

**A C T U P**  
**ORAL HISTORY**  
**P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Jim Lyons**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of James Lyons  
February 26, 2005

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Please tell us your name, your age, and where you are.**

JIM LYONS: We are at my apartment on Willow Street in Brooklyn, which is a very beautiful neighborhood. I'm Jim Lyons and I'm 44.

**SS: Ok, and today is Tuesday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and we're happy to see you. Hi.**

JL: Hi.

**SS: Let's just start at the beginning, where did you grow up?**

JL: I grew up in Long Island in a very Catholic family. There were six kids. You know, I had a very suburban existence and I dreamt about coming to the big city, and I read all the time. I started to discover, um, gay authors, and I wasn't – I was always very strongly bisexual, but I was always drawn to being gay. So I would read about Warhol and I'd read about Burroughs, and would be like, "I'm going to New York! I'm going to New York!" So, that's a way that it began, yeah.

**SS: So what do you think came first to your own conscious awareness: about being an artist or about being gay?**

JL: Gee, I don't know. I mean it was very difficult for me to accept being gay for a very long time. In one part I always had girlfriends, and one that I almost married. I always knew – had this real deep feeling of difference – particularly because I grew up in a family of five boys – that I just knew. I literally had that great and awful feeling that you're just not from this planet, and you don't understand why these people are interested in these things, and you have your own interests. So I felt like an outsider from a very, very early age.

**SS: Were there any other artists in your family, anywhere?**

JL: My mother painted – they really grew up in a middle/working class background and my mom took painting lessons from the nuns that taught at the Catholic school where she went. When I told them that I wanted to be an artist, they were like, “We think that’s a really bad idea, and that you’re going to starve.” It was an Irish thing, I think, that there was a definite feeling that those paths are not open to you. So, I was just strange for my family. By high school I was very, very strange. When I went to college, I would go home for Christmas – but I had a very tyrannical, Irish, patriarchal father. We either had fistfights or we didn’t speak. It was like that, you know?

Long before I realized I was gay or I realized that I was HIV positive or anything, there was a huge division that I felt between me and my family. Of course, because your gay you are secretive, or you learn to be secretive very early, and they may not have realized how deep the division was from my side. And I also wanted to be an artist, which was another thing that kept me from them. Because they were really afraid that I wouldn’t be able to support myself. And I luckily – and it’s a thing about ACT UP that I was thinking about before – somehow I grew up reading all this stuff from the ’60s and thinking about the idealism of the sixties. The ’60s came out of the ’50s, where people were forced into work, so the ’60s was about choosing the labor that would make you happy. I had all those feelings. I think, in a powerful way, that ACT UP came out of a time that everyone believed that social change was not only a good thing, but gonna happen, and gonna happen soon, and we just got to keep working at it. And I don’t feel that feeling anymore.

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**SS: I just want to talk about the artist part a little. How did you get hold of these books? Was there someone in your life that showed them to you?**

JL: No, I literally just found them. I always read. It was a way that I escaped the family. I would walk to the public library when the other guys were all playing street hockey. I would look up Warhol and then I would just find stuff. My mom was taking college credits at night, and so I read *Naked Lunch* in seventh grade, and I was like, wow.

**SS: So you found out about Burroughs through your mother?**

JL: Through my mother, isn't that great? I actually found out more about Ginsberg because Ginsberg had written that long defense about *Naked Lunch*. *Naked Lunch* I couldn't make heads or tails of, but poetry I loved, so I started to read Ginsberg and I saw the still from the Warhol film, *Blow Job*, and I never ever forgot it. And I always thought some day I want to see that movie. That's really what led me. I have a friend that swears – Jill Ciment, do you know her?

**SS: Yeah, I know her.**

JL: Jill says that more people's lives have been ruined by wanting to be artists than by taking drugs. And I can really see her point.

**SS: So when did you start making art?**

JL: It is almost like I am just starting to make art now because I am about to make my first short film. I was very shy when I was younger – I don't know if I was perceived that way – but in my head I was very shy. And I had this very difficult to shake self-image, that I think Irish families seem to propagate, but also being from a certain class seems to propagate. Because, I got to college only through complete scholarship, and from that point on in my life I was always friends with people who came

from a much wealthier background than mine. So even in college I knew that I was going to have to find some way to make money, and I picked film editing – which is what I do for a living— at that point, I had friends who were artists that were living on trust funds and making their art, and that was just not going to happen for me. I was estranged from my family. I didn't want anything from them. And although I was writing and making stuff always – maybe that's the hard part of your question. I was always writing and photographing, but I didn't allow myself to make that leap; instead I decided that I would cut films. And what I would do then, that would help me to learn the mistakes that people made. And also that was the beginning of the time when people were really auteurist. People would talk about film auteurs, and NYU particularly propagated that. And I thought that was really bullshit and that you really had to learn your craft. I was very into learning the craft of editing and learning and thinking from cutting other people's work that I would find the mistakes that are commonly made. So when I would go to make my own work, I would have already been through all those problems. I really came from no money at all, so when I started to hang out with Todd [Haynes] or those guys it was a very big thing for me, because I had no experience with people who could just go on vacation whenever they want.

**SS: So when did your interests shift from reading to looking at movies?**

JL: Probably, it's never changed. Once I started to understand that I loved movies – When I was in seventh grade I stayed up all night – this is a good story – because there was a new movie theatre opening up the next day. If you were the first in line you got to watch a year's worth of movies for free. So I stayed up all night. My

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00:10:00

brother came and gave me sandwiches. So I must have already been interested, although I don't know how that happened –

**SS: Did you win?**

JL: Yeah, oh yeah I totally won. And they were the hippy college kids from Stony Brook that had graduated and were starting a movie theatre. So they were showing the Groove Tube, Buñuel, and everything. And I saw Fellini, and I saw Buñuel, and all these artists that I would never had been exposed to, and to use a phrase from then, it blew my mind and made me realize – I was so lonely, and it's an old story but it's true, that these voices from –whether it was from the Rolling Stones album or the Buñuel film or something like that, almost became my companions. I just felt a kinship to a different way at looking at the world.

**SS: Now what about politics? Was anyone in your family politically engaged?**

JL: My father was an archconservative who campaigned for William F. Buckley and James Buckley. But my Aunt Midge, that I told you about before, who moved to San Francisco, was involved just exactly the opposite way – my father's sister – and she was part of this group that believed that there should be no land ownership. There were always politics around my house. People were always talking about politics. I was really moved by Watergate and I watched every single bit of the hearing. And I was really moved by the Vietnam War. I was very sweet and sensitive. My report cards were always like, "he is a very sensitive child". So when I started to realize what war was I thought we should all be pacifists, what is the problem? In 6<sup>th</sup> grade a read about Mahatma Gandhi, and then I read about the life of Mahatma Gandhi. And I don't know

how it all falls into place for some people, and then for other people not. You grow up having this feeling of politics and what compassion might mean if followed through, particularly because I was raised in the Catholic Church. Maybe that was a lot of it. I spent a lot of time questioning the Catholic Church and trying to sort out what I thought was right and what I thought was wrong. My father would always say to me, be a man, be a man. And I spent a lot of time trying to decide what manhood really was. To me that meant being strong and helping people that were weak, and being courageous, and trying to make the world a better place. That was the answer that I came up with, and it wasn't playing football.

**SS: So you went to Brown, right?**

JL: No, I went to NYU

**SS: Oh, you went to NYU. You got a scholarship, and you finally got to move into the city by being a smart guy?**

JL: That's how I got to where I was. I really probably should have simply gone to the city. Because by the time college came around, my only real interest was music. I had majored in literature, but I really came to NYU to go to CBGB's, cause I had read about CBGB's and knew that I wanted to go there. The first week I was here I went there, and started to hang out with the punks. The little –When you are an NYU student you are the lowest of the low of the cool people –

**SS: – you're the least cool.**

JL: You're the least cool. My favorite band was Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and I would go see them all the time. That was my aesthetic education.

**SS: What year did you start going to that?**

JL: '79

**SS: So were you also having a gay life at that time?**

JL: Not really, I mean, like I said, I had girlfriends who I really loved. I found very quickly, from being a punk, that men would come onto you and you could wear the same clothes. I did start to have a gay life – and I could literally go from CBGB's to the Ninth Circle in the same clothes and be a big hit in both places. 'Cause I had my leather jacket, of course, and boots and stuff.

**SS: The Ninth Circle, that was a hustler bar, wasn't it? I mean that is an interesting choice for a college student –**

JL: That was where, when you were at NYU, was seen as the first gay bar for you, if you were at NYU and were a guy. And if you were a woman there was still the Duchess and those places. But it was a hustler bar. I actually met Warhol there.

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**SS: Really? Tell us about that.**

JL: I was with Dean Johnson, the guy who became the drag queen.

**SS: Dean and the Weenies.**

JL: Those people were all my really good friends. That's who I hung out with in college. We were all friends from that time. And we were there at the Ninth Circle and he walks in with Bob Colacello, and a bunch of other people from Interview, and it was just like you imagine it, he came over to us, or he sent Bob Colacello over to us, because I guess we looked different than the rest of the guys there. I guess he came over, and Dean, either foolishly or brilliantly said, "You know, I've seen all your films and I think you're really great and I especially liked *Empire*," and Warhol said, "It's very boring." And he shook our hands and he invited us to the factory. And I was terrified. I was

actually at The Ninth Circle with my friends, but I was not out in any way. I was supposedly the straight guy hanging out with his cool gay friends at the gay bar – but of course I wasn't. But I really thought about it. I took the number, and he said come down any time, we always need people. But –

**SS: So you never went?**

JL: No, I was terrified, are you kidding? I'm telling you; I was very shy about certain things. I was always getting in fights. I was brave with my body, and I would take risks with sex some times, but I was shy about other things, and I still am. But now, I'm going to make a short film about Warhol with Gus Van Sant as Warhol in it. So it's like full circle.

**SS: Right, typecasting. He is now the one who goes up to the cute young guys at the bar.**

JL: Once he said that he would play Warhol, I just didn't ask him any more questions because his hair is the same if you think about it, and he would wear those boat neck sweaters and stuff–

**SS: When are you starting?**

JL: Well it keeps on getting pushed back; I was hoping the middle of April.

**SS: That's exciting. So, ok, so did you finish at NYU?**

JL: Yeah, I finished NYU, and finished with a double major – or more like a triple major – in Psychology, Filmmaking and, I think it's technically, American Literature. And that was really important to me – it came from actually being a goof off. I had to repeat one of my American Literature classes, and the second time around it really hit me what American literature was and how beautifully it had developed around

these themes of freedom, and personal freedom and choice, and how much I loved Walt Whitman, and how much I loved the idea of America. And in those poems – and how much I really loved Lincoln, even though he was too religious for me, and how much I loved Melville. And at first my favorite authors even in high school were James and Melville – and I didn't realize they were gay until much later. *Moby Dick*, even at that age, I could spot as a gay thing, but Henry James, I didn't realize was gay. But all those writers, for the good or for the bad, wrote about America, and what the experiment of having a new country was, and how freedom could blossom. And I always felt, even though I was very, very critical of all the government, especially Reagan, who I hated – once I started to go to Europe this particularly started to happen – I started to feel really strongly about what America was, and that it should be the place where everyone is included. And when ACT UP hit, and when AIDS hit, I found that –

I just felt that, that we're not included. I will never forget reading in the NY Times, one of the first editorials about AIDS, defining that it was scary but it was OK because it wasn't going to ever hit the general population. It couldn't be more clear, OK your not—or at that time friends of mine – were not part of this country. It was a real eye opener for me. Even though I had gone to No Nukes concerts. And things like that, how big the division was between the people who thought that gay people had the right to be part of the country, and the people who didn't. Then when *Poison* happened –should I tell the story of *Poison*?

**SS: Sure.**

JL: I was in a movie that Todd Haynes directed. It was his first film. I cut it and I acted in it. It was condemned by the right wing – who were the guys at the time?

**SS: The right wing guys? Who was the head of the NEA at that point? It was like '92, right? What year was *Poison*?**

JL: The head of the NEA at that point was a woman, that female actress –

**JIM HUBBARD: Jane Alexander, but wasn't it [Jerry] Falwell who attacked *Poison*?**

JL: Falwell attacked it, and said that he would have to bathe in Clorox, I think was the quote, after he saw the film. When they said, "Have you seen the film?" "I would have to bathe in Clorox after I saw the film." We had made this interesting short, not short, sort of experimental narrative, and it actually won the Sundance film festival – and so then it became –

**SS: *Dottie Gets Spanked*, is that it?**

JL: No, I'm sorry, I said short, but feature. The first one was *Poison*; we went on to make that one. But that's literally how I came out.

**SS: By making *Poison*?**

JL: Yeah, I hadn't told any of my old friends. My mom and dad get their newspaper every day and on the cover of the Part Two section of *Newsday*, was, "Gay actor James Lyons talks about..." It was passive aggressive – but there was no way to speak about it, I felt, to my father, so –

**SS: What year was that?**

JL: I think *Poison* was '90. I think we were making it in '88, and we were already in ACT UP and stuff.

**SS: All right, so lets go back a little bit because you're in college from '79 to about '83?**

JL: Yeah right.

**SS: So that's right when AIDS is first becoming known. Do you remember the first person in your life that you knew was infected?**

JL: The first person that was a personal friend? No, you know, just like Robert Mapplethorpe, or people who were in the news or famous. I led a very kind of quasi-straight existence for a long time, and I didn't identify with mainstream gay culture at all. I thought the writing was poor which made me really not like it. I thought the music was terrible, and I was always looking for – Dean, to his credit, made Rock & Roll Fag Bar, basically so he could have a place that he would like the music. And that was sort of the ethos of the kids that we were hanging out with, that we liked – The New York Dolls, and the Heartbreakers, and the rock 'n' roll punks that were glitter rock punks. And we just didn't see that in what had become mainstream gay culture, just a very consumerist and commercial, and everyone was judged by their body. Just the way it still is today, but somehow I have adapted to it.

**SS: So when you started to hear about AIDS, did you feel this is not about me?**

JL: No, no, I was terrified. Because what happened – and it's really very interesting – I think I know when I was infected – and I think it was the third time I had gay sex, and it was probably in '83. Let me count back because the thing I wanted to tell you about was in '83. But it was in '81 or '82, and I got this terrible sickness that corresponded with everything that you are supposed to get when you first get AIDS. No one could figure it out. My mother was a hospital administrator. I had to go home for the summer. I was in a summer arts program. I had to go home. They thought I had

hepatitis. It wasn't that. They thought I had CMV. It wasn't that. All the endocrinologist could figure out was that it was a virus that he had never heard of. And we left it that way, because it took years, of course, to develop. And that was in '82. I was always reading – I knew that it had happened—and although I felt fine, I knew that that was just not right. So when the GRID came out, or when people started to write about “GRID” I started to read about it. I remember there was a little book store on St. Mark's place, that is not there any more, and there was a tiny little pamphlet – that you guys must have seen or have – that talks about the gay plague, GRID. I have that somewhere, and I read it, and I thought, my god – maybe this is what I have. At another point, I was sick with something – I thought I had – I forget what it was, something with my throat or something—I thought maybe I had some sort of VD or something. And I went to Barbara Starrett, the doctor Barbara Starrett, and she basically scared the shit out of me. She talked about it—she said, there is a terrible, terrible, terrible virus out there, and if you are telling me that you are not---you know that you are having unprotected sex, and doing this – you're gonna die. And sadly, I think I was already infected at that point. But, I'll never forget Barbara Starrett – I didn't know her – she just zoomed right in there. Are you interviewing her at all?

**SS: No, she wasn't in ACT UP.**

JL: Oh, she was not in ACT UP.

**SS: How did you feel when she spoke to you that way?**

JL: Terrified, ashamed. Like I said, I had a really hard time coming out to myself and my family and stuff. I went through all the different fear things you go through.

**SS: So you knew you had AIDS really since –**

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JL: I didn't really. I knew there could be something. I knew I was in good health. I finally learned that I had AIDS when I was working a job and I cut myself, and I kept bleeding and bleeding. And it turned out, I did some blood counts, and there were no platelets, and a good friend and I decided – this was much later, like '88 – we decided that we would get tested, we would both do it. And that was when I found out.

**SS: So you were struggling with it on some subconscious level for about 5 years?**

JL: Yeah, yeah. It's not the kind of thing that you want to believe. You don't instantly go, "Yes, I have AIDS!" You think, well maybe I have AIDS, or maybe not.

**SS: So were you already in ACT UP by the time you decided to get tested?**

JL: That's a good question. No, I wasn't. No, in fact, I knew about it, I didn't think of myself as a member of it. But, I think I had gone to the Kiss-In, or something like that. I thought it was great. I thought it was part of this new change that I thought I was seeing in gay culture, where, there could be new subject matter in movies, and there could be queer cinema, and people were calling themselves queer, and it was different – and Dean had his club. It just seemed like it could all change and be the army of lovers kind of thing that I always imagined when I read about the ancient Greeks. I had very romantic ideas about what it could mean to be gay, and I still do. I've learned to not be too sad when they don't work out, but I still do.

**SS: So what was the thing that made you really get into ACT UP?**

JL: Really, I would have to say it was learning I was positive. When I learned I was positive, I simply couldn't do anything for about 6 months. I was friends with Todd at that time, and he would talk about it, and he was already doing the Window in the New

Museum with Gran Fury, and a couple of my friends were in Gran Fury. Todd was one of the few people that I'd trust enough to tell that I had AIDS, and he would call me, and say, you got to get out of the house, and you should come to this. That's when – so it must have been '88.

**SS: You were hiding out?**

JL: Yeah. I didn't know. I felt like I had always been a very, very ambitious person, so suddenly I felt like my life was gone, like it was taken from me. So I just didn't know how to be who I always was. I was always very directed, even if I wasn't sure exactly what I was going to do – I was going to go to the city. I didn't care if I didn't have money. I'd find that some way. I was going to write, or I was going to do all those things, and suddenly I was like – even in a more profound way, I've always just been really interested in everything in the world, and I felt like, wow, I'm not going to get to see how it works out, but, of course, no one does, ever.

**SS: So were you and Todd in ACT UP before you started working on *Poison*?**

JL: Yeah, it all kind of came together. Todd and, I guess, Mark –

**SS: Who's Mark?**

JL: Mark Harrington and Tom Kalin, and all those people had started Gran Fury.

Tape I  
00:30:00

I thought that was cool. I was very interested in politics and gay stuff. I'm sorry, what was the question?

**SS: Were you guys already in ACT UP before *Poison* started?**

JL: Before *Poison*, yeah, we were in ACT UP. But we – my place in ACT UP was sort of strange, because it had to do with – that's why I think I keep on talking about

how shy I am – I don't think people think that because I would go to the meetings and not say anything. The meetings were great, but also kind of overwhelming. I went to some of the early Treatment and Data meetings, and I just felt like, wow, everybody knows so much more than I do. Which was foolish, but it was what I could do at that time. You know? And it was inspiring. It was very inspiring. Particularly Treatment and Data and see what Mark Harrington had come up with, or what Iris Long had come up with, and realize these people were just educating themselves, and they are doing this themselves. It was so wonderful to see that it made coming out, for me, much easier – to my family and to the world. 'Cause I was very proud of them in this strange way where I couldn't say hi to them. But I was like, wow, you guys are great. Jim Eigo was another one. He was just amazing to me. I would just watch him and think, wow, he is so great. And actually those guys didn't like *Poison*, but I'm skipping ahead.

**SS: Why is that?**

JL: They never said it quite to me, so I don't really know. I would be curious now. It wouldn't hurt, you know? But I remember we had a benefit for Treatment and Data at the first showing in New York for *Poison*. ACT UP – and one of the sad things about ACT UP – was how fractious it was, and how people were constantly kind of bickering, I thought. And everyone had their points that they would really stand on and there were things in the film that they didn't like. I could tell you what Jim Fouratt didn't like the film because he told me. Basically he felt – he said, “Didn't you know that some people get these lesions on their face, and that might be hard for them to watch that.” And I'm sure Jim Eigo and Mark Harrington's critique was a lot deeper than that, because, of course we knew, and that was why it was there.

**SS: Right, that's not that helpful. I want to go back to T&D. When you were going to T&D were you looking to make treatment decisions for yourself?**

JL: Yeah, I was looking to make treatment decisions for myself. I had looked at all the different at all the different committees and thought about the ones that I thought could have the most direct effect on people. That just seems like I have that kind of – I could easily have end up being a professor or scholar, I had that kind of mind – so that seemed like the right place for me.

**SS: So what decisions did you make for yourself based on what you learned at T&D?**

JL: Well I made some decisions, but mostly I just learned to understand the system. Particularly, what was wonderful, how much they stressed that the economic system and the prejudice against women and gay people effected the decision about who got treated and what drugs got tested. They had a great, all-encompassing view of what this disease was in the world. Treatment and Data were particularly good at saying these people have decided not to release this drug at this time because they are very afraid that these stocks would go down. Now, it's common coin for us, but at that time it was like, of course, you are right. I had a doctor named Carl Hoffman, and he was a really great guy, he was a gay doctor. He was the one who I had tested with. It turned out later that he himself was sick, and he didn't tell his patients at the time. I think I did everything that he did. 'Cause we were really good friends. So I was on every single one of the treatments that they had developed. Like I was on AZT, at a very, very high dose, and I was on ddI and ddC, and I think cause I was always very, very informed I was always on everything first. As a result, I've seen many, many people get sick and die over the time

Tape I  
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that I've been positive. It's been good, 'cause I'm still here, but it's bad in that I'm one of the people – like I just got out of the hospital a few days ago – I'm one of the people who has immunity to many of the medications. So, because of things like when saquinovir came out they dosed it wrong. Or they didn't know how to dose other things. Saquinovir is a total scandal, I don't know if people have talked about it.

**SS: No, tell us.**

JL: Saquinovir was the first protease inhibitor, and Crixivan was the second. And they rushed saquinovir onto the market without having enough supply for the amount of people that needed it. And they knew that. So they dosed it at a much lower level – they dosed it at a level at what they thought could do some good, but they suspected – I knew because – my most underground friends all knew, you gotta take twice the level of saquinovir that they are proposing because it won't work any other way. As we all know now, the protease inhibitors, once the virus finds the genetic string that allows it to bypass the medicine, the medicine is no good. So saquinovir was like – I was really, really sick at that time – I got on saquinovir, and I was very hopeful about it, but the efficacy of it only lasted about 4 months or something. But that is something that really makes me want to do this interview, in that I, for one, am still – It takes a big chunk of my life to be HIV positive and the AIDS crisis is not over. I think I read some of Maria's transcript, and she was saying that the sad thing was that we stopped long before it was cured, before AIDS was cured. And, it's really true. I'm not quite sure why it happened. I have opinions about it. But we stopped well before it was over, and it won't be over, but it has been this transformative thing in the culture that I think we should force more and kick more and when I start to see women organize around breast cancer, or when I

start to see people organize to go up to Canada to buy drugs, old people, I really think that ACT UP – Breast cancer people were already organized – But, ACT UP, had nudged those feelings along and made those things happened. I'm very proud of that work and being part of that.

**SS: OK.**

**James Wentzy: Maybe we should change tapes?**

**SS: Yeah, let's change tape.**

JL: I have a lot of stories.

**SS: You have a lot of good stories.**

Tape II  
00:00:00

**SS: So you came into ACT UP and you said you started out by going to T&D and going to the large meetings, but you weren't really speaking up. You were just taking things in.**

JL: I was doing things like phone trees.

**SS: Tell us what a phone tree was.**

JL: Phone trees were great. Phone trees were -- you volunteered to call five people, depending on the action, to try to get more people involved in whatever action it was. You called five people and then they called five people. It was to alert you that at the Brooklyn Bridge, this was going to happen, or that was going to happen. It just became huge. You just ended up talking to the people. I did at least, because that was a good way to get me to talk. I would talk to the person that had my name who really didn't know me, and then I became friends with quite a few of those people through that.

**SS: Do you think it is advantageous as an organizing tool over email?**

JL: I think in that way it is. I got it – as someone who didn't speak up a lot – I got a chance to talk to people. Yeah. Yeah, that's a very good point. It is another way email isolates you. I don't know how you are addressing this, but we are talking as if ACT UP doesn't exist, but it does still exist, and it is interesting to me in my question myself, why I'm not active in that way. You're saying is email more effective than a phone tree, and I realize I don't know how ACT UP works with the email. I'm sure it works really well. At the last election I worked with Move On. I worked on trying to defeat Bush. And they used email, and it worked great. But, it's interesting to me. I don't know – Are you in touch with ACT UP at all yourself?

**SS: We've interviewed people who are still in ACT UP.**

JL: Yeah, that's great.

**SS: So we've been getting the whole spectrum of it. I just wanted to ask you some questions about AZT.**

JL: Sure

**SS: AZT seemed really controversial in ACT UP. And ACT UP never took a position on it. Some people were very angry about that. They felt like ACT UP should have been more critical about it. You decided to take AZT. Could you tell us a little more about how you made that decision?**

JL: I was terrified that I had nothing to protect me. I read about it. I realized that it did work. I thought something was better than nothing. Like I said, I had a doctor who I trusted, that I'm sure was on the same thing. I felt like I was very healthy. I checked out my bone marrow, and I thought I could probably withstand this. That was the decision I made, but as I look back, I got terrible neuropathy, that I have to this day. The

AZT was dosed way, way, too high. The critiques of it were reasonable critiques, and there are unreasonable critiques. There are still a lot – and this is a bad hangover from the sixties – there was a lot of paranoia that AZT was poison, and that it was being made to kill you. I remember being in San Francisco, where it seemed to be where the rumors started – and I remember someone telling me this is what the man wants you to do, take AZT. Yes, the man did want me to do it because AZT was so expensive, but it wasn't to kill me.

**SS: Do you remember how much it cost when you first started taking it?**

JL: I don't know I had a really good insurance. I got insurance when [Governor Mario] Cuomo had that point where he said that anyone with a preexisting condition could get state insurance. There was a window there. A lot of people in ACT UP who were HIV positive got insurance then and I got insurance then. Before that I had nothing. I had a crummy job at an ad agency. First I was living with a woman and seven cats who was my girlfriend, and that was in that period when I suspected that I might be positive but didn't know for sure. One time I did get sick and I had to go to the doctor and I went to the Gay Men's Health Crisis – or whatever it was before it was the Gay Men's Health Crisis. It had a different name, the St. Mark's Clinic<sup>1</sup>, I think it was called. I went there because I knew about it, and I asked them how much they thought it would cost, and they told me, and I was like, my god. Not AZT, but just the treatment. I don't remember the cost but I am sure it was astronomical.

**SS: So did you have other friends who had AIDS who made different decisions than you? Did you guys discuss it?**

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<sup>1</sup> The St. Mark's Community Clinic and the Gay Men's Health Project, two volunteer-based clinics that provided screening and treatment for sexually-transmitted diseases, merged in 1983 to form the Community Health Project (CHP). It is now known as the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center.

JL: Yes, very much. I have a very good friend who went on medication very recently, over the last two years. And she got sick in lots of different ways and got through it in different ways. I really don't know how to evaluate my treatment, but I can tell you I was on everything and almost as fast as you can possibly be on it. That wasn't always that best thing. I also think that I must have a very weakened virus at this point, and I think that is from being on all these medicines. Because I have watched people become positive, get sick and die. Many, many people over the course of time that I've been positive.

**SS: What are you taking now?**

JL: Well we just changed it again. I am actually taking a little AZT again. It is very difficult to decide for me what to take because I'm on Crixivan and saquinovir and those early protease inhibitors don't work for me. What is happening to me is what is going to happen to everyone. What is interesting to me is because we have this meeting this week, because this week, or the last two weeks, people have been talking about this super-infective strain and super-powerful strain. The surprise, or maybe not a surprise – it was bound to happen – that there would be strains that would be – I could tell you from my own self, my strain is immune to many, many of the commonly used AIDS medicines. Anyone who looked at the – what's the great medical word for the history of the disease? — the epidemiology of the disease would have seen that it is not that there is some frightening new thing, but this is what was going to happen when you couldn't cover all of the mutations. But I guess it is good, because the media has sensationalized it, and AIDS is back – but that's really not – anyone could have seen that. And even to go further – people would talk about guys having dangerous sex, and that's been in the

news a lot, there are these super-powerful strains of AIDS out there, and it happened because guys are barebacking it, and are refusing to have sex with condoms. As much as I despise the idea of barebacking if you are HIV positive – I have to say the connection that people aren't putting together when they talk about these horrible, monstrous, selfish gay men – gay men are taught to hate themselves from a very, very early age. We've just lived through this time when our entire election – I'm not sure if it did happen this way – that entire election was supposedly lost or won because America could not cope with or handle the idea that gay people's love should be honored by marriage. It's a no brainer. You are taught to hate yourself, and people may come up with different reasons why they are having unprotected sex, that sex is important to them, or it's sacramental or whatever – I don't think it is any of those things, I think it is self destructive, and people are afraid to call it that, some people are, other people like Peter Staley are not, clearly are not.

**SS: But it's a man thing. Straight men don't wear condoms either. They're just blaming gay men.**

JL: Yeah, well it does feel worse, there's no question and women don't use dental dams. I don't think I've ever met – And I have many, many, many close lesbian friends –

**SS: They're a fetish object. That's about it.**

JL: Maybe that is what it is, I wouldn't know. But, um, yeah it is a guy thing.

**SS: So when did you first get arrested in ACT UP?**

JL: Well that was fun, and kind of awful. I was arrested at the National Institute of Health and I had a small group – We had taken a door – Have people explained that demo yet?

**SS: Well, why don't you tell us?**

JL: Well, there was the first really big demo that I didn't get to go to was the CDC demo. The second one was at the National Institute of Health. I forget back what the issues were at that specific moment of time, but ACT UP had decided that one thing that that would try to do would be to take over the building and make it hard for people – or at least make the gesture to make it hard for people to go to work that day. And try to shut down the National Institutes of Health. I was with Christine Vachon and Todd Haynes and we had a couple other friends, and we had are own little group.

Tape II  
00:10:00

**SS: An affinity group?**

JL: Yeah, an affinity group.

**SS: What was it called?**

JL: Gee, I don't know. There was this really strong, kind of big Israeli guy named Ari? Does that make sense? I don't remember his name now. I stayed in touch with him a little bit. But we were clearly the biggest – I was working out a lot then – We were clearly the biggest people in the group. Besides Todd and Christine, there was a very, very old woman, and her very, very sick transgendered son. I forget the different – there was a very – (Phone Rings) Should we pick that up?

**SS: Maybe we should just let it ring. Will that machine pick it up?**

JL: Hey Terry will you get that? He's in the shower. There's a machine, but it takes a long time because we're always running up and down the stairs.

**SS: It's okay. We can just wait.**

JL: So there was me, there was this other really big guy, there was an old woman, there was a very sick transgendered person who was her son, or daughter, there was Todd and Christine, and there was maybe one or two other people and we were the first affinity group to block an actual – or one of the first affinity groups to drop an actual door. We blocked a side door. Our strategy was that we would just stand there or sit – Our strategy was simply to sit down in front of the door and not let people go into the door and we had our signs and stuff. And we were very, very early in the demo, so the police came to our door very quickly and immediately began to rough up both myself and this other really burly Israeli guy. I forget all the things they did – But they shoved us, they put handcuffs on us. Catherine Saalfield was there filming it because she wanted to get the early footage for the news. That is how brilliant ACT UP was – like get the first ones. So they had films of us being roughed up by the police and we were charged – the entire affinity group was arrested. We were given a choice whether to walk into the paddy wagon or be dragged into the paddy wagon. They were going to pick me and this other guy first, and we decided to be dragged and it was just awful. It was – You can see it on the tape, you can see it. Todd and Chris, I think, they decided to walk after seeing how we were treated. But then at the end – So then we are in jail or what was a holding pen for— First, a holding pen and then actually in the local jail for I while. I ended up going to the local jail, being separated from my friends because I was charged with resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. When I was charged and I wished I had gotten to do it because this is what they charged with me — I was charged with getting up from the affinity and pummeling this guy. He said he punched me in the chin three times. They were in riot

gear! It was an outright, outrageous lie, and I had to spend quite a lot of time with the state trooper who was charging me and made the lie. We talked a lot about like, how can you charge me with that? You know I didn't do it. That he wouldn't answer, but other things happened. He had to pat down my pockets. My keys were in my pockets. So I said, those keys are really sharp; there could be a way for you to get cut. I was really, really furious, and I was very hot tempered. So they held me all day long, and I was the last person that was let go. Like I said, I had to come back and I was really kind of proud of it but also it was a good acquaintanceship with the workings of the police, you know? Because we had that tape it was eventually—I had to come back to Washington and we showed the tape and they dismissed the case and I suppose it's off my record, but who knows?

Tape II  
00:15:00

**SS: So, who was the lawyer?**

JL: Jill...

**SS: Jill Harris?**

JL: Yeah Jill Harris. I think she was the lawyer. She was a lawyer that helped me a few times so it might not have been her, but I think she was the lawyer I remember.

**SS: So how did work? People would just get arrested and ACT UP would just produce the lawyer?**

JL: Yeah, it was so organized. It was wonderful. There were many different things. There were marshals at the demos that would try to keep things peaceful. Which I did once; and I was really, really bad at it. So I swore I would never do it. There were lawyers on hand. There were people like Catherine Saalfield. Because everyone was an artist, there were people videotaping everything and people writing about it. And ACT

UP brilliantly used media. They realized that ACT UP itself could almost be a brand, and that the media could rely on ACT UP to provide interesting visuals. It was amazing, and yeah, there was a whole group of lawyers. The night before, which was a really exciting night—We all came down and went to orientation of the affinity groups in some church...Do you remember this? And you saw everybody there. It was very public. And everybody was very excited and they taught us all what to do. How you should just lie back and not resist. It was all really, really organized.

**SS: Do you remember who did the training?**

JL: The training that night was the guy—You know I don't remember his name. He was a wonderful guy, and I'm pretty sure it was the guy who used to wear a dress.

**SS: David Robinson?**

JL: It could have been him or it could have been Maria. But I think I remember David Robinson in particular.

**SS: So since you were talking about how important your relationship to the Catholic Church was when you were younger, let's get to Stop the Church.**

JL: I have been waiting for years. I thought it was a terrible, terrible idea—I've been waiting for years to say this—I thought it was a terrible idea at the time. Not because the church wasn't culpable, but because I felt that it would alienate more people than it would bring to our cause. And I was in part —because I felt so strongly about it—I was in some of the planning for it, and I realized at the time that there is a filmmaker Robert Hilferty and he was going to make a film out of it. And because I was so cognizant of filmmaking I sort started to get the feeling that this was being staged for his

film. Especially when Tom Keane came up with the idea that he wanted to stamp on the host—He wanted to take communion and stamp on the host.

**SS: That was an idea that was preplanned?**

JL: Yeah. It was talked about. People didn't know. It was under discussion and it was put forward as something that we should all do. And a lot of people, not just myself, said I don't want to do that. It was objectionable to people who believe this thing. I did not think of myself as a Catholic by any means. I told my parents I was an atheist when I was in the sixth grade and it broke their hearts as much as anything else I told them. I grew up with Catholic— I have an uncle who was a priest and aunts that were nuns and who were nurses and things like that. And I knew that they—They thought that there was a real sense of charity in the church and that there were good things about the church and that Jesus meant something to them or whatever. I just saw no reason to make Aunt Joan feel so bad. To just do that. Especially when the issue was that the church was getting all the AIDS funding and they were administering it so they weren't administering to women clinics because they taught about abortion. That was a really, really good issue and it was clouded by the idea of just hatred for Cardinal O'Conner who was a total fuck and deserved hatred. But also the feeling—It was a really punk rock feeling, and I had been through punk rock already—The feeling that we just want to be contrary and we just want to do the thing that will get us the most attention. And stamping on the host was really going to do that. And somebody's bound to do it. I personally felt like it was a turning point for me because I felt like—Like I said I had no feeling except that I knew who those people were going to church. I had been an altar boy and I rejected that philosophy for myself, and I think that the church has done many

Tape II  
00:20:00

terrible things in the world, but I felt like it insulted those people and I thought that we are never going to get the government to change and be responsive to this disease if these are the kind of people that we alienate.

**SS: Who were the people who were really in favor of Stop the Church?**

JL: Robert, Tom Keane. I forget. A lot of them I didn't know their first names. That was the really strange thing about ACT UP—You could be in incredible dialogue with someone and not know their name.

**SS: So when you raised these objections were there other people who felted the same way you did?**

JL: Yeah, there were other people and there was a big general meeting where other people raised those objections too. It was a strength of ACT UP and a weakness—The people who did the really shocking— stamping on the host—said that they were not, at that moment, they were not part of ACT UP and that they were doing it for themselves. ACT UP always had this ethic that you were deciding on what you wanted to do, and if you couldn't get the group to sponsor it go do it anyway if you want. There is a lot to be said for that ethic, but that is how it went down. I resented particularly the film thing—'cause I knew that it was going to end up all being a film. And at some level we are staging this so that we can have this dramatic incident in the film. I thought that was really awful. That must have happened in '92. '91, '92?

**JH: '89**

JL: Stop the Church was in '89? Wow.

**SS: So you didn't go to the event?**

JL: No I didn't go to the event. I didn't support the event.

**SS: So what was the aftermath of the event?**

JL: Well, you know it was very easy to predict. The *New York Post* had these really awful headlines. I felt like the issue was really lost. The *Times* had condemning editorials. This issue that the Catholic Church should not be in charge of giving out the money for this disease that affects faggots I don't think ever came forward unless you read really hard. And so for all our adroit use of the media, we were just stepping on our own feet because we gave this big thing to look at that wasn't the issue. Whereas when they threw dollars onto the floor of Wall Street, I think that---Didn't the dollar say AZT on them?

**SS: I don't know.**

JL: But the issue became crystal clear and that was the sad thing that at certain points our image making was so strong but not precise. Not like right exactly where it needed to be to convince and really what politics is about is not your own therapy. If you hate the Catholic Church, fine, tell your shrink about it. If you need to, tell you mom about it. But, politics, one of the things I learned from ACT UP was how important it was to keep in sight that politics was different from art and different from personal therapy and it was about making effective change. Making effective change. I think that we did that, but I think in that case it blew it. It had profound—I think that a lot of people got turned off to ACT UP from that incident. And it made it harder for us to argue for ourselves ultimately. But yeah, I remember—I had at one point, right around then, and honestly I'll say it, but I'm not sure. I think it was Michael Petrelis, who you interviewed last week [April 21, 2003]. When I started to complain or say things about that, I lived right near a police station, and because I was so quiet, people thought that I

was a cop and that I was an informer. I didn't notice, but people sort of stayed away from me—And I thought that it was because I had a contrary view –

**SS: People thought that or Michael Petrelis thought that?**

JL: Well, perhaps his friends. And I feel kind of uncomfortable saying his name. Like I remember him as the one, but it was so long ago. When we edit this could we leave out his name?

**SS: Probably not. But it doesn't matter because people talk about him all the time.**

JL: Oh they do?

**SS: People talk about each other all the time and nothing is corroborated and that's just the way it is.**

JL: Well people thought I was a cop.

**SS: Because you were Irish.**

JL: 'Cause I was Irish and because I lived by the police station. Someone saw me by the police station. And that was the level that it sometime got on, and it was a childish level, and it was—There were clearly cops. When was the office gone through? There was a point when the ACT UP office was rifled by what seemed to be cops and there were certainly cops at the meetings all the time and there were certainly times when they seemed to know a lot more than they should, as I remember it. But I was not one of them.

**SS: Let's talk about *Poison* a little bit because it is such a significant film. In your view what was the relationship between you guys being in ACT UP to what *Poison* ended up being?**

JL: Well, it ended up being better, I think, than what we always intended it to be and better than our wildest dreams. We wanted it to be a provocation and it really came from the idea what would Genet have said or thought about this idea that gay — there's AIDS there now, and that it's common in the right wing to say that it was the revenge of God, and we wanted to bring that kind of — there was a lot of talk about transgression and Jean Genet whose writings the film is based on was seen as the high point of transgression lately in the world history. And Todd particularly loved Genet. We wanted to transgress everything. We wanted to transgress narrative form. We wanted to talk about politics and we wanted to really talk about the body and what illness really was and how you could die. We wanted to say you how could get sick and how it could get ugly and how you could feel rejected from the world simply because your face looked bad. So we hoped that that's what it would do, but we felt like we were preaching to the converted really. We thought some people would see it and we'd get into Sundance, and that's what would happen with it. And when we won Sundance, it was an amazing thing.

**SS: You won Sundance.**

JL: Yeah, we won Sundance.

**SS: How was that?**

JL: No one could believe it. It was really, really funny because Sundance is notoriously cheap. They put us in a little condo with our competitors, which was Hal Hartley and Martin Donovan and those guys, and they had the second Hal Hartley film. And when we won Martin Donovan literally came up to me and said you only won because of your politics and we should have won. Martin Donovan probably will never remember this, but I will always remember this. And I said, well good.

**SS: So this film was about your and Todd's relationship, about you having AIDS, about being in ACT UP, about Todd's love of Genet, and your history as a reader. I mean these are all the elements that are in that film.**

JL: Yeah, we became—He started writing the film before we were together and he actually asked me to read it before we were together and I read it and he said, would you read for it because he wanted to use non-actors and I said sure I'll read it, because I had acted in my films in college. I wasn't really doing anything—I was working on this Run DMC movie with Steve Brown who was in ACT UP too who died. But, shout out to Steve Brown, in the ethers. So, yeah, we – start me off again, I'm sorry –

**SS: So he asked you to read his script. The most classic seduction I could possibly think of.**

JL: I know, I know. I always make it a point to say that we weren't actually together, but of course we were. We weren't actually, we weren't, but of course it was probably a seduction. I've never said Todd did you do that, but he had a crush on me and it's well known and people talked about it. But I took the film saying that I'd be in it but I really want to cut it because I was looking for my first film to cut and I knew it was a spectacular film. I knew the writers. I had read *The Thief's Journal* and a lot of Genet, and I knew the writers. And I loved the idea that he would link what it meant to be gay with not only having new subject matter to deal with — like the different, many millions of great stories that are still not being told about being gay—

But also how it would necessitate a different form and that his form that he had come up with was so poetic and so cognizant of what a movie is while still being so heartfelt, that I was like, I've got to cut this film. So really that — and so we started to do

rehearsal, but that was when we started to seriously be in love, but it really happened in that order like that. Before that we were friends, and I think I sort of thought that maybe he had some interest in me but mostly we were just going to the movies together and both broke in the lower East Side.

**SS: So what happened after this thing when you won?**

JL: Oh yes, so we win and then it is seen as this horrible thing. And it was a very difficult film, still to its credit, for everyone, not just the right wing but for gay people. We showed the film at Sundance and people walked out at every screening. Tons and tons—They would just start at the spitting scene and they would just stand up and walk out in droves. And like I said, Jim Fouratt, who asked the first question after our big screening at the Egyptian — the question was about, don't you realize that some people get really bad lesions on their face and there really are people who are ashamed to go out in public? And of course we realized it. In Berlin, when we showed it in Berlin where it also won a Teddy award. Yvonne Rainer stood up and she was the first question and it was like this huge auditorium. And I knew Yvonne raised her voice, I couldn't see her, but I could hear her and her question was also a question about the representation of the nurse figure – the woman in the thing. And it wasn't nearly of, of course, it was Yvonne so it was a brilliant question. We all kind of went, ahhh, Yvonne Rainer. It was critical, but it wasn't critical in the way that Jim's was which I thought was weak. But, yeah, gay people didn't — like I said Mark and Jim Eigo didn't. When we had our benefit in New York for Treatment and Data, we got the feeling from them that they thought there were things that were politically not right about the film and that was hard because this was our thing that we were making. Particularly for me, because I was quiet and stuff, it was like

this is what I can do, what I can bring forward. You know, you want them to like it and you want the people that you really think are doing great work, like those guys, to like it. Mark I actually knew before he — just from the club scene — well before ACT UP. And it was really strange to go from knowing him and not really thinking that much about —

(Coughing)

**SS: Do you need a tissue?**

JL: No I just need to cough a little more. No Mark Harrington I knew from hanging out at the punk rock club scene at the time. And he was just another guy on that scene. Interesting, but not someone what was doing a lot of very interesting things. Like he worked at a copy shop and everyone was being a painter and being a writer. And we didn't really hang out. Then I watched him become this figure that was so great to see.

**SS: I want to ask you about the subculture filmmakers or film people inside ACT UP. So it was you, Todd [Haynes], there was Tom Kalin, there was Christine [Vachon], there was Maria Maggenti. There were a lot of people who were —**

JL: Making films, yeah —

**SS: And how did you all relate to each other on those terms when you were in ACT UP?**

JL: I wish I could say—I think it was all good but the hard thing was that people thought that we were this group of people who were impossible to—that were established—that it was impossible to break into the group and that there was a style that was already decided on. Like every film about AIDS had to be depressing. Or that every film had to have some kind of narrative screw up or things like that. No, I literally went

to interviews to edit a film where someone said to me, you're just going to make it really sad, so I don't want to work with you.

But I think—I wish I could say it was more of a team than it really was but certain people like Tom saw Todd films and gave comments on the scripts of the films and we saw his film and a photograph of me is in *Swoon* somewhere. Steve McLean, who made the film about David Wojnarowicz, really came to me –

**SS: *Postcards?***

JL: Yeah *Postcards from America*. Yeah, I don't know if you remember that, but I played David Wojnarowicz in the film. That was a really intense thing because we were making the film as David was dying and I knew where Peter Hujar lived, because I knew Peter Hujar, so I knew where he was dying basically. I remember actually walking — bumping into Su Friedrich one night who was another film person who was often at ACT UP—and I was literally standing outside thinking about my role in front of his house which was on Second Avenue and having her come up to me and I bet she doesn't remember it and she said, Jim, are you OK? Why are you standing there? Because I was crying. And I explained to her what I was doing. So I think it was basically support, but it was like any artist, there's always a little bickering. Everybody wanted to have this say, you know? Filmmaking is so expensive that it just is hard anyway.

**SS: Before you said that you had your own theory about why ACT UP split apart. Did you want to share that?**

JL: Do I want to share that? Do I have my own theory? I don't really have a theory about why it split apart. I have a theory about why people got burned out, which I think a lot of people say. I have a theory that people did start to believe that the problems

were going to be solved and that the medicines really were going to work. It seemed like they were because it was so miraculous. I think a lot of people died, quite honestly. And we lost a lot of really important people like David for one. So, no, I don't have a grand theory about it.

**SS: Did you interact with him a lot? I mean you were playing him, that's kind of an odd thing.**

JL: I had interaction with him but mostly through—There was a bar called The Bar on Second Avenue, and I started to go there once I realized the Ninth Circle wasn't cool. It was a gay bar, but it was great at that time cause there were all these artists that would go there and David was one of those artists and he would just always glower and stand alone and I would talk to him a little bit but I really wasn't interested in being with him and so I — there was always this note around our interchanges that are we going to sleep together or not? Where with Peter Hugar I felt a lot safer because I felt it was obvious he was a lot older than myself. Peter and I went to his house and he showed me his photographs and we could talk about art and trying to make it in the art world. Who else was there?

**SS: Well, that was ACT UP central, The Bar?**

JL: Yeah, The Bar became ACT UP central, but it was actually happening. It became that for a reason. It already was kind of this thing that we started going to before I knew I was positive or anything like that. And it was Bill Rice and Taylor Mead and those people who had all gravitated there. But, yeah, it's not even a gay bar anymore. It is too bad.

**SS: Well I only have one more question. Is there anything else you would like to cover?**

JL: Let me think.

(Long Pause)

**JW: Maybe we should stop and put in the tape.**

Tape III  
00:00:00

**SS: So one of the things that all of us who were in ACT UP know about the experience was that part of it was watching people get sick and die over and over –**

JL: Over and over –

**SS: – for years and years and years. Looking back on that now, because we were all young at the time, and of course you were more implicated because you had HIV yourself. Do you have any hindsight into what that was like to be in the middle of all of that illness and death?**

JL: I just know that it shouldn't have been. That we were too young and it was a huge cost to pay. And that I think what we got was ACT UP and we got this feeling that it really, really was important to engage politically. But I have friends, like my boyfriend now lost all of his friends. I don't think he can ever take that back, what that is. In any life, but in a young life. I personally had the feeling that it took the idea of the country away from me because I felt that America was letting people die — really, really, and I still believe it. Reagan wouldn't talk about AIDS, wouldn't even mention it. It brought home very, very clearly how little a gay life meant to a lot of people and how important it was to come out, which I had always struggled with. And how important it was to claim yourself as who you were. And I think ACT UP — I was very, very — Because I was in the film business, and I still have problems with it. I was very afraid to

say that I was positive at that time. I just didn't do it. I wasn't ready to do it. And one of the reasons I thought that I would lose jobs. And subsequently I have lost jobs being positive. But I was very proud of people like Peter Staley, like Mark, the more famous people who were really out. They would speak as someone who was HIV positive. But I think the mourning classically is defined as going through all these different patterns and one of them was anger and anger was almost synonymous with ACT UP for a long time. And people forget that the anger wasn't about not being paid attention to, the anger was about hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people are dying and that's not being paid attention to. I remember going to one of the marches with a friend of mine who was positive. We had gone and afterwards we went to the Vietnam memorial and we — it is such a beautiful memorial and we were very sad, but we were thinking the whole time, and finally one of us said it. More people, at this time, almost, have died from AIDS than have died from the war at Vietnam — more young men. And they'll never — maybe some day — but there was no question that there would be some kind of memorial like that. But I guess there was the quilt, but to have a government sanctioned memorial that was so beautiful.

**SS: But I mean even more — and this is very hard to explain to people now.**

**But back then do you remember—I mean can you convey —**

JL: What it felt like?

**SS: What it was like?**

JL: It felt like the world was coming to an end and nobody was going to watch and make sure that things were OK. And you had to do it. And, yeah, there were many, many phone numbers in my phone book that I just keep there so I remember the person.

I had a lover who I really loved named Curt Davis who was a very important person in my life. And I learned I was positive and he learned he was positive. Actually we had — this is what it was like to be a punk rocker in those years — when we decided we were together, first, we wrestled with our clothes off for like two weeks and then we did this thing when we both cut our palms and exchanged blood and after we did that and he found out he was positive he said I didn't want to tell you because "I felt so much that I had probably infected you." And I said no, I think I was infected long before that. Maybe it is possible that I infected you. But, just the feeling that you could infect someone — feeling that people were going to die around you and you didn't know who and you didn't know which one. The feeling that your own life would be curtailed. The feeling that the government didn't care. And not only didn't they care but — when *Poison* won Sundance, we went on this huge media junket that had to do with the right wing. So Todd was constantly — and every once in a while me or Christine — were constantly put on television or interviewed and the other person being interviewed at the same time was someone from the right wing. I particularly remember the young guy, the young kind of handsome guy, Ralph Reed. I remember sitting in a green room with Ralph Reed at *Good Morning America* and thinking, god, this guy is gay. I swear he's flirting with me. And Todd's outside on television with the guy who ran *The New Criterion*. I forget his name.

**SS: Andrew Sullivan?**

JL: No, it was before Andrew Sullivan. Let's stay away from Andrew Sullivan.

**JH: Bill Kristol?**

JL: No, not Bill Kristol.

**JH: Hilton Kramer?**

JL: Yeah, it was Hilton Kramer. I'm in the back room with Ralph Reed and Hilton Kramer's wife and Todd's on television with Hilton Kramer. Hilton Kramer was saying this film worships death, literally, said this. This film worships death and that is why it is an evil film. No money should go to Sundance because of it – if any money did and it should not be supported. And Todd, you know, is very, very erudite and very well spoken, but no one put him in charge of being the voice. He was an artist who had made a film. Luckily he handled it very well, but there were constantly opposing — taking these political figures and opposing individual artists to them and it was never a fair battle. They were very schooled by Ralph Reed as to what to say and what attacks to make.

But anyways, he is there and I'm in the back room having found out that I was HIV positive like a year and a half ago with his wife who was this huge woman presence. They were about to go to some benefit at Lincoln Center and she's telling me — Well, we are talking a little bit about AIDS. She is saying to me that people with AIDS take people down with them. I was sitting there with the publicist, who I won't name because I didn't like the way he handled it, and with Ralph Reed flirting with me. And that was the kind of time it was. And those things must have happened over and over until you couldn't help but — I just remember thinking for years straight — this is not my country. This is not the place where I am, where I want to be. I still wrestle with leaving the country.

But the idea — just to get back to the idea about everyone dying constantly. I think death in this culture have been obviously taken aside and put away from you.

AIDS brought death out in the open in a way that it hadn't been for really not that long. Since the polio vaccine and things like that, it used to be that people would get sick and die at home. Then they started to go to the hospital. At least for gay people, death became this real fact. It wasn't just something that you read about or heard about. It became this very, very palpable truth and you lost people. And my friend Curt, who I was talking about, I was at a beach house in Montauk on some kind of phone that barely worked while he was in San Francisco telling me that he was dying now and that he was going to die—

(Pause)

I should have thought it before I started that story—But that kind of thing was happening to everyone and I loved him. The thing that really came through was that that voice would never be there again. And there were so many of those voices. That is why Douglas Crimp wrote this great thing called *Mourning and Militancy*. And it was about the response to all the death. You should get Douglas to read it out, I don't want to steal his thunder. But it talked about how the only response that could help at all was to become active in trying to save the life of yourself and your friends and the people you loved and the people you felt kinship to even if you didn't know them. As AIDS became a pandemic that kinship circle grew larger and larger. I think that is a very, very good thing for the world. I think it came out of the personal loss. It wasn't just those guys over there, they were getting sick. It was us. And that, when you can conceive of it that way, and then you read about genocide in Darfur, you don't know what genocide in Darfur is like, but you have a little bit more of a feeling for it. If anything — I don't think anything good came from AIDS — but I think organizing is always good. I think

Tape III  
00:10:00

that that experience with compassion helped to broaden everyone was touched by it. So while I think we—I'm not saying now that there should be a pandemic for straights and then they'll be compassionate. I think that would be too horrible. But I believe that that awful experience that the world was changing in this way and no one care made me realize that I had to fight for myself and for my friends and people that I loved and things that I loved. And for my desire, which has always been my compass. Very early I realized that to be a man and to be gay were great things, were wonderful things. And that these other people were lying. And if they could lie about that they could lie about anything. But anyway, I felt like this derision towards being gay and these insults towards people being gay weren't just insults they were attacks that would have consequences where people would die. And then they were dying. It was a profound thing and part of the, the bittersweet idea of ACT UP is knowing that it came from all those bodies.

**SS: OK. That's all I have. Thank You.**

JL: Thank You. Thank You.

(Pause in tape)

JL: I just want to say that I just miss ACT UP so bad and I know that it is still there and what I miss, I think, is my own feeling and my friend's feelings that we can make a difference. And I think that this last election should not change that one iota. So what if they cheat. Because I really believe that both elections were stolen. That doesn't mean that you give up. Hopefully it mobilizes people in a similar way. That's what I wanted to say.

**SS: Thank you Jim.**