

SASS SIGNS & VIBES

COCO

EPISODE 3

AIMEE

Music & Taboos

EXPLICIT CONTENT WARNING

*If you're sensitive to swearing and frank conversations about sex,
it's probably best to avoid this series*

RANDOM FACTS

COCO: So, you know how I love a random fact?

AIMEE: (sighs) Yes...

COCO: We have more!

AIMEE: Right...

COCO: Did you know that a while ago when I was about 17 or 18-years-old I performed on stage as...A Drag King.

AIMEE: A Drag King, you...on stage?

COCO: Yeah before...yes, it was for Manchester Pride. It was my moment in the limelight.

AIMEE: What did you wear?

COCO: I wore jean shorts, a t-shirt with a waistcoat. I had a moustache and a flat cap and my stage name was...Master Stiff.

AIMEE: Master Stiff?

COCO: That was my stage name. Do you like it?

AIMEE: Okay? 'Master Stiff'.

COCO: But imagine if that was now, me performing as a Drag King. No thanks, get-a-way.

AIMEE: Why did you agree to do it in the first place?

COCO: I used to live in Brighton and my housemate got into Drag Kings. I thought, okay I'll have a go at the make-up and then I agreed to do a signed-song on stage as a Drag King. Bit random, right?

AIMEE: Really random. Would you do it again now?

COCO: Yeah, I would.

AIMEE: A different drag character though, or just performing?

COCO: I would do drag again if it was a special occasion or charity event I would do it. I would like to do more signed-songs. Why not?

FESTIVALS

AIMEE: You're talking about stages and signed-songs and that links to festivals...

COCO: You know what...

AIMEE: We're going to Glastonbury!

(jumping, laughter, and cheer)

AIMEE: I can't wait, it will be my first time.

COCO: Glastonbury virgin!

AIMEE: Everybody's been talking about Glastonbury for so long, on and on so it'll be nice to finally experience it.

COCO: I'm looking forward to taking you there. Yeah.

AIMEE: So this is your second time?

COCO: No, with you it will be my fifth.

AIMEE: Fifth? Already your fifth time?

COCO: Five times!

AIMEE: So, we've got loads of friends coming haven't we? There are a lot Deaf people there.

COCO: So, yes, Deaf people do like music and festivals. We do!

AIMEE: Yeah!

COCO: We go to festivals every year.

AIMEE: We go everywhere. We love festivals and we love music.

COCO: I love music, I can hear the music, whereas you can't hear the music but you can feel it.

AIMEE: The draw for me is that I love dancing so much. My older brother's a professional dancer, he's hearing. When we grew up he taught me how to follow the rhythm visually. I just have that connection. So I learned that through him and became interested in dancing. At festivals the music is so loud, I can see the movement in the crowd so I can watch it and feel it. When they change, I change my rhythm, I follow the beat that I can see around me. I just have that connection. Music at festivals is so loud though, I don't know how hearing people cope with that noise because for me it's already a lot.

COCO: Ear plugs.

AIMEE: I wouldn't be surprised if the percentage of Deaf people there massively increases because of how loud the music is.

COCO: I'm sure it's happened.

AIMEE: You like to listen to the lyrics?

COCO: Yeah, the lyrics.

AIMEE: So, we have different approaches but we both still enjoy it.

COCO: I always wanted you to come with me to festivals because I know we'd have a good time.

AIMEE: Yeah, together. We do everything together anyway, but I think festivals are one thing we HAVE to do together.

COCO: Definitely and we are going to Glastonbury next year.

AIMEE: Yeah!

COCO: But sometimes I get a bit frustrated because I can hear quite well, but I don't always catch the lyrics. Obviously, they are accessible now and have interpreters on the stage, which is lovely. But, I'm not sure if you or others will agree with this or not, but it's my opinion that the songs should be translated into Signed Spoken English (SSE). Just to give some people the context, there is a difference between BSL and SSE...

AIMEE: Different structure.

In British Sign Language (BSL) the structure is different, essentially it is back-to-front. So for example, in English 'the man on the bridge' would change to 'bridge man on' in BSL.

AIMEE: Condensed.

COCO: Exactly, whereas SSE is more word for word following English grammar. I want to know the definition of the lyrics, the meaning of them in SSE not BSL. Personally, when I see an interpreter signing songs in BSL, I do not understand the song. If I am going to an 'accessible' festival...

AIMEE: ...And you still don't understand the songs?!

COCO: Yeah, exactly. To me that means it's still not accessible. It's not the interpreter's fault.

AIMEE: This is just your preference for understanding the songs.

COCO: Yeah, but I do think there needs to be a change. I've been asking Deaf friends who go to festivals, what is your preference? Lots of them prefer SSE. So why are the interpretations all in BSL?

AIMEE: Maybe they feel that more Deaf people will understand BSL better?

COCO: It's not true, though.

AIMEE: But have they asked that question to audiences, I don't know. But I do tend to agree with you. I think if we imagine like a really slow, melodic song, Interpreters often sign like this... (*slowly waves and sways hands in the air*) What the f*ck are they saying? What is this? Are you conveying the air. Is this air? I don't get it.

COCO: Atmosphere?

AIMEE: This...what are you grabbing? Is it grapes?! I do not understand. If you're describing a walk in the woods, the beautiful surroundings, the smells, and the atmosphere *with* a lip pattern, then great. But if you're doing all of this (*waving, wooshing, and swaying hands in the air*) with no lip pattern, I understand it's art and poetic but...What?

COCO: Is it even art, though?

AIMEE: Or what about rapping? All of this(*holding a mic up, quickly jabbing and waving hands*)...

COCO: Yeah, rap is difficult. It's so hard.

AIMEE: Rap is really fast so sometimes you need to condense the meaning. If it's slow and in BSL it becomes a kind of dance (*smooth waving and swaying*)...some songs suit BSL and some don't because you don't understand.

COCO: You can merge the BSL and SSE. But we can't really criticise the interpreters, if it's a gig you can memorise the songs in advance, but at festivals like Glastonbury they often get the set lists from artists 2 weeks before.

AIMEE: Some songs they get given on the day, so they have to go through all of the songs and practice them. Then sometimes they're practicing and the set list changes, so the interpreter has to deal with that. They might just have to hope everyone in the crowd understands. But maybe in the audience some prefer SSE and some BSL, the interpreter has to try and match all of the needs of the audience. Everyone is different.

COCO: Yeah, exactly.

AIMEE: Performance interpreting must be a fun job, but also really difficult.

COCO: It is easy to sit here and criticise.

AIMEE: Yeah, it's easy to criticise. Also, they're learning how many songs in preparation? They might get paid for the festival but not for the prep? I don't know.

COCO: No, they don't get paid at all, it's voluntary.

AIMEE: Oh, they don't get paid at all? So, we have to really appreciate their time - learning and checking the songs.

COCO: Yeah, we need to value their time.

AIMEE: It must be difficult.

COCO: We need more Deaf translators. We NEED them.

AIMEE: We definitely do need more Deaf translators, perhaps with hearing translators feeding them?

COCO: It's frustrating for me, because I would love to do that, but I'm not a qualified translator. But I am a native sign language user - fluent in both. I can hear and love music.

AIMEE: You could easily do it!

COCO: I should be given the opportunity. I'm maybe better than half of them. No, shut up Coco.

AIMEE: You're so sassy.

COCO: It's just that music is a passion of mine.

AIMEE: It's frustrating. It's your area, you love music, you love songs.

COCO: Y'know you can still use hearing interpreters to support the Deaf translators on stage - feeding them the signs.

AIMEE: Yeah, I don't see a problem with that, it's difficult but we can make it work.

COCO: Hmm, yeah it's difficult...Difficult! Oh, I need some water after that!

MUSIC

COCO: So, I think we prefer R'n'B and Hip-Hop compared to techno.

AIMEE: Oh yes! BOOM BOOM BOOM!

COCO: Yeah, BOOM BOOM! It is very repetitive. And we like to dance, we love to dance.

AIMEE: We love to dance, yeah! And I think it's perfect because I'm profoundly deaf, I hear nothing so I really rely on vibration and we work well together because you can hear the music and lyrics and tell me what's going on. Also we love the same music so we would dance together and sometimes you would translate for me. We're a good match.

COCO: We like R'n'B but other Deaf people might prefer something with a heavier bass so they can feel it.

AIMEE: Yeah, bass, repetitive...

COCO: The repetitive bass movement, they can feel through their bodies.

AIMEE: I love that repetitive music that keeps going. Sometimes you're like "can we change it up" and I'm there unaware, dancing away and enjoying myself. You're like "change the song!"

COCO: Oh, you mean for dancing, like in a circle, but sometimes 2 minutes watching the same movement is enough, move on.

AIMEE: Oh, I love that. It's called the circle dance and everyone takes turns dancing in the circle. It's good for bonding. We can do it at glastonbury.

COCO: Yeah, fine, I'll just need lots of drinks. LOTS of drinks.

AIMEE: Loads of drinks, yeah.

DRINKING AT FESTIVALS

AIMEE: What do you think about going to a festival without alcohol?

COCO: I haven't tried it yet, I haven't tried it. Do you think you can?

AIMEE: No, I've never experienced a festival without drinking. I need a pre-drink to get me in the mood so I don't arrive looking like...*(sits up straight, wide eyed and expressionless)*

COCO: When you're getting ready, with your make-up and what not.

AIMEE: Yeah, make-up and drinks. You want to arrive ready to enjoy it, not drunk because you'll feel rough.

COCO: Bam! On the floor, no...

AIMEE: Just a few drinks.

COCO: You want to enjoy the atmosphere, I would definitely need alcohol.

AIMEE: Yeah, me too. I need it.

COCO: It seems like more people go to festivals and not drink now. Well done, fair play to them.

AIMEE: It's a good attitude to have. They can do it. Really, you don't need to have alcohol to have fun.

COCO: No, you don't.

AIMEE: But it helps...Have a bit of drink.

COCO: You know me, I hate dancing with no alcohol. I can but...

AIMEE: You would rather not.

COCO: But I'd feel a bit awkward at a festival without it, a bit stiff.

AIMEE: So you remember when I was dancing on the beach in Bali?

COCO: Yeah, you were deep into it, ohh no...

AIMEE: I was saying "come on, come on, you don't need a drink!" You were like "no, I need more drink!" So I just kept grooving away.

COCO: You were proper into it, proper dancing.

AIMEE: Dancing is my escape. Some people can do festivals without drink but I think it'd be hard for 6 or 7 hours to feel the atmosphere and not drink. I'd feel like I'd need something to sip.

COCO: Yeah, you need a drink to hold.

AIMEE: I would just feel a bit weird without it.

COCO: Have a few shots, maybe.

DEAF TABOOS

AIMEE: I've got a funny story about interpreters, not about a festival though. So I worked on a big drama production and had two regular interpreters. They were with me all the time at work and a member of staff asked "Oh, do those interpreters live with you then?"

COCO: *(laughs)*

AIMEE: Like, really, are you serious? I said, "No..." They said, "So how'd you get up in the morning?" I was like, "Umm...with an alarm." They were like, "that's so amazing."

COCO: *(laughs)*

AIMEE: I wasn't annoyed at all, I was too busy laughing. I was just surprised.

COCO: *(laughs)* Wow!

AIMEE: They were clueless, they'd obviously never met a Deaf person before. They weren't being horrible, they just had no idea. And I was like, "no, I live on my own. They come to work with me every day but they aren't with me all the time." They were like "what!"

COCO: Imagine living with your interpreter every day?

AIMEE: Yeah, Imagine that. They'd have to tap me to wake me up, "Good morning. Breakfast is there. Somebody's knocking at the door. This is today's news."

COCO: But It's not their fault, obviously. There's not enough Deaf education.

AIMEE: There's just no education, yeah.

COCO: Like, some people are surprised that Deaf people can drive. Grow up.

AIMEE: Deaf people can walk, write, they can sign.

COCO: Can they walk? Have you been asked that?

AIMEE: Someone asked me, 'Can Deaf people run?'

COCO: Run? Really? My friend told me that she went into a restaurant and told them she was deaf. The waiter said "That's fine" and off they went. Then the waiter came back with a menu that was in Braille. I mean I'm Deaf, not blind.

AIMEE: Wow! Once I was going for a smear test at the hospital, this woman approached me and I gestured that I'm deaf. "Okay", she says and tells me to follow her. So I assume the interpreter has already arrived and she's taking me to her. So I follow her, she points to a sign...Audiology!

COCO: She just assumed that it was to do with hearing.

AIMEE: I was like, "No, no, no." I've got other parts that need to be looked at as well. I don't need Audiology, I showed her the letter and she was embarrassed and apologised. They just assume every appointment is linked to your ears. Really, It's not their fault.

COCO: No.

AIMEE: It's just a lack of awareness. But I love it when I buy coffee or something in a shop, I'll order what I need using my phone and gestures. But I always sign, "thank you" because it's good to raise awareness. But some think I'm blowing a kiss and then blow one back! I'm saying thank you, not blowing a kiss. "No, no, no! I'm not flirting with you." It's awkward...

COCO: Proper awkward.

AIMEE: It's from the chin, thank you!

COCO: Thank you (*signs*). So, obviously my parents are Deaf, my Mum has quite a high-pitched voice and we would be shopping and she'd use her Deaf voice, she'd shout (*high pitched, squeaky, shout*) "Coco, come here now"!

AIMEE: Was it embarrassing?

COCO: People would stare and I was embarrassed. Now I don't care, Deaf people are renowned for having no filter. They're quite direct and blunt, including myself, I'm direct. When we went to Deaf club and saw my parents' friends, some I haven't seen for over 10 years, they say, "you've lost weight!"

AIMEE: Yeah, really blunt.

COCO: It's quite rude, there's no, "how are you?" and they were like, "you look awful."

Yeah, or "you've had your hair cut too short, it doesn't suit your face!" Like, excuse me!

COCO: It's funny though

AIMEE: Or, "Oh, you finished with your ex-boyfriend, he was beautiful. You should ditch this one, the other one was better."

COCO: Yeah, they're quite blunt.

AIMEE: But why is that? Why are Deaf people blunt? I'm sure hearing people are blunt as well? Or maybe not...Why is it that Deaf people are known for being so blunt?

COCO: Well, not really...comparing. I think there is a big difference.

AIMEE: We just say what we see. It just comes out.

COCO: Yeah, we say what we see. But also think about our Deaf parent's generation and their education. They missed out a lot in terms of social cues, their education was awful.

AIMEE: They don't know what's right and wrong?

COCO: Yeah, not taught right and wrong, not educated on how to...

AIMEE: It's a different generation.

COCO: Also, If you think about a hearing person on a bus and everything they learn from hearing other conversations, even the radio.

AIMEE: Listening into everything, yeah the radio.

COCO: They hear social cues when doors are opened, please and thank you. So hearing people have more opportunities to learn, whereas Deaf people often miss out on that.

AIMEE: Yeah, much more opportunities...

COCO: We learn and grow by observing, we miss so much.

AIMEE: And because hearing people are listening and taking in so much, Deaf people have to be curious, "what are they talking about? I feel like they're talking about me, what are they saying?" Whereas hearing people just take it in as they go. They don't need to think about it. They already know the context, they can hear it.

GROWING UP DEAF

AIMEE: I think one thing I loved about growing up in a Deaf house was, I'd be in the living room and my mum would be in the dining room. So, I'd be waving to get her attention - that didn't work. Then I'd be looking for something soft to throw, try a cushion, then I'd miss. I can't use a mug, that's too hard. I

need something softer. Or if I was upstairs and my Mum had made dinner, she would flash the lights so I knew dinner was ready...

COCO: The lights, that's right. We would throw things or sometimes slam or bang on something for the vibrations. This is quite funny, when I was growing up we had a gay night in our 'local' on a Tuesday night. So all my friends would come back to mine after. My Mum is OCD and she loves a clean house. I would tell my friends, you have to make sure the house is clean, but you can be as loud as you want. And my friends were like, eh?

AIMEE: Deaf friends understood but hearing friends didn't get it.

COCO: They would still whisper. So I said, "No, you don't need to whisper, be as loud as you want. You can shout, it's fine." Then, to prove it, I got pots and pans and I banged them together. We partied after that when they realised my parents had no idea. They were fast asleep while I was partying downstairs. Good times!

IDENTITY

AIMEE: One thing that's interesting to me, so we both grew up with Deaf families. Everyone was deaf. We experienced lots of barriers with communication outside of that, so I was completely immersed in my own Deaf world. Then when the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement happened, it was the first time I sort of strayed from the Deaf community. There were lots of posters with a black hand and a white hand, coming together. Showing that solidarity and union, and a sense of community and that was the first time I thought, so where do I fit with this? With the white hand or the black hand? I realised that I had focused so much on my deafness that I actually forgot about the colour of my skin, my race. That was a huge thing for me. Am I black or am I white? I asked the black community, what am I? I was told that it was my choice but I felt like both. Sometimes, it was a matter of me being too black to be white or too white to be black. It was a weird time but I had been so engulfed with my Deaf identity I hadn't considered my race.

COCO: What about now?

AIMEE: It's weird because I grew up with a black mother. My parents divorced when I was three. So I lived with my mother and saw my father on the weekends. I was raised in a black family, with black food, it was a very black upbringing. Most of my friends were white. Very few of my friends were black or mixed race. Two of my ex boyfriends were white. I think people thought I considered myself as white because of who I was surrounded with, friends, partners. I was open to anyone, I hadn't really considered race before. Such a large majority of the Deaf community are white, which meant a high percentage of my friends were white. Few were mixed race or black. I went through a phase thinking was I too white to be black and too black to be white? So, I identify with both. I have an empowered, deaf and mixed race identity. It was interesting not to just focus on my deafness but also my race.

COCO: This isn't linked to race but, as I was growing up I always had Deaf people telling me I was hearing. Even recently, somebody said I was hearing and that I have hearing privilege and I am like "Excuse me, I have my own struggles." I don't fit into the Deaf community and I don't fit into the

hearing community. I had these struggles growing up even though I have a strong Deaf family - I still felt it.

AIMEE: Because you can speak very well, people don't think you're 'Deaf enough'. But, like...what?

COCO: I have a big Deaf identity but there are some people out there who think that, because I can hear and I can speak that means, I don't have a Deaf identity. It doesn't make you less of a Deaf person.

AIMEE: You've got more experience as a Deaf person than a lot of others. You have a lot of Deaf family and friends. Others might have 5 or 6 Deaf family members but you have so many yet they still label you as fake.

COCO: It's a shame, sometimes I do prefer to talk. If there are hearing people chatting and there is a Deaf person present I would sign of course. But if I prefer to talk when I am having my own conversation with them, I should be able to. It depends on who I'm chatting with, if a Deaf person is involved I will automatically do both. But to say that I'm not Deaf enough or that I'm a fake Deaf, that breaks my heart. I'm proud to be Deaf. I love being Deaf and I am lucky to have the best of both worlds. I appreciate that. But please stop calling me 'fake Deaf'. It's the same for you if someone said 'you are not black enough, you are not white enough'. Or you don't belong in that group or that group.

BOWL OF WORDS

AIMEE: Right, we went very deep, so lets come back! We're ready for our bowl of words.

COCO: Let's do this.

AIMEE: Knowing us, it'll probably be another really deep topic. But let's see.

COCO: Hopefully not. *(Reaches in and picks out a piece of paper)* Fashion!

AIMEE: Oh, fashion...

COCO: Fashion, clothing. I think fashion is really important.

AIMEE: Absolutely.

COCO: I always dress to impress myself. I like to look good. I like to have my own style. People always say that I have my own style, so I'm quite proud of that. I'm quite unique in terms of what I wear. But you...

AIMEE: Hang on, let's talk about you first. Your style is unique, sometimes you have big baggy trousers with loads of patterns on. If someone else wore that they would look awful. But you pull it off. Your clothing is bold, you try new things and it just suits you. You just keep trying new things.

COCO: Even if it's ridiculous, like last week at work there were these costumes and this awful, baggy leather jacket that was like down to my knees. I tried it on...

AIMEE: Everyone said 'you look so good'.

COCO: I was like, just put on a black beanie, make it look good.

AIMEE: Any clothing suits you.

COCO: I'm lucky... So thank you.

AIMEE: That's you - but what about me?!

COCO: You annoy me. I do love your fashion, but you're so annoying because you always have to colour-coordinate. *(reaches over to reveal Aimee's orange socks matching her orange jumper)* Always, see! You need to break the habit. Stop!

AIMEE: You will never see me with blue trainers and an orange top.

COCO: Why not? Blue and orange, it's a good combination.

AIMEE: My trainers must match my clothes. That's just how I roll, got to match. Oh, and linked to fashion, I hate when people wear Nike trainers... with Adidas socks.

COCO: Look, is this allowed *(lifts her trousers to reveal different branded socks and nike trainers)?*

AIMEE: That's acceptable. But if it was Nike or Adidas, they're big brands, they shouldn't be put together.

COCO: You've given me anxiety about that. You're always "ah, look at your socks!" I always have to make sure that I'm matching now, well most of the time. Depends on my washing but I always try to match my socks and shoes because of you.

COCO: You did confess that you realised it looks better when it's like Nike with Nike, Adidas with Adidas.

AIMEE: We love fashion, we love our trainers, we love to look good. We always plan our outfits.

COCO: You are worse, tell them what you do. *(laughing)* If Aimee loves an outfit, you take a photo and then save it to your notes on your phone.

AIMEE: *(laughs)* Yeah.

COCO: So if you're unsure what to wear one day, you'll have a look in your little fashion notebook, which is a lot of effort though.

AIMEE: It is a lot of effort but it's like, if I like an outfit, I take a picture and keep it.

COCO: I wonder how many people do that.

AIMEE: I spoke to a friend, she's an interpreter and she does exactly the same. Sometimes I'll be chilling in my dressing gown and I'll get a call for a party tonight and I'm like "what am I going to wear? What am I going to wear?" Oh actually, go through the notes, wear that one!

COCO: It's like that film...Clueless.

AIMEE: It's like having a virtual wardrobe rather than rummaging through your actual wardrobe. That's stressful. I just go through my phone, pick an outfit, it saves me so much time. You should start doing it. Didn't I send you some?

COCO: I started this year.

AIMEE: I think I've got five or six of you, I'll make a catalogue to make it easier for us.

COCO: Thank you, darling. How long have we been friends for now? 2012. Ten years?

AIMEE: 10 years. Close friends for ten years.

COCO: Wow! (*wipes up some dribble with her sleeve*) I just dribbled a little bit. Sorry?

AIMEE: (*laughs*) What?

COCO: I just dribbled a little bit. Anyway...Ten years.

AIMEE: 10 years of friendship. That's a long time.

COCO: We've never argued or fallen out, not once.

AIMEE: I don't think we've ever gotten into an argument. We rarely annoy each other.

COCO: There was one point, last year we were together for eight months out of the whole year, every single day. What do you think is the key? What makes our friendship strong? What do you think it is?

AIMEE: The main thing is that we've got similar interests. We love fashion, we love to dance, we love going out and partying. We love to travel.

COCO: Yes, we love to travel as well. We love skiing and snowboarding.

COCO: We've got a lot in common. Some days we are wild and we never shut up, other days we are chilled. Sometimes we balance each other out. We can sit in silence for hours. There's no awkwardness. We communicate very well. I think we share pretty much everything.

COCO: Yeah, how we feel. Sorry everyone, but we do share everything. Don't tell her a secret because I'll know, so best not.

AIMEE: We're respectful of each other. If we feel upset with each other, we communicate about it. I think communication is really key. We are open.

COCO: Yes. I think there was a time...what was it? I think I snapped at you. It was work-related. You asked "why did you snap at me?" I explained that I was stressed, so we sorted it out by being open.

AIMEE: You snapped at me, and I said that you could have told me how you felt and if I had ignored how you felt then, fair enough, you could have snapped at me but don't just snap at me straight away. You let it out, which was fine. If I had snapped back at you it would have escalated. But we communicate well.

COCO: It might be a little, you know...whatever, but I believe in Star Signs. I'm fire and you're water. So I do think we balance each other.

We've got the same outlook on life. We're very open minded. So if I do something awful, you don't judge me. You're honest and you say, "you shouldn't have done that" but without judgement. You give me your honest opinion and you'll say, I shouldn't have done it 'this' because of this reason. Or that I'm right. I do the same for you.

COCO: We learn from each other. You're younger than me, but you are my role model for who you are and what you've achieved. Your outlook and how you speak to people and connect with people. I'm very casual, inappropriate sometimes. You can be quite professional without being too formal. Do you know what I mean? You can be professional.

AIMEE: Sometimes I can be a bit too professional.

COCO: So I've learnt so much from you.

AIMEE: We learn from each other.

COCO: Definitely.

AIMEE: To the next 50 years (*reaches out to take Coco's hand*)

COCO: Are you proposing?

AIMEE: To the next 50 years...

COCO: aw.