

## Conversations with Dave

It's over forty years since I had my meetings with Dave. My move to Australia and Dave's love of the chance encounter in the street or as an unexpected knock on the door meant that our friendship ended abruptly. I'm not sure when we first met. It was probably in the Sociology Department of Leeds University. Dave was just starting a degree in the department and I was signed up for a Ph.D. I always felt that his grasp on the requirements needed for an undergraduate degree were fragile, but the department must have felt he had qualities that would carry him through. It was a while before I realised that his difficulties with reading and writing were so severe was why he poured so much of his intellectual activity into speech. At the same time as Dave was trying to establish himself in the Sociology Department I was banging my head against a thesis whose topic I was never really happy with. Dave must have sensed the intellectual problems I was labouring under and thoughtfully paid only a cursory interest in what I was up to.

We could not have been more different. He was in his early twenties whilst I was in my mid-forties. He was working class who came from south London and who was still part of a close-knit working class family. We had lead an itinerant life living in different parts of London with little or no anchor to any defined social group. He was single and without a partner whilst I was married with a young son.

Our conversations would often follow a familiar pattern. We would begin with a few casual remarks, usually about the left groups that were plentiful in Leeds area. But as soon as a pause opened up in our conversation Dave would commence with his latest riff on the nature of the working class and its relationship to the music of Bruce Springsteen.

Dave's notion of the working class was an unusual one. Whilst he was unwavering in his assertion of his working class origin he seemed to have a perverse dismissal of all those qualities thought integral to it. Dave would have none of the many forms of romanticism that could accrue to the working class. In our conversations he never displayed any evidence that he thought that working class life was especially characterised by a greater integrity and honesty than the middle class. Of course, there are negative constructions that could, and were, made of working class life. Lazy, spendthrift, chronically scruffy and worst of all oversexed. Whilst Dave tilted in none of these directions he was especially dismissive of the political romance that joined the economic struggles of the working class with revolutionary liberation. As Dave observed, this was a terrible burden to put on the shoulders of the working class who were already at the mercy of capitals' fluctuations.

I was never able to fully grasp what Dave meant when he said he was from the working class but I never once doubted that was where he came from. His working class identity- 'identity' something that Dave would always reject- was as elusive as his more general notions of his class affiliation. The conclusion I came to was that Dave was a rather unusual member of the working class. His class identification(s) were steady but restricted, whilst his rejections of what it was to be working class were steady and broad. In there may lay the reason I found his conversation so intriguing. It was as if familiar trains were arriving but at unfamiliar stations. And so, at last, we have arrived at Bruce Springsteen and his music.

Like his understanding of his working class home, Dave's attachment to the music of Springsteen was quite unusual. He was not a fan and would not be the

sort of music 'lover' who would have a poster of his favourite musician attached to his bedroom wall. He did take pleasure in Springsteen's music and treasured it because of his belief that it had an affinity with working class life. It moved through working class way of life creating what I can only call reassurance. That agent of class emotion was work in a variety of forms. It was there in the 'pulsations of Springsteen's music and it was felt as such by its working class audiences. Dave always stressed the presence of the rhythms of work in Springsteen's music, not in the lyrics of the songs, but in its total musical impetus. He said that working class audiences were drawn to his music because they were loath to stray very far from any form of work. (Music was just one of the ways could present itself.) It was the beat of the working week whose rhythms of work were folded into the music. The audiences would recognise this 'deep' presence of work and reward the musician with a loyalty that could verge on adoration. As Dave would say 'They were not called the working class for nothing.'

## Part 2

For a moment I want to step outside my conversations with Dave and look at some ideas I had concerning music and dress. Watching the male rock musicians of the 1960s and 1970s I remember how intrigued I was by their stage costumes especially how far they had 'drifted' away from the varieties of conventional male dress. Forms of dress that lacked all kinds of restraint and which welcomed a gleeful extravagance ruled their costumes. I was never convinced that what they were wearing was something isolated and *sui generis*. Surely they had a history of sorts. I would often run the 'film' backwards to see if I could catch a glimpse of where these flamboyant kinds of dress had come from. (It is worth noting that Bruce Springsteen never followed the fashions of

his musical peers. When performing he always wore what looked like standard American work gear.)

As the years passed 'origin' became something akin to the 'ghost' of an earlier version of the rock musician's costumes. One of the most persistent of these 'ghost's was the classic Las Vegas costume of Elvis Presley. (The costume was white; it sported a cape, and covered the whole of his body.) A friend has described this costume as camp, which it certainly is, but how is it camp? My idea of camp is something that transforms the functional into the decorative, the ornate or ornamental. In short the non-functional. Looking at Elvis's costume through the lens of camp it certainly would seem to have emerged out of the register of the functional. Even during a performance it carries out the most basic of functional tasks, covering and protection, as well as establishing the sexuality of the performer. The costume is an index of a performer's success, something marked by the degree it has overcome functionality. The presence of camp and sentimentality in so much working class culture – music, dress and film-comes from a love of emotional elevation, but which is loath to divorce itself from its origin. The costume is something appreciated by the audience but is not utterly devoid of the earliest of days. A clearer transformation of dress can be seen in the figure of the 'Rhinestone Cowboy'. Beneath the outer 'decoration' of the wearers dress is a simulation of a functional costume of the Cowboy and beneath this the dress of a Native American Male. All of these 'stages' of dress were the creations of Hollywood designers. Buried deep in Elvis's costume there might be his earliest stage clothes or perhaps, it may be something that draws on the uniforms he wore during his military service. Uniforms would be a style of dress that covered the whole of the wearer's body similar to the Las Vegas costume. Perhaps its

avatar might be industrial overalls. I am still waiting for inspiration to nail the primitive roots of Elvis's costume.

I've tried to do justice to the Dave I used to know and I have treated his contributions to our conversations as ideas that provoked thought about working class life and music. Our parting was both abrupt and unexpected. Neither of us knew that it would bring the curtain down on the conversations. This is for you Dave, wherever you are.