

Meeting Bowie

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My first meaningful exposure to David Bowie's music was in 1975 when at the age of 10, I became transfixed with glee every time Fame played over the car radio or stereo speakers. I had the benefit of having three older sisters who's love for music provided my budding eyes and ears with easy access to a bountiful selection of records and music magazines (Creem and Circus, anyone?) But it was seeing Bowie perform on Saturday Night Live in 1979 that really knocked me out of my Buster Brown shoes and bell-bottomed, red corduroys. David wore a dress and was accompanied onstage by backup singers in drag (Klaus Nomi and Joey Arias) moving like robots in and out of sync with one another and the music. In the middle of the stage stood a pink, stuffed toy poodle with a mini- television clutched in its teeth, broadcasting the performance in real time. The band played Man who Sold the World, TVC 15 and Boys Keep Swinging. During Boys Keep Swinging, Bowie's body was superimposed with a marionette, an odd TV trick which, in contrast to his over-sized head and the mimed movements of the puppet, gave the scene a truly creepy feel. The whole thing was incredibly bizarre, surreal and completely enthralling. In the coming weeks and months, I would spend any and all cash that I could muster buying Bowie records, old and new. My indoctrination to his musical genius had begun. Little did I know then, that one day I would have the incredible honor to meet the man...

When you are employed at Zabar's on Manhattan's Upper West Side, crossing paths with celebrities becomes a commonplace occurrence. Over a decade in the nineties, I brushed elbows with the likes of Paul Simon, Art Garfunkel, James Taylor, Tracey Ullman, Geena Davis, Tony Randall, Robin Williams, Bruce Willis, Cindy Crawford, Tom Hanks, Cindy Lauper, Meg Ryan, Meat Loaf, Mary Lou Henner, Laurence Fishburne, Woody Allen, Tiny Tim, Rupert Holmes, Randy Travis, Jane Pauley, Diane Sawyer, Lauren Bacall, Lauren Hutton, Carol King and more. With a few exceptions, I was perfectly content to have little or no interaction with these individuals, outside of brief observation from a comfortable distance. Once in a while I sought out autographs for friends of mine who were fans. James Taylor graciously wrote a nice note for my friend Alice, never mind that his arm was in a cast from thumb to elbow. Robin Williams delightedly signed a paper bag: 'Dear Lisa, don't kill him – he got the autograph,' after I had indicated that Lisa would indeed kill me if I didn't ask for it. But for the most part, I didn't want to bother anybody – so it was a stretch for me to pursue attention or time from these individuals, who most assuredly just wanted to do their shopping and be left alone.

The paramount exception to all of these encounters was when I had the great fortune to meet and talk to David Bowie. It would not have been possible without the efforts of my good friend, Mr. Scott Goldshine, Zabar's General Manager. Scott and I became fast friends after we realized that we shared common musical interests. He was an uber-fan of all kinds of music, and sought it out with a voracious appetite, buying more CD's every week that he could ever keep up with listening to. His apartment was literally overflowing with prodigious volumes of discs – so much so that practically all the furniture throughout the place was cleverly outfitted to either display CD's or serve as cabinets to house them. Scott was also a huge supporter of the band I was in at the time, and as it happened we had recently completed our first CD recording, pressed to disc, packaged and ready for distribution to a waiting world. Scott was always looking for ways to promote us, and via the position he held and the numerous potential contacts that came through the door, he had the means to do so.

The evening I met David Bowie was not unlike any other: I was working in the back food-prep area, cleaning up and getting ready to go home. I heard my name over the intercom – it was Scott, his voice tinged with a devious tone which I had grown accustomed to over the years. I picked up the phone and he instructed me to come to the front of the store with a copy of the new CD. When I arrived there I could tell by the smile on his face that there was something up – and that something was going to be good.

When Zabar's locks its doors for the day at 7:30pm, the sidewalks of the Upper West Side are normally still bristling with customers, often in full sprint to the entrance before Scott turns the key and waves away those arriving a moment too late. He was particularly vigilant about closing time. When half past seven struck, the double doors of the entrance were shut and bolted no matter who may have been in the process of trying to get through them. Over the years I had seen him close these doors with no exceptions, on surprised and defeated faces, and not reopen them; no excuse, no pleading cries of 'I only need one thing!' no tales of how far one may have traveled to get there, no manner of imploring whatsoever changed the fact that once the door was bolted – entrance to the store was prohibited, denied, out of the question, until the next morning. On one occasion I happened to accompany him to the doorway and watched as he shut and locked it in the face of then comedian, Al Franken. Mr. Franken paused, looked at me through the glass and remained standing there - miffed and perplexed. I turned to Scott who was already walking away.

"You just shut the door on Al Franken!" I shouted.

Scott casually waved his hand in the air and replied: "Al Franken, the comedian? So what,

he's not fucking funny."

I turned back to Al, still standing there, and shrugged my shoulders. Scott had worked at Zabar's his entire life - since a teenager. He was unfazed by celebrity.

But on this particular rainy night in Manhattan at 7:30pm as Scott turned the key in the door - he recognized a face approaching through the glass that made him turn the key back, perhaps for the first time ever. It was David Bowie - arm in arm with his stunning wife, Iman. The bolt was thrown as the couple was approaching - and after a momentary pause - Scott reversed the action and allowed the two to enter. He made certain they realized what had just taken place. It was a subtle, but meaningful gesture.

When I reached the front, Scott took the CD from me, then grabbed my arm and led me across the main floor of the store. His head turned from side to side, searching, as he indicated that there was currently someone in the store that he was sure I would be most interested in meeting.

And with that - I recognized and slowly approached David Bowie as he was looking over a vast selection of coffee beans. Iman was off in another part of the store, no doubt in an effort to complete their shopping in the short time allotted to them.

David was wearing an auburn trench-coat, wet from the rain, and a black scarf. His blonde hair fell about his face as he looked our way - and though I'm not at all sure how tall he is, he seemed to tower over the two of us as we stood in front of him.

Scott managed the introduction with a smile.

"Mr. Bowie, as you saw, the store was closed prior to your arrival. I made an exception for you, one which I rarely, if ever make. In lieu of that, I was wondering if you might consider a small favor in return."

It was a bold play on Scott's part, but not out of line with his character. The look on Bowie's face was classic; a mix of unshakable ease, uncertainty and mild amusement.

"Oh, dear," he said, the unmistakable voice like a velvet lather, filling the space between us. "You're not going to ask me to sing, are you?"

Scott held out the CD and tilted his head toward me.

"My friend, Joe here is a musician - and I'm certain he would like nothing more than for

you have this. Will you listen to it?”

“Well, goodness. That’s easy enough.” David put down his basket of groceries, took the CD and looked it over, front and back, then up at me. I reached out my hand and shook his. We exchanged pleasantries and spoke for a few moments during which I’m certain I effused about his greatness like a schoolgirl. It was all happening so fast, but after those first few foggy moments – I remembered to breathe and thought to myself that an autograph from Mr. Bowie would indeed be one I would treasure.

At the time I was reading a book called ‘All You Need to Know about the Music Business,’ by Donald Passman. Mr. David Bowie waited patiently in the coffee section of the store, while I fetched the book from the back room. I asked if he had any objection to signing my copy. When he read the title he raised his eyebrows, scrutinizing it cover to cover as if unsure whether or not this was something he wanted to grace with his pen. I can’t say I blame him. I was simply looking for something outside of a shopping bag for him to sign. A book I knew would stay safely tucked away in my possession for years to come. And in some way, it was completely apropos for a man who knew as much as anyone on planet earth about the music business to be signing a book on the subject.

“Who is the author?” he muttered to himself, looking at the cover once more. “Passman eh? Hmmf. Very well then.”

As he put his pen to the page I relished with delight the final moments of being in the presence of a such a tremendous musical persona. We parted in what were mere minutes that seemed like only seconds. I watched him tuck the CD into his jacket pocket and gave him a final salute of gracious thanks for his time. Where the CD ended up beyond that moment in time – I cared not. To me – it left the store in the possession of Mr. David Bowie, certainly something to write home about. And so I did.