
My Favourite People and Me 1978–1988

ALAN DAVIES

MICHAEL JOSEPH

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Contents

Introduction

1978

1979

1980

1981

1982

1983

1984

1985

1986

1987

1988

Thank You

Sources

Appendix

Introduction

Growing up, every year brings new people with attributes to admire or ideas to inspire. Remembering those times and looking back over the heroes and villains of my own younger life led me to consider why I thought the world of such and such a person when now I don't give them a second thought. Which of them were just passing through my world, while I was passing through a phase, and which of them had an influence that was lasting, for better or worse? Soon I started to arrive at a list of my favourite people, not all obviously heroic, just personal icons.

The process of evolving from an unknown figure, through the admirer's first awareness, to icon status can be a rapid one, particularly if the person attributing that status is young, impressionable, and pink with naivety. Before sharing my list I considered researching historical, political, cultural and sporting events to beef up the collection of heroes, to strive for a wider significance. A couple of things undermined the value of detailed research, in my mind.

One was the realization that the significance, to me, of one of the most important events of 1981, the attempted assassination of US president Ronald Reagan, was the recollection of my dad's indifference when I called out to him in the kitchen:

'Reagan's been shot!'

I repeated the shock news and when he came in to look at the television, he said:

'Oh, I thought you meant Regan in *The Sweeney*.'

Of course, John Thaw's character in *The Sweeney* was pronounced Reegan, whereas the president went for Raygun. The point is that anyone's memory of significant events is so couched in the where and when of their own life that there seemed no way of establishing the true influences on me by trawling through old newspapers and history websites. World events connect with individual lives unexpectedly and the connections that matter to me are those that are lodged in my mind still.

1978 was really the year when I started venturing out more, without adults, with other eleven-, twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. The year in which the accumulation of personal heroes accelerated.

1988 was the year I graduated from university to pursue the possibility that stand-up

comedy could be an alternative to finding a job where I'd have to do what I was told,
something I was struggling with at the time. Stand-up would also afford me the chance to continue mimicking heroes well into adulthood and, in fact, might allow the postponement of adulthood altogether.

The second thing that happened that deflated my interest in research was an early attempt at just that. The first port of call for researching anything, now and for the foreseeable future is the infernal interweb, accessed, more often than not, by the mind control device that is Google. I typed 1982 into my Google box and was predictably offered the assistance of the eagerly unreliable and peculiarly selective Wikipedia site. I scrolled down to August 1982 and these were the only six entries:

August 4 – The United Nations Security Council votes to censure Israel because its troops are still in Lebanon.

August 7 – Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Spadolini resigns.

August 12 – Mexico announces it is unable to pay its large foreign debt, triggering a debt crisis that quickly spread throughout Latin America.

August 13 – In Hong Kong, health warnings on cigarette packets are made statutory.

August 17 – The first compact discs (CDs) are released to the public in Germany.

August 20 – Lebanese Civil War: A multinational force lands in Beirut to oversee the PLO withdrawal from Lebanon.

French troops arrive August 21, US Marines August 25.

I'm not suggesting that the break-up of The Jam should have been noted as a world event twenty-six years later but, for me, August 1982 meant going to one of their farewell gigs at Wembley Arena before searching through Camden Market to find a bootleg tape of the gig. I've lost the tape but I still have the poster.

I considered that to be the most important event of August 1982, until there was a knock on my front door only minutes after writing the above paragraph. A package had arrived for me, containing *The Guinness Book of British Hit Singles and Albums* that I'd ordered the day before. I had been looking for my old copy, to check that some song or other had fallen between 1978 and 1988, only to discover that it not only fell apart in my hands, but had been published in 1978.

The new book shows that The Jam charted with *Beat Surrender*, their farewell single, in December 1982. Another search led me to www.thejam.org.uk which shows the farewell gig also to have been in December 1982. It actually shows only one at Wembley when I know (I think I do) that four extra dates were added.

So, I decided on a new policy: fact-checking, a safety net for my addled memory. Rushing

back to Wikipedia, in case I had doubted it unadvisedly, I checked entries for December 1982. Unless you're a regular at Times Beach, Missouri, they are largely forgettable, apart from Marty Feldman dying in Mexico. Oh, and Greenham Common, but more of that later:

December 2 – British comedian and writer Marty Feldman dies in Mexico.

December 3 – A final soil sample is taken from the site of Times Beach, Missouri. It is found to contain 300 times the safe level of dioxin.

December 7 – The first US execution by lethal injection is carried out in Texas.

December 12 – Women's peace protest at Greenham Common: 30,000 women hold hands and form a human chain around the 14.5 km (9 mi) perimeter fence.

December 23 – The United States Environmental Protection Agency recommends the evacuation of Times Beach, Missouri due to dangerous levels of dioxin contamination.

December 26 – *Time Magazine's* Man of the Year is given for the first time to a non-human, the computer.

Scrolling down the page brings you to my favourite entry for 1982. It's the only one in a section for the year marked 'Ongoing' and reads simply:

Cold War.

Some things need to be established before picking through the people who inspired and influenced, initially in my teenage years, and then through four years at university, with all the malnourished frowning with episodes of idealistic ambition (and constipation) that I endured there. I'll rephrase that: the four years of playing pool in the pub (and constipation) that I enjoyed there.

I was born on 6 March 1966 and my star sign is Pisces. Which must mean nothing, surely, as horoscopes are an escapist fantasy, except that I really like fish, I eat it all the time, pollock, haddock, mackerel, all sorts, and I'm Pisces. Unrelated? Surely not.

My top 10 fish

1. Tuna, but we shouldn't eat that because they're dying out. The same goes for
2. Anchovies.
3. Salmon, but, watch out, are they farmed and if so are they getting out, mixing with the wild salmon, and then producing young who can't remember the way upriver to the spawning grounds? Think on.
4. Cod, because, am I right, they use it for taramasalata? Cod roe? Anyway, it's lovely with

chips but it's been overfished, so think on.

5. Haddock. Get a piece from Steve Hatt on the Essex Rd in Islington, or your local fishmonger, whichever is nearest. Then go to the herb rack in your grocery store where they might have a little jar with 'fish' on it. It's a mixture of herbs but primarily dill. Sprinkle liberally on your haddock and grill it for 10–15 minutes. Lush, lush, lush.
6. Trout. Often have that in Italian restaurants. They're good with capers, your Italians. That is to say the capers go on the fish, not on the Italian.
7. Sardines. On toast or with potatoes. Lovely.
8. Monkfish. I didn't realize, they only use the tail. Meaty and thick. Ugliest fish you'll ever see. Poor sod, just looks a mess.
9. Rock. Get this from the chippy. Bit chewier and more flavour.
10. Swordfish. Growing up I imagined swordfish as lethal. They looked so fearsome in pictures, as if they could saw your arm off, but actually they're quite nice for tea, it turns out.

My top 10 fish from the early '70s (by way of comparison)

1. Fish fingers. Cod ones.
2. Fish from the chip shop. Don't know what it was but very likely cod.
3. Boil in the bag cod with parsley sauce.
4. Plaice with chips and peas.
5. Haddock with chips and peas.
6. Prawn cocktail.
7. Tbc.
8. No data.
9. Tba.
10. Goldfish, in a clear bag from the fair but you don't eat them. Also, you don't necessarily flush them when they float on the top of the water. They might not be dead. Sadly we didn't know that in our house in the '70s and several went down the lavatory who may have been alive.

Loughton is in Epping Forest, which straddles the border between Essex and Greater

London. At different times both Boadicea (that's the '70s spelling) and Dick Turpin used the forest to hide out in but nowadays it's on the Central Line. That's the long red one that goes across the middle of the tube map for those of you who have been to London. For those of you who haven't been to London: What are you *doing*? Get your *act* together. Is someone *reading* this to you?

Although London isn't to everyone's taste. I met a woman from Preston once who told me in a broad Lancashire accent, that the trouble with London is:

'It hasn't got any good shops. There isn't really a High Street as such.'

I've no idea where she'd been, she said London but maybe she'd disembarked at Euston, thought Tie Rack and WH Smith a poor show, and gone home. She can't have, though, because she also said:

'There was one place that were good, now what were it called...? Oh yes, TGI Fridays! Have you been?'

I hadn't, even though I like stripes.

'You should go, it's brilliant.'

In 1992 I did a stand-up gig in Preston and The Temptations were playing in the same building. The Temptations! I love them and they were playing the Guildhall, Preston, even though at least two of them were dead. I snuck in next to the mixing desk and watched 1,500 Lancastrians, on their feet, singing that they were doing fine on cloud nine. Joyous.

I was going to say Loughton was boring but that seems harsh. Soporific is fair though; so quiet, and boring.

My mum had died of leukaemia in 1972 so I lived with my dad, elder brother and youngest sister. I seemed to drive the family mental. Every day I looked into the eyes of at least one exasperated relative. The mantra in our house was:

'What are we going to do with you?'

They were The Exasperated. Which would be a good film title perhaps. It brings to mind *The Departed*. Bagsy Mark Wahlberg to play me. Sadly, Adam Woodyatt was more me (that's Ian Beale from *EastEnders*, so you're clear).

I went to Staples Road County Primary, which I liked, particularly because of the surrogate parenting of our twenty-three-year-old teacher, Mrs Thorogood, but in 1976 I started at Bancroft's School in Woodford Green, which was *either*:

a) an old-fashioned English institution that drummed stuffy, outdated pre-war values into

or

b) a Minor Public School with an exceptional exam record and reasonably good personal hygiene in the staff room.

It was both actually, so less ambiguity there than I intimated. No ambiguity about the prefects though. They were tossers.

By 1978 I was cycling everywhere and wanting to go out a lot more, which I was allowed to do a bit, as I was nearly twelve and starting to grow up. This book covers that growing up from 1978 to 1988. It is intended to be a nostalgic trawl with a little anecdotal back-up. An attempt to remember who and what I liked as a boy/youth/idiot and to work out why.

There are also some pictures.

Barry Sheene

In 1978 I collected stickers assiduously, doggedly, obsessively and privately, in a fog of seeking and accumulating. There was a sticker book called *Motorcycle 78* and another called *Football 78* and filling the appropriate space with the appropriate image was satisfying but not a cheap thrill. I was also afflicted with a potent, potentially upsetting, not to mention pricey, emotional attachment to Arsenal Football Club that had taken root early in the decade and by 1978 ought to have been a source of concern for those who ought to have been concerned. But then though I was an eleven-year-old pathological liar and kleptomaniac so why would anyone be concerned?

In 1978 I had joined the Barry Sheene Appreciation Society, the Starsky & Hutch Fan Club and the Arsenal Supporters Club. I was an enthusiastic joiner. I loved having membership cards. I wanted to belong to something, to feel part of a group, a collective. Perhaps, in part this was tribal boy stuff, looking for societies and clubs and gangs. For me though, these were solitary activities. *My things that I liked.* I didn't join to meet people. Deeply ingrained in my siblings and me throughout our growing up was a fear of new people and the perils associated with them, principally of conversation, of having to listen or contribute to it, for a time rarely specified, often with no end in sight. This was a reason to be fearful and we became expert solo players. To this day I have no interest in hooking my games console to the internet. I'll play alone, thank you. Fortunately when you're eleven, so long as it's not too late, or *too far away*, you can go out by yourself and ride your bike by yourself and in doing so you can become Barry Sheene, by yourself.

Barry Sheene raced motorbikes, by himself. He was World Champion, by himself. He was cocky and cool and he'd been smashed to pieces a couple of times in horrific 170 mph accidents so he was held together by screws. He was also good-looking in a dimply, tousled, grinning, disobedient sort of way which appeared to me to be the best way to be good-looking and something to aspire to.

Hurting down our front drive (sloping speckled Tarmac) and out on to Spring Grove, I could career into Mr Newby's front drive (flat crazy-paving) next door before heading back again, which constituted a lap. It was a decent-sized lap as we lived in big houses with big gardens in leafy suburban Loughton, out on the edge of North-east London.

Despite the London proximity, the Central Line station and the 01 phone number, people were generally proudly and resolutely Essex. Chingford, where I was born and spent the first couple of years, was now London E4, though most of its residents would have nothing to do with their new urban postcode. Many of their grandparents had moved out to Chingford for their health, to get away from the smog and grime of London, and the last thing they wanted was for the dirty old town to catch them up.

The poor next-door Newbys. Eventually they must have had a quiet word with my dad about the endless Grand Prix-length repetitious solo bike riding of his second son. Whether they were really bothered about the cycling or the enthusiastic Murray Walker-style commentary that accompanied it is hard to say. They may just have thought I was obsessive lapping the two drives for a very long time and that I was heading for social misfitness (I was) with few friends (none to speak of) and I could do with varying my activities (I would if someone would *buy me a skateboard*).

Well, that's all very well for you to say, Newbys, with your functional relationships and family jaunts up the Matterhorn and suchlike but some of us are going mad with Sheeneitis and there's little else to do at the moment. I'll stop when *Grange Hill* comes on, OK? I have a crush on Tricia Yates, and Tucker Jenkins has enough of Barry Sheene about him to enjoy.

The Newbys were actually very tolerant in the face of repeated incursions into their property, with footballs and cricket balls finding their way over their fence, several slats of which were bashed and cracked. They rarely complained about my scrumping (their crunchy red apples which were nicer than those on any of our three trees. I didn't call it scrumping then, I called it nicking and I thought I was good at it and moved unseen). The most exciting time, though, was when I set off their burglar alarm, with a boomerang that did not so much come back as go next door.

Barry Sheene was, in fact, a double World Champion, in 1976 and 1977, and a national hero. We had a car racing champion in 1976 too, James Hunt, but he was a posh'un and it perhaps said something about you, which of them you preferred. Hunt was a racing driver, which was apparently cool and something to wish to be, without appealing to me, but then i

was also a commonly held belief that all boys wanted to be train drivers, which was not true. I didn't. Why drive something that has to go on someone else's tracks? Especially as the drivers could no longer hang perilously from an open-sided cab like Casey Jones while they were a-steamin'an'a-rollin'.

Hunt had a funny peculiar round-shouldered gait when he competed on *Superstars*, which counted against him. He was also a bit ill-tempered in competition and sounded posh. It was not cool to be well-spoken, like my dad. It was cool to sound working class and a bit cockney, like Barry Sheene. Nowadays, the peculiar mixed-race, hip-hop inspired *patois* of Britain's youth causes mirth and exasperation in equal measure when adopted by adolescents in the bespoke kitchens of Southern England. Similarly, in the '70s, it drove parents mad that their kids wanted to sound like the Artful Dodger and not Oliver.

Sheene also had a beautiful blonde better half called Stephanie (routinely described as a glamour model) who could be seen in photographs looking too good-looking for Pan's People, which is saying *a lot*. Pan's People dancing on *Top of the Pops* was the closest thing to erotica anyone in Loughton could experience. Unless they caught the 20a bus to the Green Man roundabout where the Green Man pub advertised 'Sunday Lunch 'n' Strippers' on a giant blackboard by the road.

Sheene's fame went beyond fans of bikes or even sports. He'd gone household. He featured on the first record I ever bought. The Barron Knights had their own brand of musical spoof. On a record called 'Live in Trouble (Part 1)', they did a version of Brotherhood of Man's 'Angelo', about Ann and Jo, which had the lines:

*Long ago, outside a chip shop in Walthamstow,
Was a young rocker called Greasy Joe.
He put on his helmet and said, 'Let's go.'
He was keen,
Off up the High Street like Barry Sheene,
Doing his best to look very mean,
Till he met Anne on her new machine.*

This was hilarious to me. Though for years I maintained that 'Wig Wam Bam' by Sweet was the first record I ever bought, the truth was that it was bought for me, rather than by me, aged seven. No, the first time I went in to Pop Inn on Loughton High Road with my own pocket money, it was to buy a Barron Knights record. As a hoarder, I still treasure it. It's a

remarkable memorial of what passed for entertainment in the '70s.

Sheene always had a fag on, which I hadn't noticed at ten but had down as cool at eleven. Smoking was ace and I couldn't wait to get started. Outside Loughton tube station was a fag machine. Just sitting there on the pavement. It should have said 'fags for kids' on it. Smoking was difficult. It took commitment and effort. This was primarily because it was rank. It smelled like football grounds while tasting like shoes but I was determined to have my dream look. The cool smoker. This was a sure fire way to impress my peers too, which I was rarely able to do throughout my school-days.

It worked too. The coolest kids in my year *were impressed by my smoking*. That they were work-shy vandals whose principal aim at school was to flob (spit) higher and further than anyone else was unimportant. They were the rebellious, cocky, couldn't-care-less kids and I aspired to their periphery. We had one thing in common: we hated the school and everything in it. Now we had a second thing in common. Fags.

Coming by fags was difficult but I had the 'fags for kids' option which no one else appeared to know about. Fags were great but inhaling was grim and took a while to master. It put me off smoking and I didn't really get the hang of it until 1980 whereupon I smoked for twenty-seven years, with occasional breaks of anything from a week to a year while I attempted to give up. I'm not blaming Barry Sheene or other hero-smokers for my subsequent addiction; after all we always had Mr Baker the PE teacher barking away at us that each cigarette was five minutes off your life. That sounds bad until you point out that each episode of *EastEnders* is thirty minutes off your life. None of us did though, principally because *EastEnders* didn't start until 1985. Still, you definitely had to want to smoke and I did.

To be Barry Sheene meant being immersed in motorcycle racing from birth. Sheene says in his 1976 autobiography (*The Story So Far* – the title said so much) that the day he was born his father phoned a friend to say: 'I've just been presented with the winner of the 1970 TT.' As it was, Barry Sheene never liked racing on the Isle of Man as, ironically for a man with an astonishing history of breakages and metal reinforcement, he felt it was much too dangerous and only rewarded those racers most familiar with the thirty-eight-mile road circuit.

We went as a family to the Isle of Man in the mid-'70s to watch the TT. Motor sport was always an enthusiasm of my dad's. He had a previous life as an amateur rally enthusiast who competed in many events as a navigator (principal requirements: meticulous route planning and an ability to fold maps in the dark). These appeared to have been his most exciting days

and he still has a cabinet full of odd little trophies from rallying. Consequently, we would always have motor sport on TV if there was any being shown and I still remember the excitement when Formula One was first shown in colour, thereby enabling the viewer, at last, to identify the cars.

Motorbikes flying round the streets, hills and mountains of the Isle of Man are terrifically exciting for a boy already in possession of his own race circuit at home. Despite the noise- and adrenaline-fuelled excitement, when we weren't watching the racing I had my nose in Anna Sewell's decidedly non-macho *Black Beauty*, which remained my favourite book until about 1983.

On one occasion we were standing near some racing sidecars. Low-slung powerful machines on which the rider virtually lies face down, with a platform attached to the side that some crazed *volunteer* would roll around on to help cornering. Barmy. A young boy was fiddling with one of the bikes. He looked dirty and mechanicky but was, in reality, about ten. I watched him and he tampered seriously with some moving part for my benefit, looking cool. He then stood up, asked me to mind the machine, and went off. My dad found me (I had a gift for getting lost) and I said I had to stay and look after the bike. He tutted and walked away, with me following, protesting pointlessly. He didn't believe that any racer would leave their prized machine in the hands of a strange nine-year-old. Shows how much he knew.

I felt bad about letting that kid down. It was the closest I ever came to some kind of 'in' with the racing fraternity. But I was hooked; I loved the noise, the speed and the glamour. Despite a crush on Stacy Dorning from the TV series that lasted a decade, I was leaving *Black Beauty* behind; I wanted to be like Barry Sheene.

David Starsky

I also wanted to be like Starsky out of *Starsky & Hutch*. *Starsky & Hutch* was an American cop show set in Los Angeles about two thirty-something detectives who smiled and bantered their way through episodes while effortlessly catching crooks in '70s' three-piece brown suits. This was shown on Saturday nights on BBC1.

The BBC always ran an American cop show on Saturday nights prior to *Match of the Day* and by the time *Starsky & Hutch* came on in the late '70s, I was allowed to stay up and watch. For years there had been shows about serious tough solo cops like *Cannon* and *Kojak* but *Starsky and Hutch* were different. They made policing seem fun as they raced around in a noisy red Ford Torino with a white stripe down the side. This was the best car ever and it was Starsky's. He was the bouncy, funny, dark-haired one who had burgers and shakes on top of the dashboard at all times, particularly prior to a chase. Hutch had a knackered old car which Starsky always rebuked him over. Hutch also liked health food and chastized Starsky over his diet. Ooh, they were a right pair.

Hutch was more contemplative, less mischievous, than Starsky who was forever being insubordinate to their boss, the captain at the precinct, who was unfailingly furious with them both. He was a round angry black man played by the late Bernie Hamilton, who was eighty when he died, which makes the show seem a very long time ago.

The other main character was Huggy Bear, who knew what 'the word on the street' was and without whom the boys would never have caught anyone. Antonio Fargas had a relaxed comic screen presence and a memorable character name that somehow survived his non-resemblance to a bear and his no-hugs acting. He was, by the way, not a pimp, as portrayed in the catastrophic film version of the TV show which, infuriatingly for devotees, changed the characters around and made Starsky the serious one. What rot. He was a maverick and so he should always be

I was devoted to Starsky and Hutch and I knew everything there was to know about them through the *Starsky & Hutch* Fan Club. What personal details would anyone want to obscure from the viewers? Everything that mattered was clearly going to be in the fan club literature. I knew, for example, that in reality it was tall, blond and handsome David Soul, who played Detective Ken Hutchinson, who actually liked burgers and Paul Michael Glaser, who played

Dave Starsky, who was the health foodie in real life. Isn't that ironic? *I remember that. I did not look that up.*

There was an occasional official mini A5-size magazine and unofficial (whatever that means...) magazine/poster publications were very popular then too. A normal-looking magazine would open out into a huge poster with sixteen pages of articles and photographs on the back. One of those devoted to your favourite TV show or band was worth spending your pocket money on. I had two Starsky and Hutch posters. 25p each. My dad couldn't understand the extravagance. On one occasion he absolutely thrilled me by pulling a Starsky and Hutch magazine from his briefcase when he came home from work. Later that same evening he wrote down the cost of it (30p) in his daily cash book. Money was the most important thing in the world.

For me, TV was the most important thing in the world. We weren't a literary house, an artistic house or a musical house. We were a TV house. It was never off. When me and my brother and sister sat down to have our tea, our TV on wheels was pulled up to the table as it was a fourth sibling. This meant we didn't have to talk. It meant *Grange Hill*, *Boss Cat*, *Wacky Races*, and *Rentaghost* over our fish fingers.

One evening I was sitting on my own watching *Coronation Street* (one of the best sitcoms on telly in the late '70s) when Vera Duckworth tucked her fag in her mouth, thereby freeing her hands, so she could Blu-Tac a poster of Starsky and Hutch on her wall, with a few amusing suggestive remarks to her watching friend. The penny dropped that *ladies* had Starsky and Hutch on the wall, ladies like Vera Duckworth. I recall feeling that Vera and I should not have the same posters.

I didn't fancy Starsky and Hutch, did I? I joined the fan club. I had shop-lifted an *I'm a Starsky & Hutch fan* sticker for my school briefcase (yes, a briefcase. My dad bought it for me). On the first day it only had a recorder in it. I covered it in Mr Men stickers from packets of Ricicles and in time it was replaced with the obligatory Adidas bag). No, I wasn't in love with Starsky and Hutch, well, not madly. I idolized them, certainly. They were funny and laid-back as well as tough and good-looking. These were all attributes that seemed immensely desirable. So much so that I began to imitate Starsky. I'm hopeful that this behaviour went unnoticed by my peers. It involved a slight swagger, a rolling gait to affect casual self-assurance, something no twelve-year-old has (self-assurance that is; there are many gaits on show among boys expanding, hormonally and otherwise, into puberty).

I carried a toy revolver stuffed down my back into the waistband of my school trousers.

That was where Starsky kept his gun. Hutch went for the shoulder holster but Starsky just shoved his gun down the crack of his bum. What if it went off when he sat down? He could shoot his nuts off. Or maybe one of them anyway, unless they were squashed together, and he did wear tight jeans, made tighter still by the gun expanding the waistband.

I only had a cap gun, which rarely had caps in anyway, since caps were something that I found difficult to make last, so my nuts were safe. Indeed, they may not have dropped yet; my genitals had been making slow progress, which our family doctor put down to junior Y-fronts. I was able to hold my dad responsible as he bought the pants in our house and his were massive after all. I didn't say anything, too embarrassing.

I never pulled the gun out at school, or wore it if we had PE and I'd have to get changed. It just sat there secretly and allowed me to fantasize about being a cool American. America was an obsession for everyone who liked telly, since Americans were never off the telly, in cop shows, films, cartoons and sitcoms. They had a seductive, hypnotic effect on England that perhaps lingered from the GI invasion of the early '40s and grew as cinema and then television took hold. Everything they did was so much more informal, loose, their conversation an appealing mix of colloquialism and grammatical shortcuts that washed through stuffy old English. They didn't say: 'Do you know, I think I'll have a glass of water?' They said: 'I guess I'll be a-partaking in a little ol' drink of somethin' right now an' hell if water ain't such a dreadful notion.'

Even more than us kids, our parents were smitten with American film stars and were forever saying things like 'Here's lookin' at you, kid', 'Get off your horse and drink your milk' or 'You dirty rat' in strange mutilated RP accents unrecognizable as either English or American. America was cool and we all wanted to go there.

American guys were good hero fodder too. In England we did have *The New Avengers*, enjoyable for the startling beauty of Joanna Lumley as Purdey, racing about in a yellow TR7. We also had *The Professionals* throwing disillusioned 'birds' out of Capris, unable to explain why, as they went off on a secret mission with the butler from *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Then there was *Blake's 7*, *Dr Who*, who was a weirdo, Dr Weirdo in fact, or *The Sweeney*, but that seemed like a lot of whisky and cigarettes even for a budding smoker, plus they were on late on a school night.

In fact it was a depiction of American school life that really delighted England in 1978. I

went to see *Grease* five times. I've never been to see a film in the cinema more than once before or since. Some would have you believe that punk and new wave were the big thing that year but, out in suburbia and all over the country, people were mad for Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta. Some time later the American *Mad* magazine, which ran strip cartoon spoofs of films, ran a *Grease* strip which culminated in Olivia Newton-John's Sandy character deciding that, in order to get her man, she would become a 'SLUT!' with the tagline 'What a great message for the youth of America!'

We were oblivious to the negative imagery. She looked great in her skin-tight strides. We lapped up *Grease* and everything American (the Australian actress included). Terry Wogan talked about *Dallas* so much to his 400 million listeners that you had to watch the show to enjoy his radio show. So we did. There were Westerns on every weekend and American cartoons like *Scooby-Doo*, *Dastardly and Muttley in Their Flying Machines* and *The Flintstones*. All of it seemed cooler, less constrained and restrained and no one wanted to go to their own hideous school when the fantasy world of Rydell High was there at the Woodford ABC.

At that time songs went to number one in the charts for two to three weeks if they were lucky. You did well if you had a number two or three. In fact anything in the top ten was a big hit. 'The One That You Want' was at number one for nine weeks. Unheard of. They followed that up with 'Summer Nights' for seven weeks. A total of getting on for four months at the top of the charts. Virtually every other song in the film charted too. It was cultural carpet bombing.

Boys wanted to be T-Birds and girls Pink Ladies even though, collectively, they were as thick as a cart of planks. Within a year I was thirteen and may have denied ever seeing *Grease* at all but for a little while I couldn't get enough of it.

The first time I went was with some friends from school. As we jostled on to the bus, I pressed the ticket button on the driver's machine. It was on the passenger's side as you stood in front of him and he used to reach over with his fingers and strike it a glancing blow. I put my 10p down and hit the button. He gave me my ticket and my 10p back and threw me off the bus. Obviously none of my mates would wait with me for the next one so I turned up at the cinema on my own. At the end of the film, when the lights came up, I realized I'd been sitting just a few rows away from my mates. I walked out with them but didn't say much. I thought Danny Zuko and Kenickie were the coolest people in the world and I was posturing, acting tough, in an effort to mimic them. Ironic really, given how effeminate John Travolta

was in the film. One of my mates said, 'What's wrong with you?' and that was the end of that.

We also went to see *Grease* as a family. I was confused by the scene where Rizzo is concerned she has skipped a period. It seemed important in the context of the film but why would she care about missing a period? She was the coolest, toughest chick in the school; she surely missed lessons all the time? I whispered to my dad:

'Does that mean she's missed a lesson?' I could tell he didn't like the question, even though it was dark.

'No, that was a very rude joke indeed.'

Joke? Rude joke? What did he mean? I could see my brother on the other side of him wearing a patronizing smirk and the rage bubbled up in me a little. If he wasn't to have one up on me I'd have to bluff:

'Oh yes, yes. I knew that.'

'No you didn't,' he muttered.

Periods. Damn. What are they? I think I worked it out on about the fifth viewing. But I never spotted the rude joke.

I liked Travolta but there was something a little squeaky-creepy about him. I was more of a Kenickie man myself. In the same way I preferred Han Solo to Luke Skywalker or the Artful Dodger to Oliver. I was never going to be the squeaky clean hero in the 'what are we going to do with you?' world I grew up in, so I never went for the hero, I always liked the jokey one with a short-term view and possibly too-small underpants.

I liked Starsky and I carried on liking him even by the third series when the leading actor took a stand on reducing the violence in the show. This had some consequences when a person was shot. After shooting someone, Starsky would slump against a wall while Hutch ran up and said: 'Are you OK?' Starsky would mumble some kind of assent while trying to shake off his feelings and get on with The Job. Hutch would slap him comfortingly on the shoulder and check he was not in need of a proper cuddle, before leaving him to have 'a moment'.

This emotional content would irritate my dad and my brother, as the bleeding heart, wet-blanket stars flopped around the screen when there were perfectly good anonymous victims to track down and waste (as they always said in those days, rather than the ubiquitous 'clip' of the new millennium).

I didn't mind the 'taking a moment' scenes; after all, over on my sister's favourite show, Charlie's Angels, a similar outbreak of resistance to the glamourizing of violence had led to the Angels having a full sob-off every time they wasted/clipped a villain. I never liked Starsky because of his killing prowess, I liked him for his *personality* and that's where I parted company with Vera Duckworth too.

Pat Jennings

Much of my early '70s had been spent running around the garden playing football, often with my brother. The rest of the time, when not reading Enid Blyton books, I watched television, which provided most of my favourite people. Some sporting heroes, though, I had seen in the flesh since my dad was keen on sport. We used to go to White Hart Lane to see 'The Spurs', as he called them, because that was his team. Quite often we saw their reserve games, as there were fewer people and you could get kids in for free if you could carry them through the turnstile. Inside, the seats were wooden and didn't flip back up after you'd sat in them so after games, I would walk up and down the rows putting seats back in place for as long as my dad could stand to wait.

Playing in goal for Tottenham Hotspur in the '70s was a big Northern Irishman who could leap out and take crosses one-handed. He had astonishing reflexes, an ice-cool temperament and the ability to stop goal-bound shots with any part of his anatomy, his legs as often as his hands. He was unassuming and heroic but in the main he had massive shovel-like paws, remarkable things, like an unevolved larger primate, and Spurs fans never tired of telling you he was THE BEST GOALKEEPER IN THE WORLD.

As I became more of an Arsenal fan, the pressure exerted by my brother's campaign at school, to deny my being related to him, forced me to re-evaluate my relationship with The Spurs. The campaign was unsubtle but effective. Kids from my brother's year would point at me and ask him: 'Is he your brother?' and he'd say: 'No.' My opinion was sought but he just told them I was lying if I said yes. I wish I'd got my own 'no' in first, just to throw him. The truth came out of course but he kept up the pressure by ignoring me. This was wearing and I began to take against Tottenham in response.

I decided then that Jennings wasn't the best, that Peter Shilton was. Except he wasn't because he let one in under his body and England didn't qualify for the '74 World Cup and as for Ray Clemence, he never had to make any saves since Liverpool were too good and Gordon Banks didn't play any more because of his car crash and losing an eye and Dino Zoff was Italian and, drat, maybe Jennings *was* the best.

Without him Spurs would certainly have been relegated to Division Two in 1976 when he was voted the Players' Player of the Year. The following year even he couldn't keep them up

and they, remarkably, decided he had to be moved on. For a bargain transfer fee of £40,000 he moved to Arsenal, where he played for eight more years and over 300 games. More importantly, Arsenal had the best goalie in the world and Spurs fans couldn't deny it.

Fortunately, for me, I had already eschewed Tottenham Hotspur in favour of Arsenal before I ever went to White Hart Lane. This was the single best idea I had in the first forty years of my life. There is no single moment that could have gone so badly wrong as the moment, in 1971, when I chose Arsenal. What a terrifyingly close near-slip into a pit of bitterness and despair, of false dawns, anger and continual, second-best disappointment. To have never had the joys of Arsenal heroes like Liam Brady and David Rocastle. It was them or Glenn Hoddle. Even though he was from Essex and I knew where his house was (Harlow) and once looked over his wall (he wasn't in) it makes me anxious to think I even considered Spurs. That was a Great Escape of mythological proportions, a turn-to-stone, don't-look-back-or-someone's-a-pillar-of-salt moment. For Spurs are truly, shamefully, terrible and Arsenal are the custodians of human decency in a world of lies.

I had decided on an Arsenal shirt, given the choice by my mum in 1971. I was keen to have a shirt but equally keen not to have the same one as my brother. Actually, it may have been that *he* wanted me in a different-coloured shirt, which is ironic given he's a lifelong Spurs fan like my dad. Thankfully, he said: 'Why don't you have an Arsenal shirt? They're top of the league.'

Not exactly recruiting for Spurs there but perhaps he had no idea of the rivalry. Arsenal were League Champions in 1971, which must have registered with him, even though he was only seven. I was shown the shirt and I liked it. I still have it. I was asked what number I wanted on the back. Did I want number 9 for John Radford because he gets all the goals? No. I wanted to know who the captain was. It was Frank McLintock, who wore number 5. My mum sewed it on to the back of the shirt and a club badge with a cannon on to the front. The badge faded to pink while the shirt itself stayed red and the number 5 fell off years ago but the shirt is something I'd consider rescuing in a fire. I remember odd little things about my mum but that shirt-choosing moment, for me, was her finest hour.

After that I'd be taken to the occasional game at Highbury, the home of Arsenal. The first being a 1-0 defeat by Stoke in August 1971. I spent much of the game kneeling on my seat facing the wrong way staring at a fat man with a large, livid purple birthmark on his face. It was a revulsion-fascination for me. I'm surprised he didn't tell me to stop staring. I'd never

seen so many people but I remember liking it, especially the smell, which I couldn't identify (it was cigarettes, thousands of them).

After that most of my trips to Highbury came in early March as my birthday treat. I still remember a game v Sheffield United three days before my sixth birthday in 1972. Arsenal won 3–2 and it was fantastically exciting. There was even a goal as we were getting up to leave early and beat the traffic. Charlie George scored twice but I don't remember that, I only really remember Alan Woodward of Sheffield United because he had grey hair, which made him stand out, and he was called Alan, which meant he was good, obviously.

Towards the end of the 1977–78 season I had the urge to go more often. Arsenal had the makings of a good team, with Jennings the senior man amongst six Irishmen. I read in the match programme that the Irish boys loved to play tapes of The Dubliners on the team bus for a sing-a-long. It was only in later years that I realized what a living hell that must have been for the four Englishman and one Scot who made up the rest of the side. Terry Neill, the manager, was Irish as well, so what could they do?

I was old enough now that my dad wouldn't have to trek in with me, provided my brother could be persuaded to go. He really hated Arsenal so it was a little surprising that he agreed but then I had been to White Hart Lane many times, so it was fair. Maybe he wanted a glimpse of the superhero in goal. I managed to get to three or four games with my unsmiling sibling. Arsenal won them all, which only made him grumpier, and they scored pots of goals. Previously, when we were going to Highbury in the '70s, they were as likely to lose as to win but now they were on fire and they reached the FA Cup semi-final v Orient, who were the nearest club to us in Loughton, doomed to be everyone's second-best team.

I felt part of things, having seen Arsenal's 4–1 fifth round win over Walsall. They beat Orient 3–0 at Stamford Bridge with a goal from a budding hero, Graham Rix, and two bagged by Malcolm 'Supermac' Macdonald, which were both deflected into the net by Orient players with the original shots heading for Fulham Broadway rather than the goal. Supermac was as straight-faced as he had been after another goal I saw him score at Highbury, when he claimed a hat-trick in a 4–0 win v West Bromwich Albion even though their left back, Derek Statham, claimed he'd booted one of them into his own net. Admirable in a way, embarrassing in another. Supermac's autobiography was called *Never Afraid to Miss*. I once saw a picture of him in an Arsenal programme, boarding the coach to go to a game, and he was wearing a pale-blue pinstripe three-piece suit. He looked the confident type. He was

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