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W: www.pagesix.co.uk E: help@pagesix.co.uk T: 023 8038 1978

Transcript Name

Dick Hebdige

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Kieran Connell: So, I was going to ask first of all what... 1972, you ended up in Birmingham, what brought you there?

Dick Hebdige: I did my first degree in English at Birmingham, so I went to Birmingham in 1969, from London where I grew up. I went to grammar school, got 3 A levels, didn't know where to go, never been outside London, so I looked on – we didn't have the internet, but I just saw that Birmingham was the second city so I thought, 'Oh well, it must be something like London.' Little did I know, wasn't much like London but it was... Went to Birmingham for the interview, I only had one – yeah, I can't remember where else I applied to.

Kieran Connell: Were you an undergraduate?

Dick Hebdige: Undergraduate. And we had to write an essay and then we were interviewed by the professors from the department, and I happened to get Richard Hoggart. My first conversation really in Birmingham was conference studies, although I didn't know who he was or anything. Had a terrible interview but he took pity on me and I scraped in. I don't think I was – it wasn't a stellar performance. In the third year of my undergraduate degree, there was a cultural studies option, I took that. There was a seminar. Stuart would – Michael Green, I think, ran it most of the time but Stuart [Hall] did some of the teaching from the introduction to cultural studies and cultural society tradition and that whole connection to English, I guess. And then we were given, for our final assignment, I wrote retrospective ethnography of the pubs I used to go to in London, in Fulham, where I grew up and the language game that these, kind of, villains that I knew who were older than me, local faces, would play. So it was like a participant observation thing about forms of masculinity, really, and working class or under class or what would be the resistance to being intelligible ways of including or creating a certain order around a culture through language. Stuart, I think, was interested in it and I didn't know what to do when I'd finished. I wanted to do graduate work, I wasn't sure I was going to be accepted or what I would do, and he encouraged me to apply. Michael Green was my main advocate and he really encouraged me from the start to connect cultural studies and to take scholarly work right into... So that's how I got in to cultural studies. At that time, entrance was decided by a committee, not by Stuart, but it was basically a jury of your peers. Chas [Crichter] was on it, I remember Chas on it. Paul [Willis] might have been on it. There were various figures who I can vaguely remember.

Kieran Connell: What was that process like? Was it nerve racking?

Dick Hebdige: I spent my whole career nerve racked so, yeah, I was nervous. I remember one question was why should we be interested in criminals and their uneducated or whatever, political reactive resistance, whereas we were just coming out of '68 and all that, so really in 1972. I do remember saying the student resistance might be happening now but criminality is likely to continue for a good time to come. It was organic, I guess I was trying to say. Anyway, almost despite that interview, the same with Richard, I got in and I got a 2:1, I didn't get a 1st, and the only reason I got a 2:1 was because Michael Green argued it up, I heard; he didn't tell me but somebody else told me. So I really feel I owe everything to Birmingham and cultural studies. Because of cultural studies, what I had to offer, which was a fairly organic experience of growing up in a working class household and a cosmopolitan situation.

Kieran Connell: Were you the first of your family to go to university?

Dick Hebdige: Yes. My parents were – well, my mother is still alive, were working people, left school at 14. My mother came from a big family, was orphaned when she was very small, adopted by her elder sister who was 17 years older and so it was that, kind of, culture that EP Thompson talks about; people had to organise themselves. She came from Wandsworth. Before that, her family came from – her parents came from Rye in the country, I think a generation before that,

dad was a baker. So she left school at 14 and was an upholsteress, sewing in a furniture factory. My dad came from Yorkshire, his dad was a miner, and didn't want my dad to go into the mines. I think he had an older brother and two sisters but my granddad came down – my grandfather came down to London with my dad when he was 14 to find him work outside the mines because he wanted to go down there, because I think that family had been in mining for some time, and had been horrible industrial accidents and not a good life. So my dad got apprenticed to a carpenter in a furniture factory and he became a skilled frame maker. So I think when he was about 17 or something he went to the same factory that my mother was working at. He came from Yorkshire, she couldn't understand a word he was saying, and they met in a tea break, I think. My mum gave my dad Smarties or something, they were basically children, it's amazing when you think about it. I guess it still goes on all over the world now. Of course, probably still goes on in Birmingham. Don't make a big deal about it, but I was spared all that. They started courting and got married in the war. It was quite interesting talking about the work conditions; very, very different. Factory thing in the East End of London or South London, I'm not sure if it was south or east they worked, my dad worked in both east London and south London, but at that time they were industrial situations but it was almost like family business, small group of workers, and they segregated the men and the women, and the women did all the sewing stuff and the men did... and they'd have a canteen with one of these, what are they called, hutches or whatever-

Kieran Connell: The hatch.

Dick Hebdige: The hatch, and there would be flirtations going on but they weren't allowed to sit in the same thing. You can't imagine it now. There were many marriages, even though there was, I don't know how many workers, probably less than 100, about five weddings because you were working six days a week and that was it. That was mostly your life so you had to make your opportunities and social life. It's an old school industrial working class situation, I suppose.

Kieran Connell: So coming from that background and being interviewed by Hoggart and I presume coming into contact with Hoggart's work and stuff on working class culture, was that – how did those two things relate? Was it important to have that acknowledgment?

Dick Hebdige: It was, actually. I was always... it was complicated because I grew up in London so I identified myself totally as a Londoner even though my dad was Yorkshire and still had a slight Yorkshire accent. He had come from Doncaster and never went back, in his whole life he never went back to Doncaster. Had quite a nice childhood. These mining towns on the edge of the country so he had a lot of country, he liked nature and fishing and stuff like that. No... sorry, what was the question again?

Kieran Connell: Just coming from that working class background, and whether you were influenced by Hoggart or Thompson or that kind of thing. I was wondering if that was part of the appeal?

Dick Hebdige: Yes, definitely. I did know enough about... I think I knew about *Uses of Literacy*. I remember when *Coronation Street* started on TV, *Coronation Street* is very connected to – I mean, it's fictionalisation of working class culture in Leeds, in a sense. I remember my dad watching it and just being knocked out by how accurate it was and how surprising and gratifying it was to see your culture represented for the first time on TV. So there was that connection too from my dad, actually, to the northern thing. I remember reading *Uses of Literacy* and having an argument with some of its characterisations of Americanisation and rock and roll and all that stuff. Really I was formed inside so... I felt affiliated to it but different from generationally separated from it, and geographically by coming from London.

Kieran Connell: Obviously like a young generation reflecting on a similar theme in a different way, modifying some of the things in some stuff...

Dick Hebdige: And I was already having a debate about the values and virtues of organised labour. My dad was a shop steward in the furniture makers. He was very principled, order of organised labour. He really was a craftsman; he made stuff as well as he could in factory conditions and tried to protect the craft from the attempt to accelerate production. It was all piece work, you were paid by the piece, so the whole game was to try and get the best deal that you could for the piece. And when time and motion people started coming in and doing a tailored cataloguing of the work process, my dad would organise everybody to work in slow motion because he used to say you have to protect the oldest man in the shop, because it was the man who had most craft who could make a piece of furniture from the plank, as they used to say. Get a piece of work, used to make it, and that was the wisdom of the craft and dignity of the thing that they wanted to protect. And through the fifties where there was a lot of industrial strife and rationing and all that stuff was still going on, he would go into these small shops and quietly try to organise, because I think he got black listed from some of the big places because he was seen as on the left, I guess. He wasn't a Marxist by any stretch of the imagination. Saluted the Queen and all that. A socialist. That's really what I thought my mother and he, that generation, that's what they fought the war for. They came out of it saying that Churchill was a greater war Prime Minister and a dreadful person, and that they wanted a different deal. My mother lived through the Blitz, she worked in Woolwich making bombs until they blew it up and once she was working in a factory in London and doing Red Cross work, so she lived all through the Blitz. And my dad was in Normandy, and did their bit. So I have massive respect for all of that and for the values that they rescued from what they had been given, amazing. So I had a whole respect for the respectable working class scene that I come from, even though it was relatively poor because my dad wasn't well for a short time, my mum wasn't – well, she eventually started working, she worked in retail in Woolworths, she worked as a cleaner and stuff. So, this idea of clean living under difficult circumstances was very important. But, on the other hand, I was also attracted to the Bohemian underworld thing too, and in Fulham where I grew up, which is on the edge of Chelsea, and is kind of one of those liminal areas between wealth and the people who feed off the wealthy, I got into these rather villain culture, I guess, people who are older than me, also very intelligent and interesting, predatory people.

Kieran Connell: How did you come out to hang out with those kinds of guys then?

Dick Hebdige: Just going down the pub. It was almost like a right of passage. You go down the pub and you meet these people and they were local. They kind of apprenticed you to that thing, that you could – a lot of it was around, and this is like the – I suppose I started going when I was about 16/17, but then through all the time I was at university I was going back. There was a, kind of culture thing to it.

Kieran Connell: Oh, was that because the Mod scene was attached to that?

Dick Hebdige: Yeah, that was the other thing. There was a whole bunch of big time – really quite dedicated Mods in Fulham who would meet in the same pub. So there were these various forms of insubordination and vernacular resistance or whatever you want to call it, and vernacular modernism in a sense. You didn't want to be trapped in the same kind of routines that their parents were trapped in. They didn't want to be dutiful servants of labour. They wanted more, simple as that. And if you couldn't get it any other way you would cheat or steal. Maybe that was it. So there was this tension between these two different – or conflict between these two different value systems. I guess I've tried to negotiate that ever since.

Kieran Connell: So arriving to the centre, was it like a conscious thing to try and articulate that tension and work through that tension in your research work, or was it more organic than that?

Dick Hebdige: I think everything is organic. Certainly at that age, when do you ever step back and plan? There were certain conflicts and contradictions, tensions, dramas, that I wanted to pursue, live out and document, actual desire in part to try and find a way, navigate a way, between different options. Nobody really wants to just reproduce where they are. I'm really, as I get older, I'm really valuing more and more the home base, the continuity, solidity and reliability of the people that brought me into the world and raised me, because they were – it was unconditional. And the family was really important to my family, both my mum and dad, because it was the one unit you could really rely on in times of trouble, extended family for my mother because, as I say, adopted by her older sister and it was almost like a commune rather than a traditional family when you've got your older sister and oldest brother in those surrogate parent roles, and they kept that going all their lives. They're 92 now, she's the only one still surviving, but all the cousins all looked to her as well. The matriarch, in a sense. So I grew up in this house that was in Fulham which, as I said, was this liminal area which was working class and then got gentrified very early even in the sixties. The frontiers, people – pioneers of Bohemia were coming down the King's Road and so the house we grew up in was a dilapidated but rather fine old Edwardian house. So I grew up in this place, still bombsites around it. But the house itself, my aunt – my mother's older sister who was, like, seventeen years older than her had bought in the second world war from a member of her church. She was part of a Baptist church in Elephant and Castle where she had met her husband who was – I think he came from a market trading family. They got married, bought this house for a song in the Second World War because everybody thought that the houses would either be demolished by the Blitz or cleared after the war. So she actually got this house and we lived in the top flat, my mum, dad, brother and I, and she and my uncle lived in the middle flat, and my mother's brother and her older brother, Charlie, lived with his wife, Betty, in the basement, well not basement, the first floor flat. And we shared all facilities; there were no dividers between the flats so I'd come in from school and go up through this family history. Our flat was the most modern. My aunt and uncle in the middle flat were really fundamentalists; they were early converts to Pentecostalism, probably some of the first and one of the first Pentecostalist congregations I think in London were in the Elephant and Castle. And they went Pentecostal partly because there were so many immigrants from the Caribbean coming in and bringing in that tradition, so it was a mixed congregation. My uncle was a lay preacher, lay Pastor or whatever, but he was also a sign bearer and he was one point ahead of the sign bearers' federation, the text bearers who carried the signs from the Bible and stand on the street corner, I wouldn't say denouncing but it's another word... proclaiming, testifying and so on. So I grew up with all that, and playing the piano and the accordion and... They were very generous people and they didn't interfere with us. We were secular socialists at the time. And my Uncle Charlie and Aunt Betty in the First World War were communists.

Kieran Connell: And they lived on the ground floor?

Dick Hebdige: No. On the ground floor that was the communists.

Kieran Connell: Communists on the ground floor, then-

Dick Hebdige: Then we had the fundamentalists, the hill billy religion in the middle.

Kieran Connell: And then the socialists at the top. Given the influence that domestic set-up had on your formation, what was the appeal of the gangs or the Mods and that sub-cultural side of it, but what was the appeal coming from, as a young person? Was it the standard teenage reaction against parental culture that [Phil] Cohen talks about, or is it something more complex than that?

Dick Hebdige: It's quite complicated because none of them tried to put any – they didn't try to indoctrinate us. I mean, not even my aunt, and they were with the Lord and all that, but they never tried it on us. My parents were pretty hands-off, taught us... a loving way, they taught us by example, but they didn't insist on particular ideology. My uncle downstairs was just completely a communist guy, a complete comedian, he was amazing. He would place spoons in the pubs, Uncle Charlie, he'd converted to communism but he was a Prisoner of War, he was captured in Dunkirk and taken to a Prisoner of War camp where there would be a load of Ukrainians and they taught – and Russians, and he befriended them even though they were segregated. English were treated better. He'd always been, I think – he had been in the British Army before the war. So colourful, that's the thing, the background was really colourful. When I hear people talking about the fifties, here they always talk about the suburbs and all that, it was like growing up in a kind of Dickens on acid what I grew up. It was really old school interesting place, and my parents were both readers, they read a lot, mainly fiction but fanatical users of the public library, both believed in education. My mother in particular believed in education as a way forward, up and out, and encouraged me at that level. My dad was possibly a bit more sceptical about the up and out thing because he believed in everybody being lifted together and... So I wouldn't say that I was – like all kids react to their background, I mean, I definitely wanted to travel and I wanted to get out of a smothering environment. I wouldn't say – it wasn't-

Kieran Connell: Oppressive.

Dick Hebdige: It wasn't oppressive, no, but it was a very close knit thing. I just wanted a wider horizon or a bigger horizon. I was good at reading, that was about the only thing I was good at, reading and writing, lousy at maths and everything else, sports, bit of a nerd kid I guess. I was into art, poetry and stuff, so I was looking for a way of limbo dancing underneath all these constrictions, I guess. That was probably the appeal of the first subconscious that I would call – well, I knew the Mods, Mods at school, they were all over Fulham, the Mod thing was big. You and I know to get on a bus and you were up the West End and you could go to – when I was in my late teens I would be going to the Marquis club on a Friday night for – it was all blues. Jethro Tull and John Mayer, Fleetwood Mac, Chicken Shack, all those... big on the blues, formed a band with my friends that I had met in a youth club attached to a local church. But then this other group were older, they were more people who had been evacuated during the war, teenagers in the war, and that generation particularly of working class men were very into all, I think, anti-authority, all those opportunities for crime and scavenging during the war and after, they weren't properly trained or regulated or supervised during the war. So there was one guy who I was particularly close to and regarded as a sub-cultural father figure, a guy called Don Gardner who has been dead now for a long time, who was Romanist or half Romany, I think, and he was a man of power, I would say. He wasn't a gangster but everybody respected him and was scared of him if he got into any – they'd all been to prison or they had been to military prison, they'd all been conscripted and hated it, or in the merchant navy, and they had this wild edge and violent edge to them that I found terrifying and fascinating. And you are sometimes drawn to what's going to really test you and destroy you and hurt you. But for some reason he took to me and I became his – he had a son, who is also dead actually, but I became a surrogate son and we just knocked around a lot. He took me along and we hung out, he, his wife and me, his daughter and his son – his daughter dated the tipper out of The Clash. His son was a guitarist in one of the original Roxy bands, one of the worst ones, called The Unwanted, which was a good description I think, the public verdict on their musicianship. And so, yeah, I don't want to go on about this too much. I hadn't written it down but I will one day, I think, because as you get older you look back and realise that all the details that held your world together had been erased.

Kieran Connell: Do you think that desire to write it all down before it is erased is also part of the same project that your early work was part of anyway, because writing it all down is essentially what – whether it's the Krays or whether it's the...

Dick Hebdige: I always would – when I was asked to describe what I'm doing, now I always get – I always find this quite ironic – 'Dick, the sociologist'... I've never done a sociology class in my life. I probably haven't read the key texts. I know it by hearsay a lot of it, and the seminars that we did with Stuart, incredible, intense, intimate immersion you had in all this stuff that I think I'm pretty good at picking stuff out without really doing it in detail. So I always felt – I am, it's hilarious, there you go. All those books on subculture now, 'As sociologist Dick Hebdige...' I thought I was a writer, that's what I thought I was, but I've identified with that field so I'm an expert on it, I guess. It was part of a process of chronicling, I think, and if I ever really had to characterise what I do I think it's chronicling, always of its time, and therefore it is, to some degree, contemporary and responding to... it's trying to document the passage through time.

Kieran Connell: It's almost, in a sense, like not memoir but informed at least a little bit by that, to some extent. And that's the other thing I wanted to ask you about – the process of living in a culture and chronicling it. To bring the story up to 1972, how did that moment relate to what your project of writing and chronicling...?

Dick Hebdige: The organic thing, I guess that's the other thing. There's always this thing about organic intellectuals and we never really had one. But I think I've always been more organically connected to what I write about, on some level, although I'm writing about Japan, I've never been to Japan. I wrote a book about reggae and never went to Jamaica. But I think it's always trying to bring it home, I guess.

Kieran Connell: Bring it all back home.

Dick Hebdige: Yeah. To some degree that's how I saw cultural studies, and that's really what use literacy did to it was dealing with all these major issues but through an autobiographical lense, to some degree, and a very particular impartial lense. But that meant paying attention to where you are and I still believe in the value of observation and of having a sense of where you are seeing things from. And I'm also very self-involved. So when I went to Birmingham, I was doing English and I loved English, doing English, but I always felt I was in the institution not of it, you know, including the institution of English literature I always said I prefer reading, like a lot of self-involved adolescents that are slightly artistic bent, I liked reading Moody European literature in translation. I never really like English literature. I like Shakespeare because it's like reading foreign language. I couldn't get it half the time, but when I got some of it it was like schizophrenic words, it was fantastic. It's like listening to Linton Johnson [dub poet], you know, doing his...

Kieran Connell: Yeah, yeah.

Dick Hebdige: And obviously 17th century English went to Jamaica to stay alive. It's got a lot of connections. So I like the Elizabethan thing and I liked – I could get into Dickens and stuff like that. I really loved Conrad because he wrote awkwardly and you could feel the outsider's perspective, and I like translations even bad translations of Russian literature and French literature and Spanish literature. Because sometimes when an idiom is translated literally it just becomes poetry automatically without any effort so I liked – I never felt at home at the centre of the thing. So the cultural society tradition was really important but I never really identified with that most of the time either because it was like commentating from within. It was like reading *The Guardian* comments pages. Most of the time with those I think they are really well written but once I've read the first sentence I know what they are going to say most of the time. There's very little surprising in it because they fit, and I didn't really want to be – I didn't feel

comfortable fitting. So one of the first missions was to try and find some version of what I had in London, and I met up with Mike Horseman [local DJ and collaborator] -

Kieran Connell: Okay, how did you meet him?

Dick Hebdige: He was pursuing a love of his from Bournemouth – he was Bournemouth Art College and he had fallen in love, she'd come up here, up to Birmingham to do anthropology, and he was mooning around after her and it didn't work. But then he had a, sort of, genius to him I think for getting on in Birmingham and being very interesting, intelligent person, kind of street intelligence but that's not really the way of talking about it. Crafty, intelligent but not bookish. There's a word that I'm looking for... slightly perverse. A Bohemian, I guess. And we became buddies, and so when I wasn't working, which I did a lot – I mean, I didn't just go AWOL, I actually applied myself to studies and took it seriously, and really tried to write essays that made sense and took me somewhere. I wasn't casual student. At the weekends I would go and hang out with Mike and we joined this, kind of, commune, 103A Bristol Road-

Kieran Connell: Was that part of a political group?

Dick Hebdige: No, it wasn't a political group, it was just – they were like beatniks who became hippies. It was transcendental meditation centre as well.

Kieran Connell: Okay, on the Bristol Road?

Dick Hebdige: Bristol Road. It was the woman who was really the main force within it was a Birmingham woman, older, ten years older than us, called Noreen Davies, Nori, and anybody from that generation older than me in their seventies now will from that hippy culture or beatnik culture that straddling from rock n roll through to the jazz thing into the counter culture would know who Nori is and talk with, I think, the spectrum admiration and love for her because she was a very charismatic and beautiful person. So we arrived, my hippy phase now... And so we hung out. So, yes, it was like I found another group of older people who lived inside outside, who lived on a margin within an urban context, who learnt from them and it was a different culture but there were similarities, and it all came together with punk, and a bunch of us came up from London for a punk day, I think it was a Holy Cesar or it may have been Barbarella's, famous [nightclubs] I think, 1976 or 1977, and The Unwanted played, so I brought these two groups together and they – and then Nori and Mike became an item at one point and they came down from London and would stay at my parent's place and go down the pub. So I was bringing these two things together.

Kieran Connell: The hippy – the commune hippy thing became...

Dick Hebdige: The hippy thing disintegrated in the end. Mike joined it, he started living with Nori, and I'd go there at the weekends. The three of us would hang out a lot. It was a time of heavily smoking. It was experiments. A lot of it was around marijuana as a, kind of, liberation thing and people going off to Wales to grow it and coming back. This whole commerce of, I suppose, the first wave of – the Howard Marks thing of when the drugs culture really took off. And it wasn't just about that, but how did people finance an alternative way of life. The way that Nori did it was by designing and selling cards, greetings cards, and would go around – we'd go off on these trips down to the West Country and go to these hippy places, sell the cards and sleep on the floor in these places. But it was always trying to find what are the alternatives to doing really what my parents did, what are the institutions, what are the networks, what are the strategies, what are the opportunities? And a lot of the people that I was hanging out with were at arts school at Birmingham or had been to art school elsewhere. Art school is something I would have done if I could have done but it wasn't really an option for... the art room at the school I went to was the darkest room in the school and all they had was powder paints and ended up

painting a brown mess or a grey mess depending on what sub-quality cardboard paper you had. So art wasn't taken seriously, not in a grammar school anyway. And, of course, my parents wanted me to do something that had some shape and discipline to it, so English was the closest I could get. But as soon as I could I worked in teaching in arts schools.

Kieran Connell: Was it important to get out of the academy, out of university? These people were finding their – like an alternative way of life and developing alternatives, whether it's in the commune or whatever else it is, was it important for you in Birmingham in that period to be in touch with people and be with people who weren't just students within the university?

Dick Hebdige: Absolutely.

Kieran Connell: Why was it important?

Dick Hebdige: The homogenisation of affect or of ambition. I just needed something else, and I had always needed that since I was really small. Not through delinquency or anything, but I'd just been attracted to – I guess it's the whole identification or the idea that there's something beyond the comfort zone that is going to be challenging and interesting. But I also didn't feel entirely comfortable inside the student culture. I was, like Richard Hoggart and all these other people, like a scholarship boy, I guess, and I could put myself in that but I couldn't identify with that either, the way in which that had become a trajectory that was a decent trajectory, I'm not knocking it, Alan Bennett and all these people, but it was another gang that I didn't really feel comfortable with. Partly it was to do with a combination of utopian thinking and music and rock and roll and drugs and all that, created a different kind of constellation that you could try to visit or join. And it was also interesting to be in Birmingham and find out what was really going on with the people who didn't go to university. I guess I was trying to find something authentic, authentic Birmingham culture.

Kieran Connell: Was that outward looking emphasis part – were there other people that – was there a cultural thing at the centre to look out of the academy, or did you find that...?

Dick Hebdige: Oh yeah, there was definite-

Kieran Connell: Politically or culturally or whatever.

Dick Hebdige: There was a definite connection to ethnography, yeah, and a sense that ethnography was one way to connect with the world beyond the boundary of the campus, and that was always a major imperative in cultural studies mission to connect to publics beyond. It sounds instrumental but I think it was also heartfelt, an attempt to – an idea of honouring what was the resources that people had managed to make available to themselves. So there was a sense that you've got to understand how people live, or how extraordinary people live really, so what is going on beyond the official histories and so on. There was that. And some of it was a fantasy, and people had some very grandiose ideas about how we might offer revolutionary advice to workers. I always found that a bit absurd. But, none the less, people who were standing outside factories handing out leaflets were trying to make a connection. I didn't do that.

Kieran Connell: Was it quite a politically charged atmosphere within the centre?

Dick Hebdige: Yeah. It was what next? 1970's, early 70's, still dealing with post traumatic stress after 1968 and everything.

Kieran Connell: So the political side of it in the sense you were saying it was quite charged. What about when your work – you became interested obviously in Rastafarianism and that kind of thing,

Reggae, how did that relate with people like Paul [Gilroy] or whatever or people getting into race as well, what was the relationship between the sub cultures sub group and the race group? Were there tensions or how did that work out?

Dick Hebdige: We were there, all that youth culture stuff, that was very early when Stuart had taken over the cultural studies centre, I don't know when that was, I think it was a couple of years before. But I think our cohort when we came in, that's me and John Clark and Tony Jefferson, Brian Roberts, Angela [McRobbie] came in a year later I think, but she was part of it too, there was a theory seminar, I think it was on a Monday, which really was dominated by Stuart's incredible vision; we were trying to run and catch up with him, keep up with him. Ian Connell was another person. Rachel... I can't remember Rachel's second name.

Kieran Connell: Powell?

Dick Hebdige: Yeah, Rachel Powell. And Jessica Pickard, who was my partner for years, and still somebody I'm really connected to. I met her there. Jessica was doing work on comics. Janice Windship, yeah. So there was a main seminar and then there were these satellite seminars, they were called sub-groups, one on youth and one on sport, I think, I can't remember, I was only in the youth one, so that was another seminar on – I was writing my thesis MA on aspects of style in the deviance of cultures in 1960's, used in that, really taking the work I had done on the windup and these guys, Don and my friends, ethnography of the pubs and how that reflected changes in class conflicts in the gentrification in that area of London. So it's all that. It's a particular subculture. Trying to use culture – these cultural adaptations to social change within that community, there was that, and then the Kray twins chapter on Mods, that was the first thing I wrote for the sub-group, commodity signage and consumption. Following on what John Clark had written really, John came out with theoretical framework. I came at it more from a – well, partly having grown up with it and watched it, part of it to some degree, and part of it because I was already interested in art strategies and applying some strategies from the avant garde to vernacular culture and seeing, so we were all working around that idea of appropriation and repurposing. And then the reggae and Rastafarianism thing. So we all met and resistance for riches comes out of that. But I was, basically, most of the time writing these chapters, trying to get it done fast, because I didn't really want to hang round too long. I don't know what I thought I was rushing towards but I wanted to be a writer, I think, that's really the first thing. And I wanted to find a way to support myself, but I've never felt comfortable inside the academic context. I found the theory seminars interesting and amazing to watch but I never felt I could participate; I was intimidated by it, I didn't know what that were talking about some of the time.

Kieran Connell: Was it the subject that was intimidating or Stuart, or both?

Dick Hebdige: No, Stuart was always – if you paid attention he always made sense, but it was a very ambitious and accelerated process of assimilating and condensing articulation. He was like an articulation machine. He would sit there with all these books, pull one out, he was so on. It was like watching somebody – a dancer who is at the top of their game. He really had – he was driven. It wasn't ruthless but you had to run to keep up, and everybody was in awe and everybody loved the guy; everybody knew that they were in a special place to be able to witness this, that's really what I felt, to witness something and try to take bits of it that I could understand and translate. People often – well, some people would say you make stuff very accessible, you know, but that's because that's the only way I understand it. It's not that I'm translating from a higher level of abstraction, I've never been very good at more elaborated forms of philosophy or discourse that underlies what I'm writing about. I'm really just trying to make it accessible to myself. They were really processing some really important political philosophical questions, I think, epistemological... and I'd be sitting there doodling because I'd been listening but that's how I had to listen in a distracted way because I just found it too

difficult to – I just couldn't concentrate on it in the way in which it was presented. I had to get it through osmosis, but being exposed to it, like being a servant, listening at the master's – you probably get stuff that you then use in a different way. And I'm not saying that in a disrespectful way, I just didn't feel that that was my job or my forte. I always wanted to hold back a bit the pace, and I wanted to find and preserve a place for first hand, unprompted first hand judgement, the old thing that – the human subject is also a sensor and there's a legitimacy to what you can witness and document that is much more modest scale. It's a combination of all those being exposed to that level of theoretical reflection, aggressive theoretical reflection, it wasn't in any way complacent and it wasn't showing off. They were, kind of, bolting together a transformative paradigm that was totally synthetic. It was coming from all over the place; Anglo American sociology, linguistics... and it was Stuart's mission to demonstrate something about the provincialism of English intellectual tradition. There's a bigger world, bang, here it is. It would just go to Europe, you can find not even going globally, you can de-centre some of the complacent assumptions.

Kieran Connell: How important was Stuart in all this? Such a charismatic figure, such an incredible figure... how pervasive was his influence?

Dick Hebdige: I would say it was absolute... and it doesn't mean people like Michael Green to me is a really, really important figure. It's Michael Green, Richard Johnson... Michael Green was a really supportive and incredibly generous person. He saw something in me that nobody else did; I didn't see it in me. Honestly, I said, I think he argued me up from a 2:2 to a 2:1 so I could get into the Centre so he believed in what I was doing. He came to my parent's place, I think he slept on the sofa, I don't even think I was there but was, like, one of those really go the extra mile type humanists type person. He was a really humane compassionate and empathetic.. There was a lot of damage, I think, emotionally in young graduate students, out of their depth, flailing around trying to compete whilst pretending to be in a collaborative community kind of thing. Underneath that there's always jagged sibling contests, and I actually feel Michael made that what could have become a snake pit into something a bit more amicable and pleasurable. Not that Stuart was nasty, but he was just in a different league to any other person in the university that I knew. When you were in Stuart's presence, you knew you were in the presence of somebody who would listen and was sympathetic but he had an agenda and he had an intelligence that was just unusual, stood out. So you almost felt the vibe of intelligence and you knew you had to try to live up to and not waste this man's time, that was the thing. I've got students now who help me with the dissertation and all that, and I have to sign these contracts where I meet them every week or something. Stuart, I probably had four one-on-one meetings with him in two years, and I give him a chapter and he'd... then I'd schedule a meeting, and I would go in and he'd read it whilst I'm sitting there.

Kieran Connell: And then produce the-

Dick Hebdige: And then he'd give me a symptomatic reading that hit straight away. It didn't – it wasn't rocket science to him to do that. And he had other things he needed to do. And if you understood that, that was fine, but some people who I think had a more classic leader relationship to it, found it provoked anxiety and neurosis and stuff, and psychosis sometimes, because some people really did get damaged. That happens everywhere. I teach in an art department where I regularly meet people who freak out. Doing an art MFA is not easy. There aren't any rules. You're in a studio on your own looking at the wall, you've got space but what do you do with it? Kids nowadays have all their time connected, they don't really spend time on their own with an open horizon like that, and it's terrifying. I think all graduate work is like that. Everybody is sitting in the studio on their own looking at the wall not knowing what to do.

Kieran Connell: You mentioned in that piece you sent me that when you're learning about DJing and observing people who are DJing and doing some DJing yourself in the sound system,

presumably, and that approach that comes from DJing influenced the way that you write and think-

Dick Hebdige: Absolutely. Not that I'm a great DJ but, you know what, I made some of the best mixed tapes. I had about 700 tapes, I threw them all away because I thought oh well it's all digital now. I kept a few but... there was something about the time limitation, you know, 90 minutes, you've got 45 minutes... the sequence was just so much more. Like sewing, weaving something, whereas when you make a play list it's just stealing a load of sounds and you haven't got the articulation. That's really what this weaving thing where this references that, references back to create each of those 45 minute sides of a 90 minute tape was a seductive little labyrinth that would lead you... and I loved doing that. That's how I try to write too, that you create this network that's a trap for the reader, but also an enjoyable, I hope. It's always about stories and narratives and invocation, you know. And it's creating mood and all that stuff. I think that's the way I try and write, but I learnt some of that, a lot of that, from how you put stuff together, how you articulate stuff that doesn't necessarily seem to be connected at all. You can make – you can stitch together two things that are very different to create a shock effect but quite the opposite, to create a binding stitch that really pulls people in and helps persuade them of things that perhaps they wouldn't be persuaded of otherwise. It's basically that's what I learned from – not from DJing myself because I was always so nervous that it would be, 'Oh God, here comes the man who is going to scratch the record,' because we had to do it by hand.

[The owner of] The Shoop over The Golden Eagle, [a sound system/disco in Birmingham] had been running it every Thursday night from the sixties and it was the place for arts students to go, to socialise and pick up, the one hip place that wasn't in one of the nightclubs. There were all these cheesy nightclubs owned by the Fewtrell family, they were the kind of Kray twins of Birmingham, Eddie Fewtrell, and they always called these clubs after womens' names like Samantha, Rebecca, the Sin Bin... James Bond or something. They were good music but they weren't really self-organised independent like clubs are now, but The Shoop was the one place, and it was open from 8 or 7, something like that, to closing time which was 11, and then people would go on to the clubs or the afterhours drinking clubs. [The owner] was moving, he came to the States actually to California, so he wanted to get rid of the franchise and the record collection. So he sold it to Mike [Horseman], and I put in – I was Mike's partner, I put in money too, to buy this big record collection and the right to do the thing, and every Thursday evening we phoned a black cab and then come down and put all the speakers and stuff into the cab – he had a way of doing it, and the cab driver – it always had to be a black cab because you needed the space, and the guy would go, 'Oh no, you can't do that, there's no way you're going to get that in,' and we'd get it in and then we'd be sitting like that and carrying these things up the stairs, this big white painted twin deck thing. Sometimes I would do a few records– a few tracks as people were coming in, but most of the time it was Mike who was DJing. My job was to get people dancing so I used to get up and do... how embarrassing that is now. I was a bit of a fashion maven at the time. There were people in fashion in that subculture who used to make their own clothes... and they, for some reason, they liked dressing me so I'll get these big Oxford bags out that David Bowie wore and stuff like that. So it was a fashion thing. And later one, Jane Kahn and Patty Bell from Kahn and Bell [clothes shop] in Digbeth near the rag market [shopping centre] had their little avant-garde fashion shop and they would use The Shoop as a, kind of, catwalk to show off their clothes, really. They would come and there would be the arts school people, a load of townies, Anglo-Irish townies, black economy drugs, building labourers, whatever, that kind of casual culture, casual labour, working class quite tough white kids mainly, and then more and more because Horseman played a lot of Reggae, import Reggae, dub plates, but he had a pretty amazing collection because he would go and import record stores and actually buy the stuff and took – had a genuine educated interest in Reggae. We got more and more kids come in from Handsworth, scufflers and more and more – because we got into the heavy steppers and that

stuff, dreds and so on. So I was amazed looking at the photographs that Mike shared with me recently how dominated it was by a Black audience. It looks like everybody packed in, way beyond what you were supposed to capacity. I mean hundreds of people. At the end, I would say it was 60% Black probably, but there wasn't any trouble, it was amazing I think because they were tough times when the police were trying to keep Birmingham city centre White. This is a time of *Policing the Crisis*. So have I told you this story before about that?

Kieran Connell: About...?

Dick Hebdige: How the owner of the pub, the Irish owner, said only play 1% of Black music. Alright then. What would that mean? You'd have to play Morris dancing or something. All the music we play, because basically it was classic rock, Stones and all that stuff, Ska, Funk, a lot of Funk, a lot of James Brown, heavy dub plate stuff. It was all the ingredients of every dance music has ever been in Britain from the sixties on. So we ignored that. The only reason I think we got away with it was because Albert, the man on the door who was part of the Royal Corps of Commissionaires, big old guy, been in Palestine as a military policeman in the forties, tough old geezer, military moustache and his uniform with the medals, he was on the door. I'd sometimes stand with him. I don't know what I did, it wasn't security, but he was a tough old guy and his son was in the CID. So I think he probably...

Kieran Connell: Pulled a few strings.

Dick Hebdige: Yeah. It was organic, and they left us alone, and drugs circulated within, and so it was an opportunity to get drugs, sell drugs probably. Policemen probably got something off of Albert from the door because I never knew – we didn't really monitor it, and there was so much money coming in. I remember Mike at the end, all these £1 notes, but I'm sure they probably shouldn't talk about this because the tax people might get... But it's interesting to see that's really what was important for me to learn how things operate in the world rather than as ideas. And that often involves this kind of dirty dealing.

Kieran Connell: And was it part of that emphasis as well on the stuff of organic intellectuals, because I know Stuart has written previously he thought what they were trying to do at the centre was create organic intellectuals. So, in a sense-

Dick Hebdige: But he always says that we never managed to do it.

Kieran Connell: I know but what's your take on that? Did you or do you see yourself as an organic intellectual?

Dick Hebdige: It's a bit ridiculous when I'm a professor to be an organic intellectual. I try to keep it real. I don't think I succeeded. In terms of the subculture thing, maybe it's just adolescent stuff really rather than organic. My dad was like an organic intellectual in the union movement. He was a leader, people respected him, he wasn't doctrinaire and he had – he was at ease with everybody and knew how to operate in a way that was always principled and achieved better conditions for the people he was with. So he was an organic intellectual. So I wasn't like that, no, I'm just a... Bohemian organic or whatever. I think there were degrees of success in that mission, not just me. John Clarke and people, Tony Jefferson. And Angela [McRobbie], I guess. What I think Stuart says was important was change – the idea of the critical space, keep the critical space open, but underneath that and through that there was a commitment to some organic transformation too, you change the body of knowledge by changing the bodies that profess the knowledge and have the knowledge, so do the knowledge of the London cab drivers say. So that's why you could run it then style it with this empty centre and say, okay, when the next wave comes in, whether it's working class baby boomers with their youth culture thing or feminists with their thing, or the re-examination of race in relation to political

history, that was organic in the sense that you are making a space where the bodies that don't fit anywhere else can come to find – to begin the fight back, as it were, to be protected. We'd shoot round from 1972 all through the seventies, and then we saw Punk being constructed in the background somewhere like Frankenstein's monster out of all these elements, and it did come out partly from the conjunction of things like The Shoop bringing together these different genres. Before then, recorded music particularly was very subordinate to live music, it wasn't seen as authentic. When we first started with The Shoop I remember we would be engaged – we'd be hired to do wedding receptions and stuff, and then you'd stand up there and people would make requests and if you didn't play what they were requesting you'd get thumped. And my job was to stand there at one point and take peoples' requests, plus Mike, and then whisper in his ear... so that you had to distract him from what he was going to do anyway. But DJing wasn't seen as an art form in any way and it wasn't seen as anything but paid employment to entertain people, but also one of the people I think – one of the pioneers for developing it as a form in itself, and a generator. The Shoop was – I would say The Shoop was the closest to a Utopian multi-cultural environment I've ever come across, because it was totally self-regulated. There weren't any fights because people took responsibility for the space and for keeping it open because they knew it was precious and if they screwed it up then it wouldn't come back. And then it grew. I finished my work on subculture, sorry, my MA, and then started teaching in arts schools up in Wolverhampton and then all over the country, Southampton, Portsmouth, Loughborough College of Arts, Maidstone Central School of Art.... You get on this circuit where you do a day here, a day there. It didn't have to be very intellectually demanding but you just had to be flexible and be able to engage these students. It was less demanding than working in the universities. You got paid enough by the hour to live on it, and I just wanted – there used to be a tradition in the arts schools of jobbing artists who would go in and teach whatever and they could make their art on the strength of the back of it, and that's how I saw what I was doing. When I got the contract to write *Subculture* I could finance myself through this teaching and also learn from it. But then Mike got into partnership with Pete King who was a record producer, they set up a studio together and then they went into managing Special AKA when it was called the Special AKA. I think the English Beat still pulls big contacts with UB40 and all that. And Horseman got into promoting; he worked with Bernie Rhodes from The Clash. And then DJing in clubs like the Holy Cesar, Barbarella's, putting on gigs and so on, so he got into it more and I got into teaching.

Kieran Connell: Was that the, kind of, experience and emergence of Punk almost taking place, managing through the people and the fashions that they were putting on, was that the backdrop for obviously the MA and then the book when you got the contract for the book? Did that spring out of what you were observing on a weekly basis on a Thursday night at The Shoop?

Dick Hebdige: Yeah. I finished my MA in 1974 so that was all written. I got the Kray twins to wind up the Mods and the Reggae thing done by '74, and then I was - some representatives from the faculty of art and design at Wolverhampton Poly came and said – Geoff Heard who was working there, a really good guy, came and he was – they were in a department called complimentary studies, it just meant that everything that wasn't essential to what art makers do, I loved it actually. I liked being complementary, supplementary and superfluous. And I said, 'Yeah, I want to do it.' I was amazed that nobody else did that. I really wanted to do it; it wasn't that I saw it as second best to working in a university, I thought this is perfect. Art schools then, even in Polys, were pretty, as I say, unregulated. It was intelligent, people trying to make statements and do things in different medias, and find out who they were in a fairly unregulated environment where half the people who were teaching them were crazy. I think it was a brilliant piece of – holding group for certain versions of eccentricity and perversity and contrarian thinking. Everybody knows that in history; all the rock n roll that came out of it, all those people, Keith Richards and The Kinks and David Bowie. So for somebody like me interested in the interface between fashion and music and visual art, it was no better place to be.

Kieran Connell: And it fits in with what you were saying previously about not feeling comfortable within the traditional university.

Dick Hebdige: I always felt – the thing is, I've never felt comfortable presenting myself as somebody who knows something, really. I ask questions and that is what art does, I think. It's an interrogative thing. It's not providing answers, it's setting up questions. I always felt more comfortable with that. When I tried to teach other kinds of classes where I'm supposed to know something I always felt totally like an imposter. And then asking students to re-capitulate my trajectory, 'you have to read this, read that, then you read this'... I just couldn't see the – I couldn't feel invested in that process. And I know that is a caricature and a rather negative caricature of what scholarly work and what academic work can be, and I know that isn't what John Clarke does or Angela [McRobbie] or anybody, Dave Morley who is a great friend of mine, I just always like to be teaching from the side, complimentary studies and critical studies. Rather than re-producing what I say, it gets translated into something else and it suffers some sea change, and I only take what is useful and I like that much better. That's more my model of transmission, so it's more suggestive, I guess, than directly... It depends. Now I've worked with graduate students, some graduate students who are doing PhD's and so on, then I realise that you've got to be more directive, and I'm at an age where that is easier. I think when I was starting, remember I was teaching by the time I was 23, it's ridiculous, teaching 18 year olds when you're 23... I also taught the community colleges, Hall Green [a district of Birmingham]. I remember going to Hall Green and I was asking for work and they all wore these brown coats like technicians, all the teachers wear them, and none of them seemed to want to teach. It was all these day release people, brick layers and stuff, doing general studies. And I remember a guy saying, 'When do you want to teach?' I said, 'Well, what have you got?' He said, 'Well...' He opened it and I could have taught 180 applicants... It would be like week one [would be trainee butchers], you know, the butcher... their implements and their bloody aprons saying, 'What the F**k....?' I'd get threatened by people. And I tried to engage them by teaching them the history of rock and roll. [They'd say], 'Get lost!' Sometimes I would teach people who would be sitting in groups playing cards. I'd try and get them to turn round and pay attention and it was hilarious. But that's a good trend. I think that really gets you to understand where knowledge fits with people who are not in the same game as you.

Kieran Connell: I was going to ask you finally about the Birmingham School brand and the position of *Subculture* within that and how that has contributed to the brand, and what are your reflections on that really and your own careers as well, *Subculture* has taken you from Birmingham to London to Santa Barbara, just...?

Dick Hebdige: Like I said before to you that I thought the cultural studies was... they had radical implications for the development of a, kind of, different critical culture that it could actually be popularised, that there was a lot in it that was in the melange of approaches, that open your horizons that you could use all these different analytical tools, you could visit all these different things and put them together to create a, kind of, apparatus that could be quite productive, but also enjoyable and pleasurable and complex, that you could get an adequately – you could engineer some interesting radical analysis through cultural studies, and intervene in popular culture. I sense there are a lot of people who weren't being addressed by the dominant modes of discourse and intelligent discussion, sociology say, or talking heads on TV or the accredited credential experts on popular culture missed the point, and it felt patronising at the time. Or uncritically promoting it, that there were other positions, so the subculture brought an attempt to create something that I could – that really reflected my own excitement and confusion about what was going on. It was basically hear some approaches to form the culture that aren't normally taken seriously in this way. And here they are being applied to a subculture in formations, punk was just coming together at that time. I got the contract in '76, it was published in '79, so imagine – I can't remember exactly but the manuscript must have gone in

'78, and it wasn't quite over really. But I wanted it to be out there. You take the risk of really doing contemporary cultural studies and trying to – people do it all the time now because the technology has caught up with it. You can blog it now. But the publication and turnaround times in those days was much more slow, much slower. But, as I said, I believed in this notion of contemporary chronically eye witnessing, doing what you can with what resources you've got at hand. These are the things you learnt from artists that you can make a world out of the materials at hand because you haven't got access to everything, and you've got to get something together in a certain time. They say I'll go out, see what I can get out of the dumpsters in two blocks, and then I'll make something out of it. It's a punk – it's a punk approach that you're never going to get to that point of perfect vantage point from which you see what's going on. So you have to make do with what you've got, make do and disrupt or make do and mend. And that's what I was trying to demonstrate that you could do a lot in a little book, less than most people would think was adequate. It was happening at the time. I remember at The Shoop it began in about 1976, maybe even earlier, incorporating the little live bits too. I remember one band, I can't remember who they were, there was one guy who used to play the spoons and tap dance and do these crazy – like a circus. There was another guy, and I don't know who it was, it was a bit like Joy Division or something but he used to shave whilst he was on stage and singing with a cut throat razor; you'd get these cuts and stuff. There was a lot of self-laceration going on. And he got the razor blade – razor blade earrings, and safety pins and piercings. It was all very – it wasn't finessed through Malcolm McLaren and Vivien Westwood, it was codified into a fashion. It was much more self-organised improvisation. It did bring together the reggae and punk and rock. I think down here it was the same with The Unwanted, that group I was talking about, or John Lydon was hanging around import reggae shops, so there was something in that position of the new immigrant that the Irish could identify with. So there was all that in the mix. And then the other thing was in the mid-seventies, after The Shoop closed, we often went to gay clubs for dancing to Camp Hill, The Nightingale.

Kieran Connell: The Nightingale is still there.

Dick Hebdige: Is it still there? And it was a good liberation to get away from gender or the oppressive pick up thing that still dominated the hetero-normative thing. So that was the beginning of queer culture at that level. And you could masquerade a little bit. You could try out different looks and talk to people that you wouldn't necessarily have met otherwise and start experiments. It was all part of that deconstruction of uptight Englishness. I've said that I regard what subculture as both a celebration and a deconstruction of Englishness and male narcissism, you know.

Kieran Connell: That's great. That's fantastic.

[End of Transcript]