Lady Phyll: ‘When Gloria Gaynor played, I danced as if I never would again’

‘I’m a big softie’: Lady Phyll. Photograph: Kofi Paintsil

The co-founder of UK Black Pride, 45, on articulating her identity, rejecting an MBE, and bowing to no one

At 11 I learned the colour of my skin would dictate the way I was treated. A school friend and I were out in Enfield Town, when a woman pulling a tartan trolley told us the BNP and National Front were marching, and I should hide inside a shop as they didn’t like my “sort”. Right then I realised I’d have a different experience in the world to my blonde-haired, blue-eyed friend.

The “Lady” in my name isn’t a title, it started as a nickname to clarify that I’m not a bloke called Phil.

I became politically active at school, although I didn’t know it. I’d be kicked out of classrooms for asking questions: Why were we only being taught about the Battle of Hastings and Henry VIII’s wives? I wanted to know about slavery; the history of Africans and Asians. My requests were declined. Instead, I sat in the library and taught myself, reading books about Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

I found out I was pregnant nearly six months in. At 19, I collapsed in a shop after a trip to Jamaica. At the hospital I was taken to, a smiling nurse pulled back the cubicle curtain and congratulated me. For an hour I couldn’t stop crying. Today my daughter is my backbone, but then I didn’t want children. And I knew something in my life wasn’t right, I was still searching for a part of me that was missing.

We didn’t talk about sexuality at home, in my language there is no word that translates to lesbian, gay or bisexual. It’s why, despite always knowing I fancied girls, I couldn’t articulate what that meant. Aged 20, I returned to the library. That’s when I found Audre Lorde: she gave me the words to describe my identity. From then I’ve never stopped talking.

Stepping into a lesbian venue for the first time I felt an indescribable sense of freedom. The Hemel Hempstead bar itself was a dive, but women were holding hands, twirling and kissing. When Gloria Gaynor’s I Am What I Am played, I danced as if I never would again.

Rejecting my MBE came with a lot of abuse, but the Empire has a toxic legacy. Being the co-founder of an organisation called UK Black Pride, I couldn’t accept something which elevates itself above the people I set out to serve. And, it’s a well known fact that one queen will not bow to another.

We should not be debating trans people’s lives. It’s absurd that we continue to talk about toilets, when people are dying because of the way society treats them. If your feminism is routed in the hurt and pain of other people, but you claim to understand oppression, then something is deeply wrong.

On a good night I get five hours of sleep, a bad one can be less than three. Sleep apnea and a touch of insomnia don’t help, but mostly it’s my brain refusing to stop ticking over. I talk about self-care a lot, but I struggle to practise what I preach.

Today I refuse to respond to the question: “Why does the UK need a Black Pride?” I’ve wasted too many years on justification.
To survive, I’ve developed a protective shell. For 20 years I’ve endured death threats, hate mail, and witnessed the consequences of black lives not mattering. I’ve become hardened in order to compartmentalise my emotions. I’m a big softie underneath it all.

https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/jan/09/this-much-i-know-interview-lady-phyll-black-pride-uk