

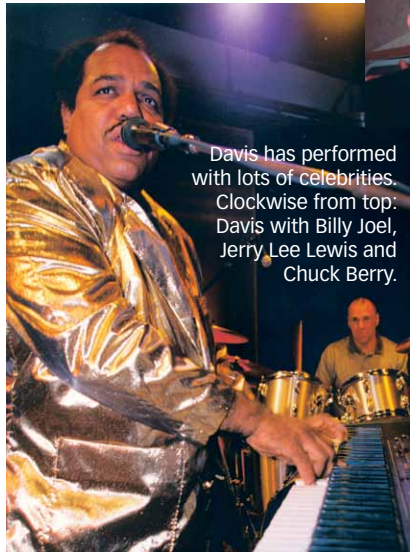
DOES DARYL DAVIS HOLD THE KEY TO RACIAL HARMONY?

BY MIKE GRUSS

THE SILVER SPRING
MUSICIAN SAYS
THAT BY GETTING TO
KNOW MEMBERS OF
THE KU KLUX KLAN
AND LETTING THEM
GET TO KNOW HIM,
HE'S FOSTERING
MUTUAL RESPECT AND
UNDERSTANDING.
IT'S A SIMPLE IDEA.
MAYBE TOO SIMPLE.



Musician and author Daryl Davis holds one of the hoods that he says was given to him by former Ku Klux Klan members.



Davis has performed with lots of celebrities. Clockwise from top: Davis with Billy Joel, Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry.



DARYL DAVIS IS A SHOWMAN.

On this Saturday night at The Birchmere in Alexandria, four white men in black shirts and black pants saunter onto the stage. Then Davis, a 55-year-old African-American wearing a gold shirt and black jeans with a cellphone attached to his belt, takes his place in the spotlight.

He opens with a showman's query: "What do you people want to hear?"

The audience shouts the names of 1960s rock 'n' roll favorites, and the band kicks off a series of twangy, boogie-woogie songs. Davis plays in the flamboyant style of Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard, sometimes chopping the keys karate-style and grimacing as if the music pains him.

Though Davis lives across the state line in Silver Spring, he addresses the crowd as if he were performing in another country. "Every time I play Northern Virginia, y'all call it rockabilly," he says late in the set. He describes the genre by naming Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. He talks about the same music being referred to as rock 'n' roll, but played by Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry.

It would be easy to parse this explanation by race. Presley and Holly, both white, fall under one set of rules. Diddley and Berry, both black, under another. But before the audience can think too hard about it, before they can tell if the speech is the setup for a joke or part of a larger point about how artists are viewed based on the color of their skin, Davis moves on.

"In Chicago," he says, "we call this the boogie-woogie."

And that may be one of the least polarizing things Daryl Davis has to say about race.

When he appears on television, whether it's *The Geraldo Rivera Show* or National Geographic or CNN, Daryl Davis' own history rarely comes up. The hosts don't really want to know who he is or where he comes from; they want sound bites.

Davis provides them.

The subject of a 75-minute documentary scheduled for release early this year, he has become a media-friendly outlier when it comes to the über-touchy topic of race in America. He alternately is regarded as a role model in a post-racial society—and as a publicity hound who has put his own interests above the African-American community by ignoring a not-so-distant struggle.

The fact that he has played with some of the country's most revered musicians, well, that only adds to the allure.

Davis is a gifted keyboard player and bandleader. He has the kind of enviable talent that has attracted audiences, though never the fame of a Little Richard or a Chuck Berry. But Davis believes his true gift is this: He wants to be seen as a catalyst in resolving race relations in America. He is a black man with friends in the Klan.

And now we come to the background that Davis says helps explain his views. Davis' parents worked for the Foreign Service. He describes the international schools he attended as "a little U.N.," with Italians, Germans and Nigerians.

In 1968, when he was 10 years old and living in Belmont, Mass., he was one of two black students in his school. During a parade that spring, as Boston seethed with tension over civil rights, he marched in his Cub Scout uniform from Lexington to Concord. Onlookers pelted him with rocks and debris and bottles, he says.

Davis didn't understand why. "My first thought was they didn't like the Scouts." His parents told him it was because of his race.

Six years later, while Davis was attending Rockville's Thomas S. Wootton High School, Matt Koehl, then the head of the American Nazi Party, came to speak to his class. Koehl pointed at Davis, one of two black students in the room, and told him, "We're going to ship you back to Africa."

Another student asked: "What if they don't go?"

"They will be exterminated in the upcoming race war," Koehl said.

Afterward, Davis started reading everything he could about hate groups, and today he claims to have read every book written about the Ku Klux Klan. The confrontation stuck with him like a song he couldn't get out of his head. And rather than ignore it, he plays the refrain over and over again.

How can they hate me when they don't even know me?

In the early days of rock 'n' roll, Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry played to segregated crowds. Davis was too young to witness the concerts firsthand, but the photos intrigued him.



Music "brought people together. I like that," says Davis, pictured here at home in Silver Spring.

family room, a Who's Who of '60s and '70s musicians. There's Ted Nugent and rock and doo-wop groups such as The Platters and The Coasters. There are his idols, Presley and Berry. Over the past 30 years, Davis has played with Berry and with Little Richard and even with Bill Clinton on sax.

But as Davis backed some of music's biggest names, he continued to untangle the question of race. The story Davis likes to repeat most often is about a gig at the Silver Dollar Lounge, a truck stop in Frederick, where a white man told him he played like Jerry Lee Lewis. The man said he'd never seen a black man play like that.

Baffled, Davis asked the stranger if he knew who taught Lewis how to play. The man did not.

A black man, Davis said. (Lewis told him so, he says.)

The two kept talking, a friendly conversation about the roots of rock 'n' roll and blues and boogie-woogie, and eventually the man mentioned that he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. And this is where the story should end. This is where others would have walked or run away, where they would have ended the conversation, gracefully sidestepping the ignorant.

Instead, the two exchanged phone numbers.

"If I had a gig, I'd call him and he'd come out," Davis says.

The man would bring his Klan friends. Later, Davis hung out with them. He listened. He treated them with respect. Sometimes he knew the history and meaning of the Klan traditions better than they did. He operated on the principle that people who have a coffee or a beer together create a shared experience.

"I have issues with their beliefs," Davis says, "but I realize I'm a good influence on people."

Davis' wife of six years, Brenda, calls her husband a "human magnet."

"I admire him for what he does," she says. "Has it taken some getting used to? Yes."

Brenda, who is white and from Luray, Va., says she has seen a change in her

"Black kids and white kids would bounce up out of their seats, knock down the ropes and start dancing and boogying in the aisles together," Davis said in a 2011 interview with *Amerika.org*, a site for the self-described New Right. "This had never happened before."

Those images became an inspiration.

"I wanted to do that. I wanted to make people happy," he says. Music "brought people together. I like that."

It's not much of a stretch, he adds, to apply the same idea to race relations. Music depends on harmony and dissonance. Dissonance, Davis says, should only be used to create a certain mood. As he explains this, he stands up from

a couch and plays an ominous coupling of notes on the piano that dominates his family room.

But harmony is different, he says. It does not come naturally. "You learn to play harmony," he says.

About the same time as his encounter with Koehl, Davis taught himself to play piano. He attended Howard University on a music scholarship, graduating in 1980 and going on to meet as many musicians as he could, taking gigs as a session player or leading a band or backing national artists. "Music became my profession," he says, "but the whole time my obsession was racism."

Dozens of photos line the wall in his



Davis at a KKK rally

DAVIS STARTED READING EVERYTHING HE COULD ABOUT HATE GROUPS, AND TODAY HE CLAIMS TO HAVE READ EVERY BOOK WRITTEN ABOUT THE KU KLUX KLAN.

own friends, some of whom originally disapproved of her dating a black man but have rethought their positions.

Out of human kindness or something less easily defined, Daryl Davis says he convinces racists not to hate him. Some figure if Davis isn't so bad, maybe other black people aren't, either. Heck, maybe they'll even quit the Klan. And maybe one day, Davis says, the Klan will simply disappear.

Some might view that as positive thinking; others might call it unrealistic. To Davis, it hardly matters. Today he claims to be friends with more than a dozen current or former Klan members. And that's why he has been on *Geraldo* in the '90s and on *Jenny Jones* and on CNN, where one anchor deemed him "strange indeed" for attempting to bridge the impossibly wide chasm between himself and the Klan.

Lest anyone doubt his results, on a Sunday morning this past September, he goes to his closet and brings out a small, black traveling bag, the kind you would pack for a short weekend away, and pulls out the white robes, the ones he doesn't keep locked up off-site, the ones he says friends gave him after quitting the Klan.

Harmony does not come naturally.

In 1997, Davis wrote about these interactions in *Klan-Destine Relationships: A Black Man's Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan* (New Horizon Press). Readers online praised the book for its honesty. *Kirkus Reviews* described it as a "futile and pointless volume."

"The dual dangers of this book are that some readers will find tacit support for their beliefs that blacks are easily led," the reviewer wrote, "and others

will view the Klan as 'not all that bad' and perhaps join where they otherwise might not have."

Davis says NAACP leaders have criticized him, as well, though neither the national chapter nor the Montgomery County chapter returned calls to confirm that.

In 2007, administrators at Longwood University, a rural Virginia school where the student population is 85 percent white, made the book required reading for incoming freshmen. Other colleges have invited him to speak. Among them: Cleveland State University, Penn State University and Carleton College in Minnesota. More than 15 years after the book's release, Davis lectures as many as 50 times a year even as he plays about 200 gigs, from private shows to Kentucky blues festivals to opening for blues guitarist and singer Buddy Guy. And early this year, Figura Media will release a documentary about him called *The Daryl Davis Project*.

Amid all this attention, some question Davis' intentions. Others doubt the depths of the Klan members' conversions.

Davis has heard the criticisms. *This must be some kind of publicity stunt. He's not an academic, so where does he get off claiming he knows something about the Klan that others don't.* He says African-Americans who criticize him for befriending the Klan are essentially taking the same hate-based position they despise: They're labeling him before they've even listened to him.

Davis makes his case by playing a DVD. The first clip, from *The Geraldo Rivera Show* nearly 20 years ago, features Klan members and their children. It's typical talk-show tawdriness, and Davis was in the audience that day. Years later, according to Davis, he called one of the Klan

women who appeared on the show and offered to drive her to visit her husband in prison. The next clip, public television footage filmed five years after her appearance on *Geraldo*, shows both the woman and her daughter renouncing the Klan at a public ceremony for Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Silver Spring. They hug Davis and tell the crowd they love him.

In another video, one that aired last summer on the National Geographic Channel series *Taboo*, a former Klan leader named Don sits at Davis' dining room table. The two sip bottled water and talk about a Klan event in Missouri that the show paid Davis to attend. Don talks about how his friendship with Davis has changed his views, and says the Klan largely disbanded in Maryland after a few of the guys became friends with the musician.

"My beliefs then are," Don says, choosing his words carefully, "completely different than they are now."

Davis, watching the clip with a visitor, pops up from the couch.

"Am I wrong for sitting down with people when I get results like that?" he asks.

But is it really that simple?

Davis' logic follows that if Klan members can just get to know him, they won't be able to hate him, and vice versa. But how can you ever really know what's in another person's heart?

Mark Potok, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala., says the center gets calls about Davis every few years. Potok has neither met Davis nor heard of many of the Klan members the musician claims as friends. Regardless, "the idea of being nice to the Klan is a pretty silly one," Potok says.

Elyshia Aseltine, an assistant professor of sociology, anthropology and criminal justice at Towson University, studies how race factors into people's self-perception. She says Davis likely has "a narrow understanding of how racism plays out." Racism is more nuanced than it was 50 years ago, she says, and manifests itself in people's decisions about where to live or shop or send their kids to school, rather than in Klan membership.

She worries that Davis has become an exception to his Klan friends, not the rule, and that their views remain unchanged.

Consider Gary, a former Klansman from Washington County in western Maryland who asked that his last name not be used because "crazies" could look him up. Gary has been to more than two dozen of Davis' concerts, and Davis once secured tickets for him to see Chuck Berry. Gary says the hard-core Klan members "can't stand" Davis because

they hate all black people. But many others like the musician, he says.

Gary counts himself among the latter. He's a separatist and would prefer that the world "be all white." But he attended Davis' wedding, even though it was to a white woman.

"I don't think it's right," he says of the interracial marriage. "But I'd never say anything about it."

If the purpose of befriending Klansmen is to somehow chip away at race-based hate, how do you measure victory? In robes? In someone holding his disapproval in check? In a change of heart?

At The Birchmere, Davis throws a blue hand towel over the keys and bangs out an extended, flourish-filled solo. He likes to introduce stunts into his sets, occasionally playing the piano through flames created with the help of lighter fluid.

"I feel it," he shouts. "It's in my soul."

At one point during a vivacious ver-

sion of "Johnny B. Goode," Davis moves away from the keyboard. The bass player lays down the groove. The drummer stays on time. Davis makes a show of watching his lead guitar player so intently that he appears to be studying how to play the instrument for the first time. Finally, he nods as if to say: Let me try.

Then, still facing the crowd, Davis stands in front of the lead guitar player and, as if he has just learned the song from those few seconds of careful observation, takes over the solo, playing the instrument behind his back.

It's the signature move of the evening: white fingers guiding the instrument, black fingers playing the strings, and a crowd behaving exactly the way he always dreamed. *Listening.* ■

Mike Gruss has written for newspapers in Ohio, Indiana and Virginia and now lives in Alexandria. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.

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