



Black Angel turns 25

CLAUD CUNNINGHAM AND PAULA GANNON-LEWIS, CO-FOUNDERS OF THE LEGENDARY CLUB NIGHT, TALK QTIPOC REPRESENTATION ON THE SCENE AND THEIR UPCOMING DOCUMENTARY
WORDS ELEANOR NOYCE

25 years ago, in 1998, Black Angel was born. A club night for QTIPOC people, specifically Black and Asian LGBTQI women and non-binary people, it sought to create a space not just

centring these communities, but also providing them with vital representation through music. The mainstream LGBTQIA club nights across Manchester catered largely for gay men, and the music failed to represent the diversity of communities seeking solace along the cobbles of Canal Street.

The first of its kind, Black Angel played R&B, soul and Bhangra for its LGBTQIA audience. People would travel across the country to attend the core events held in Manchester, which spread out to Leeds and London as demand grew. Black Angel

was a pioneering event, centring the female gaze and raising awareness of the importance of inclusive LGBTQIA nightlife.

In 2022, Black Angel returns for a night of celebration and reflection on 8 October to mark Black History Month, 25 years after the magic first began. The story of Black Angel is a remarkable one of struggle, passion and protest, and after all these years, its history is now being collated as part of a documentary. Black Angel's story deserves to be told. The time is now.

"The Manchester scene was

white male-dominated," Black Angel co-founders Claud Cunningham and Paula Gannon-Lewis remark. "We wanted to go out and see people who looked like us, and who wanted to hear the music that we liked. We didn't think it would have so much significance, resonate so much or last for so long. This is a celebration. It's part of Black history and it does need to be recorded, and that's why we were approached to make the documentary. We were there, but we didn't realise how significant it was."

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Claud and Paula didn't see any images of Black queer people. Claud explains, "That made us feel that homosexuality, being a lesbian or a queer woman in our community, was non-existent and made it harder to come out." Paula states, "A part of my life was being other. Realising when I was young that I was gay, I moved to Manchester from Cardiff in the 1990s. Most Black people or people of colour who were gay left because there wasn't much cheer on the gay scene back then. But in Manchester, the Gay Village was targeted towards white men. There was a lot of racism and a lot of microaggressions towards anyone that looked like me."

Claud similarly struggled to find a space she felt she belonged. "I didn't come out until I was 29," she shares. "There was a lack of representation when I was growing up, and there was a lot of homophobia in the 1970s and 1980s more generally, but also within the Black community. Paula and I spotted each other because Black women were rarely seen on the scene. Black Angel was later a place where you could make friends and form a community."

to go out to. We started our own community, and people felt like they belonged somewhere. To be free. And you didn't really have that anywhere in the village at all."

Sadly, Manchester's LGBTQIA venues – and indeed, queer venues across the country – haven't come as far as we would have liked. Ahead of Manchester Pride's celebrations in August, VICE published an exclusive investigation led by senior reporter Ben Hunte into the racism endemic amongst many of Manchester's favourite LGBTQIA venues. Documenting the stories of 10 LGBTQIA people who have experienced racist abuse and discrimination within the city's Gay Village, who have been called racial slurs and blocked from entering venues because of their race. Many of these venues are situated at the heart of Manchester Pride.

Accounts like these happened in 1998 when Black Angel was founded, but they're still happening now. And that's not ok. "There's still a need for nights like this now," Claud says. "A group of non-white people I know of were thrown out of an LGBTQIA venue for no reason. This should not be happening in this day and age, and the scene needs to take a long, hard look at itself. White people need to stand up and do something about racism in the village. They need to support those who are experiencing it and not just turn a blind eye or continue drinking their pint because it's not affecting them."

The way forward? Hiring security guards that are trained in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. More QTIPOC-owned venues, and more QTIPOC staff. Support nights like Black Angel and, crucially, call out injustice when you see it.

It's also vitally important that the incredible story of Black Angel is told. As Claud puts it, "We're making the documentary because the voices of LBT women of colour are rarely heard. We're setting this right and we don't want our stories to be lost to time." ■

Black Angel 25 is on 8 October at Manchester's Contact and tickets are available via contactmcr.com. To read more about the documentary and Black Angel 25, visit blackangelmcr.co.uk. Follow @blackangelmcr

“Black Angel was a place where you could make friends and form a community”

"Me and Claud met, and the rest was history," Paula smiles. "Black Angel was the night that I wanted