, you take their photos and bring it here and I'll show you what to do. So I was doing that until I get known, I do the market people and I see them and I say I can change that shirt collar for you because I learn that at home and he says how? This is one of my favourite shirts but the collar's gone. So I says I'll cut the tail of the shirt and then make a collar. I was inundated. I buy a machine, people come from Manchester, no electric, I make only 2 and 6 pence, that's 25 pence now but 2 and 6 in the 50s was a lot of money and I'm inundated with the shirt thing and I was making the money. I bank all that money and since I come here I lost it? 7 and a half thousand pounds ? It didn't go up here, my mother said these things are worldly things, so I believe whatever she tell me and I didn't go astray, the police have nothing on me, a lot of young girls take up prostitution and all that, not me.

What were the fashions like? What were people wearing in the 50s? What they're wearing. What did they wear? The suits or dresses, was it long style? What sort of thing did people wear? Yes, there was a thing they called flare, flare skirts, and I could make it, you cut the material on the balon? what do you call it now? on the bias? to make flare and that fits any figure, this skirt, I had a very small waist and a broad hip, you cut it, measure them up and you make this skirt and then when they come you trim it, whether they want it knee-length or lower down.

What did they wear, a shirt or a blouse? A cardigan, two-piece cardigan, a jumper and a cardigan, and it looks very good. I go into a shop once to buy one and the lady say you have a very good figure, so I says you know what I'm thinking I'll buy 2 cardigans and button one and leave one open and it become a style for people that see me wearing it, you couldn't go in a shop and ask for that. I didn't need a brassiere nor nothing to go to work, sometimes they were cheap and sometimes when it's warm you take the cardigan piece off and you either button the other one back to front or in front and leave it on the bus and forget it.

What about hats? Did women wear a lot of hats? Yeah, hats, a lot of straw hats they wear, come from the colonies, Africa and all that, silver straw we call it, it's very nice, you get it now, it's very expensive, when you do see it. A lot of people could make their own hats. I used to make hats for myself and for people. I didn't have a pattern but you buy an old iron, which you iron clothes with, and use it for the material, you put it there and mark it around, mark it around, and you have either 6 pegs or 5 pegs and stitch it together and make a ring round and it looks beautiful, not much of it in shops.

What about shoes? What shoes did women wear? Shoes, there was a lot of stilettos, they called it stiletto, the heels were about this length? When you go for a room the landlord or the landlady first they look at your shoes and they say you can't wear that in there, there's no carpet on the floor, it's lino and the lino wasn't as good as the lino now so these stilettos cut a hole in it and you put it on when you're running to

work and you look back and there's a hole in the lino so when they come up to clean the place they give you notice to go, I usually pay for it, I take the shoes under my arm down the stairs because there's lino on the stairs and when you go in the hallway on the concrete you put them on.

What about men? What did men wear? Men, it's the same as now. There were a lot of tailors from the West Indies and Africa, they can't afford to buy it in the store, it was so expensive. It's the same as now. The Americans come over here because of the war, they wear a lot of floral shirts, I used to make the floral shirts for them. They never wear it because when they're in the floral shirt the English look so stupid because it's only women wear floral thing and these Americans wearing shirts. But I make my money by buying the floral material in Goodmans? in Chiswick, linen material, beautiful, and make their shirts.

The men wore suits? Yeah, American. Men in general? Yes, ordinary suits, they buy the material and give it to the tailors and they make it, the colour and whatever they want. And hats, did they have trilby hats? Yeah, the Churchill, there was a hat called Churchill, it was all over the place, some of them didn't look good on people but they have to have a Churchill hat on and they wear caps. People make the caps for them, the ? and the peak and the ring round, some women wear caps as well.

Did you ever have anything to do with Teddy boys? Did you see Teddy boys on the street? The young men with the hair? I know the Teddy boy, I forget them now. But I never got mixed up with those people. You go to the clubs and the clubs that let them in, some clubs won't have them, because they drink and they go berserk. You might dance with a Teddy boy, dance the waltz or what do you call it now, the twist. So a lot of people was in good figure because the Americans take the twist here and you twist and it was like going to a gym. But it was lovely when you go to a club and you teach men with big tummy how to do the twist and they start losing weight. The next evening you go to the club and the boss says drinks on the house, so I says you giving drinks, no, Mister so and so that you teach to do the twist is losing weight and he give me money to buy drinks for you girls. We had the twist, the waltz, samba.

But life was happy, really happy, people were happier than now. They haven't got the money and if you invite anyone on a Sunday for a meal they worship you, Coca-Cola, you couldn't buy alcohol, Coca-Cola, a bottle of Coca-Cola, not in tin, in glass bottle, one bottle, 3, 4 people would drink from one bottle, a little glassful, and it's fantastic and we cook rice and peas, cow heel at the butchers, tripe and all that. You don't get those things now. There was a woman about 3 years ago she says to me I've been going round the butchers looking for tripe and I can't get it. I says the government banned it because it's the intestine of the animal and some of them have disease, so it go for dog and cat food now.

Did you go to any clubs? What were the names of the clubs? Well, I go to Sugarhill club in Soho. I go to 13 clubs because I'm taking photos in there, I go to the Mandrake in Soho, Meard Street, and I go to Sissy's club, I forget the name of it, because I remember introducing Shirley Bassey there and another club where they have the tower there, I forget where it is now, the telephone tower building, that was run by a man named Paul Grove? he was the son of a minister, I go there. I don't pay nothing to go because I take people's photos, and they come to the club to see somebody taking photos. Police never wear white shirt, they wear blue shirt because of the fog and all that, it get filthy quickly, so still the black suits but blue shirts, now it's only white shirts they wear, their hats was the same.

So you remember the fog, the really bad fog? On God, people bump on me in the fog, because I'm black, you can't see anyone in front of you, like that table you see nothing, the street light dim. There was a little old man in an old leather suit, I don't know whether it was leather or plastic, and he had a long stick that pull down the light, it wasn't electric, but he pull it down and there's still light there and after it finished. You stumble over people in the street and people with a bad cough. It's nothing like ringing up an ambulance now and it takes you to posh places. You can't see anybody and talking about the Teddy boys, they have coshes and they come out at night in the fog. They know the places where the people come in before the fog come down and they hide around you can't see them and anybody pass they got coshed. I got coshed once in my head. They cosh people but the very old people they struggle, some of them probably die, people stumble over them. You wear nylon stockings and you have to wash it when you come home at night, the water was black, in the flat to dry you had a little heater, and it runs if you hitch against anything and you sow. So you see people going along with thread mark because they can't buy a second pair.

Did you ever smoke? Did you smoke cigarettes? Were you a smoker? No. What did people smoke? What sort of cigarettes? My father said when you grow up you must never smoke and I says to him but you smoke. He says do as I say not as I do. So I never smoke but people give me cigarettes all the time. I give it to other people because since I live up here I had a stall in the market and a man come and he sit on the stall. I used to take his photo when I was doing the photography and I say I never smoke and he said you could have fooled me and I remember he used to take the packet of cigarettes in a club in Wardour Street

and if I'm working when the girl who run it named Mary, she was Scottish. She phoned me up and she says a friend of yours come and he used to give me 2, 3 packets of cigarettes with 10 in it, thinking I'm a smoker, and cigarette lighter, beautiful. I just give it to people and take him over to take his photograph.

What about drink? Did you ever drink? Oh yes, I could drink. I always drink in the club to find out what people feel like when they were drunk. I couldn't get drunk, I have champagne, whisky, gin, vodka, everything, and people watch you and they see you drinking and they say give her a drink or give him a drink. But a man told me he says when you go to the club don't refuse a drink, have it, but before you go drink the cream off the milk and you'll never get drunk. The cream on the milk is not like that, it's thick, it's lovely, now they take it off, beautiful fresh milk and I have a pint delivered every day. You drink it off so you can drink anything.

There's one club in Soho in Meard Street called the Mandrake, it was run by a Jamaican half-caste man and Tony Armstrong-Jones used to visit that club, he married Princess Margaret. He was going out with a Chinese girl and he lived in Victoria I remember. He watched how I pose the people to take photographs because he was a high up photographer and he used to tell the barmaid give that lady a brandy, a double brandy, I just swipe it down and then the girl from South Africa that the manager of the club was going with, she says would you like to help out here and serve the people, because then you don't have to buy drinks and they'll give you a drink, I said yes, so you go and they order and you take down what they want and they say have one for yourself, I used to tell them I'll have the money not the drink.