

Klandestine Konversations

Black musician Daryl Davis talks to [Jack Richardson](#) about befriending the KKK and overcoming prejudice

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Born in Chicago, Illinois, in the early 1960s, Daryl Davis is best known as a musician. Torn between computer programming and espionage when it came to boyhood aspirations, he realised that the people (discounting James Bond) he most looked up to were Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. "What I admired about them was the fact they had made millions of people happy all over the world with their music," he recounts. "They had never met most of these people, but had touched them with their music."

Having decided overnight to become a musician, he started learning keyboard by ear, and graduated from university in Washington, D.C. with a degree in Jazz music. Unfortunately, Elvis died just one year after Davis graduated, but he was able to play with The Jordannaires, Elvis' backing singers, on tribute shows. His professional relationship with Chuck Berry came later, and lasted 32 years until Davis' current semi-retirement after decades playing just about every musical style one could imagine.

For most of us, this would be enough reason for Davis' fame, albeit confined to musical circles. There is, however, another side to the man's story. His parents worked for the U.S. State Department, meaning that he travelled all over the world as a child. Combined with his music tours, he says he has visited 53 countries on six continents and played in all but one state in America. One doesn't go through something like that and come out close-minded, and Davis was no exception. He credits his childhood with broadening his horizons and exposing him to many different races, religions and cultures.



Late one night in 1983, he pulled into a truck stop to get some food after a gig and came across a man beating a woman on the pavement. When he tried to pull the man away, he shouted “What the fuck are you looking at, nigger?” A fight ensued, and it was only once Davis started to win that bystanders (“voyeurs” is Davis’ word) called the police. The police seemed unwilling to arrest the man, but were eventually convinced on the evidence of Davis and the woman.

On the day of the man’s court hearing, all became clear. As Davis was picking up the woman who had been attacked to take her to court, she told him that he was her ex-fiancée and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klansman himself had told no-one about him beating the woman, only that he “had a fight with some nigger.” He was arrested, fined, and ordered to pay Davis and the woman damages. This was to be Davis’ first experience with the KKK.

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The Klan has been through three iterations since its original founding in the late 1860s in the Southern United States. They gained greater notoriety in their second active period from 1915 to the mid 1920s, during which time they adopted the infamous white robes and cross-burning practices. They grew significantly in response to the growing civil rights movement of the time, and were responsible for numerous lynchings and mobs, especially targeting African Americans. Nowadays, they exist as a number of groups under the same name. While (it seems) the lynch mobs may have ended and the Klan continues its decline, this is still not a group around whom many people would feel comfortable, especially if they were black.

A few months later would come Davis’ second and far better reported association with the Klan. He was playing in a typically white country music bar which was ironically part of the same company which owned the truck stop. After he had finished playing, a man came up to him and said “This is the first time I’ve ever heard a black man play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis.” Davis has, in fact, played with Lewis, as well as Bill Clinton and many others. He told the man, “Jerry Lee learned to play from black blues and boogie-woogie piano players, and he’s a friend of mine.”

The man was sceptical of both claims. Davis offered to discuss it in more detail, and over a drink the man admitted to being a Klansman. Davis’ reaction was not to insult, as we might at a distance, or get the hell out of that bar, as we might were we in his position, but to talk. “When two enemies are talking, they’re not fighting,” he says. Astoundingly, the two became friends, united by music.



Davis believes that this approach is the best way to combat racism and intolerance. Although he had

experienced racism before, the encounter with organised hate groups was something new. Thinking of his own upbringing, he realised that ignorance was the crux of the issue, so talking directly about what Klansmen thought and why it was wrong would remove that ignorance.

Eight years later, Davis realised he wanted to write a book about racial hatred, using the Klan as a focal point. He turned up to the man's apartment unannounced and, after some persuasion, was able to find out the address and phone number of the head of the KKK in Maryland, Roger Kelly.

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The meeting required significant planning, and not just because of the secretive nature of the organisation. “My secretary called him,” Davis says, “and I told her, ‘do not tell Roger Kelly I’m black. Just tell him I am writing a book on the Klan.’ I wanted her to call because she’s white. I knew enough about the mentality of the Klan that they would never think a white woman would work for a black man. She called him and he didn’t ask what colour I was, so we arranged to meet at a motel.”

Unsurprisingly, the meeting was tense. Kelly brought with him an armed bodyguard, a ‘nighthawk’ in Klan-speak, in military fatigues. Neither of them had expected Davis to be black. Every time Davis reached into his bag to change the tape, the guard reached for his gun. Tensions rose even further when “a loud, strange noise” began to occur. Starting to fear for his life, Davis stood up and slammed his hands on the table.

“When my hands hit the table, my eyes locked with his, and he could read them. We stared into each other’s eyes. The bodyguard was looking back and forth at us, but then my secretary Mary realised what had happened.” A bucket of ice and soda, brought in for refreshment, was shifting as the ice melted. Suddenly, everyone relaxed.

“We all began laughing at how stupid we all had been. In retrospect, it was a very important lesson that was taught,” he says. “All because a foreign entity of which we were ignorant, entered into our comfort zone, we became fearful of each other. The lesson learned is: ignorance breeds fear. If you don’t keep that fear in check, that fear will breed hatred. If you don’t keep hatred in check it will breed destruction.”

His book, *Klan-Destine Relationships: A Black Man’s Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan*, was published in 1998. Now, Davis estimates he has around two dozen KKK uniforms hanging in his closet, given to him by ex-members who changed their views after talking with him. “I never set out to convert any of them,” he says. “I simply engage them in conversation and exchange ideas, opinions and facts. If they are smart enough, they come to the conclusion on their own, that they need to reconsider their ideological position. That’s always better than trying to force your own ideology on someone else.”

He doesn’t only have hoods and robes as trophies. Davis has served as a pallbearer for one Klansman’s funeral and attended the wedding of another. He even has a medallion with the words “KKK – Member in Good Standing” on it. His involvement with hate groups and the Klan in particular may strike some as not only brave but rather ghoulish. Many are rightly astounded that these people are afforded any respect at all, especially by a man they consider fundamentally inferior and violent.

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In reality, Davis believed that “a Klansman or Klanswoman is not stamped out of a standard cookie cutter. They come from all walks of life and have various reasons for joining the organisation.” Some may join out of family tradition; others may feel they need to be a part of the organisation because it seems like the only way to get by in a community. The appalling views are, of course, part and parcel of the Klan’s

identity, but Davis sees this as the manifestation of ignorance and fear, even brainwashing.

He remembers a conversation with a Klansman who said that black people were naturally violent due to their genetic makeup: "I said 'Gary, what are you talking about?' He said 'Who's doing all the shootings?' I said 'let me tell you something, I am as black as anyone you've ever seen and I've never done a drive by or a shooting.'" When he challenged Gary to name three black serial killers, something seemed to click. Davis claimed that maybe white people had a violent gene, and that this claim was just as ridiculous as what had been said about black people. "He was very quiet after that," he remembers, "and I knew it was sinking in."



Donald Trump might not (openly) be in favour of the KKK, but given his words and actions of the last few months, and the fact that KKK leader David Duke has offered his support strike a worrying note. Davis, however, sees Trump's rise as fitting with the current mood of many Americans, and not even totally negative.

Whites are becoming less and less of a majority racial group, going from about 80% in the 1960s when Davis was a child to 66% nowadays. By 2042, it is predicted that America will be 50/50 white and non-white. Add to this tension a black president and white supremacist group membership is on the rise even as the Klan continues to decline. Davis describes how groups aim to legitimise themselves by claiming to fight against illegal immigration, but that this is just code for 'non-whites.' "There are plenty of people here from Canada, the UK and Eastern Europe, who are here illegally, but the KKK is not concerned about these folks," he says. "What I keep hearing from the Klan members and neo-Nazi members I talk to, is, 'I don't want my grandchildren to be brown.' They are very concerned about miscegenation/race mixing."

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Trump provides a focal point for these views, and carries with him the legitimacy of the Republican Party, even if this legitimacy was unwillingly bestowed. After decades of decline, these groups feel emboldened to speak their minds, knowing that they will be tolerated or even mirrored by potentially the most powerful man in the world.

However, Davis believed that there is an upside: “Trump has provided the world as well as a lot of dumb Americans to see this country for what it really is; hypocritical and racist. People are lifting the taboo off the conversation of racism and beginning to speak honestly with each other. This is a great improvement.” Implicit racism, arguably the more dangerous variety, has burst into explicit racism, which is far easier to combat and far harder to turn a blind eye against. People of all races have united against this trend.

The fact that this situation exists at all, however, is proof that there is still much more to be done. While Trump’s rise and Davis’ example certainly help, there remain many who are totally unwilling to talk to those they disagree with.

“A lot of people have anti-racist groups. They get together and meet and have a diverse group and all they do and sit around and talk about how bad discrimination is.” But the problem comes later, Davis says. “Someone says ‘there’s a Klan group across town. Why don’t we invite them to come and talk to us?’ and the other person says ‘Oh no! We don’t want that guy here!’ Well, you’re doing the exact same thing they are. What’s the purpose of meeting with each other when we already agree? Find someone who disagrees and invite them to your table.”



This behaviour, all too common nowadays, stands in the way of progress, and not just for racial equality. The unwillingness of one party to talk to another, even if they think their views are reprehensible, fosters further hostility and mistrust. Just look at the Brexit vote, where Leavers were patronised and insulted by a lacklustre Remain campaign and supporters who were too assured of their victory. Only with honest debate can social divisions truly be solved.

“Invite your enemy to talk,” is Davis’ advice. “Give them a platform to talk because then they will reciprocate. You never know; some small thing you say might give them food for thought, and you will learn from them. Establish dialogue. It’s when the talking stops that the ground becomes fertile for fighting.”



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