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Let a Thousand Stones Roll: Living and Thinking with Music

Ove Sernhede is one of the foremost writers and cultural critics in Europe today. Yet, much of his work is little known outside of Scandinavia and his native Sweden. This is, in part, the result of a paradox. While people in Göteborg, Oslo and Copenhagen have been tuning into every subcultural shift and theoretical develop- ment in London, few have taken the time to re-set the dial and listen to what is going on in those cities. This in part is the result of the colonising effect that the dominance of the English language has had on the social and cultural imagination within academic circles. The appreciation of Ove Sernhede’s work offered here is a correc- tive and aims tune into the frequency of his thought, research and political activism in Göteborg, the city that has been the subject of so much of his writing.

Over a period of more than twenty years we have had many con- versations about our shared interest in the cultural politics of city life. This essay focuses on just two of them. The first took place in 2002 in Bergen and was later published in *Street Signs,* the journal of the Centre for Urban and Community Research (Back 2002). The second was recorded through subterfuge in a café in Haga, Göteborg in September, 2015. Ove had just finished giving a lecture to 500 teachers about educational inequality and the position of young people in the suburbs. We met and talked together for nearly two hours with the hidden motive that the fruits of our conversa-

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tion would be included in this surprise volume. His reflections here show how much the English speaking academic world has to learn from re-tuning urban and cultural theory to a broader wavelength. In what follows Ove Sernhede offers us an example of how to live an academic life in public while remaining vigilantly loyal to the things in life that matter.

This appreciation of Ove’s writing links his academic and politi- cal work and his love of music and involvement in musicking (Small 1998). For music is the key to understanding Ove Sern- hede’s thought because it is the place where ideas and theory meet with intimate experience and feeling. Ralph Ellison commented famously that urban life poses a stark choice: “either live with music or die with noise” (Ellison 1972: 187). In what follows Ove Sernhede shows us how music offers us a place to dwell but also an encounter between the most intimate aspects of life and the largest public issues of history, politics and society.

Not Fade Away

“It is so hard to put into words” says Ove as we talk in a café in the recently gentrified district of Haga. Formerly a dockside working- class district Haga in the sixties and seventies was also a refuge for bohemians and radicals. In the twenty years since I first visited it the neighbourhood seems to have had something of a cappuc- cino makeover. Ove set up the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Göteborg and he has also been a key to the develop- ment of a programme of urban studies through the Centrum för Urbana Studier. He grew up in a working-class district of the city. “I remember when I was like 13 or something there were a couple of kids who used to go to one of my mates homes because he lived quite close to the school. He had a tape recorder, you know.”

The reel-to-reel tape recorder became an instrument of play as well as a way of listening to pre-recorded sound. “We used to do like radio shows … like radio plays.” Ove switching into a mock radio presenters voice, continued “And now Mr Frankenstein has just eaten his last victim.” The story is punctuated by a loud out- burst of laughter. He continued: “This was the mid sixties—I was

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born in 1951. I was really into music and listening to music. One lunch break when we went home with this guy—his brother had been to London—and he had a new tape. So we just put on the tape. And it was “dung ga dung dung ga dung dung ‘I wanna tell you how it’s gonna be . I looked at cover of that tape and at that time you could buy albums on reel-to-reel tape. It was the Rolling Stones’s first album. I still remember that sound—looked at those guys and they looked quite ugly and the sound they made. I felt like this was what it was all about and after that my life was never the same. I immediate ran to the record store and bought the record.” The music of the *Rolling Stones* made a lasting impression on Ove along with other British bands from the sixties like *1he Small Faces* and *1he Animals* Göteborg is a port town, the main har- bour in Scandinavia, with an internationalist sensibility that has always looked outwards to the west across the sea. It is an industrial city with strong proletarian traditions in cultural life and political organisation but also a city with a radical tradition for establishing alternative forms of city life and social organisation. In Sweden,

Göteborg is referred to as ‘Lilla London’ (little London).

London holds a mythic allure, particularly for young people in Göteborg. In the sixties the Capital was seen as the centre of music and pop culture. Ove was part of that generation. “I was just fifteen years old when I came to London for the first time,” he remembers. “The ferry landed at Ipswich and my friend and I built a special tandem bicycle, with a strange box in the middle of it. This was the place where we could put records. I remember my friend and I brought back forty records each. We didn’t have room for our clothes, so we posted them.”

The music emerging from London during the sixties through bands like the Rolling Stones, Small Faces, John Mayall’s Blues- breakers, Cream and Alexis Corner had a deep resonance with young people in Sweden. These bands themselves were a white translation of blues and rhythm and blues music. A parallel music scene developed in Sweden. Ove remembered: “Through out my teenage years it was bound to music with my friends. We lived together with music and to have long hair and dress up like Mods and all that it was definitely a language that was all about saying we

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want a life of our own, we want to rule our own life. We didn’t take a lot of drugs but it was a kind of rebelliousness. The music stood for a kind of alternative lifestyle in a sense that I couldn’t put my finger on but still it was a feeling that empowered me.” Ove learned to play the blues harmonica and sang with local rhythm and blues bands. One of Ove’s academic colleagues once commented that he was the Mick Jagger of Göteborg, although it has always struck me that Ove’s way of carrying himself is more akin to Keith Richards’s awkward swagger.

“Then later on, when the whole Vietnam war and the youth in Sweden started a solidarity movement towards Vietnam” com- mented Ove. “To me that was all connected to the scene that was created by rock music and what was happening in London and of course the States—Jimi Hendrix and all these guys. To me music was a way of expressing yourself. When I started at university I started to read sociology and history and then I went through the institution of social work and I became a social worker.“ He was also connected to the musicology department in the seventies as well being influenced by critical theorist like Wilhelm Reich, Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse. He wrote his Master in Sociology about the Frankfurt School.

“For Marcuse he was always talking about the aesthetic dimen- sion. He was talking about that as a way of expressing … from the different kind of groups in the margins of society. They have this capability of expressing what had happened under the surface of society, so to say. He connected me to my own feelings of what music was all about and how non-verbal languages could be con- nected to more analytically rational kind of understanding.” For Ove there is a link between the Rolling Stones *Not Fade Away* and the things that Freudian inspired Marxism tried to make sense of. Although, Ove never followed the mass cultural theorisation of commodified music that claimed that the precious sounds coming out of that reel-to-reel tape recorder merely made the “inescapable easier to bear” (Adorno 1989/90). He has never lost faith in the capacity of music move people personally and politically. “Beneath there is a vibrant culture and people using music for expressing themselves through getting together” he concluded.

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Pretty Vacant

Sweden was hit by a severe economic crisis during the mid seven- ties. The conflicts and tensions reverberated in youth style and in particular in the emergence of punk. Groups of young people were literally living on the streets of Göteborg without families. Many of these kids spent periods in borstal and prison only to return to a life on the streets. By the early eighties Ove was working as a social worker with young people. At this time he had been introduced to the Frankfurt School writers and Freudian Marxism in particular the work of Thomas Ziehe. He reflected, “I started to apply some of those theories to what I saw on the street. I didn’t talk about Ziehe and Negt with the youngsters, but I kept those ideas in the back of my mind.”

“Social workers always look for problems but these kids had solu- tions in their life world so to say. One of the things they were all interested in was music. Many of them didn’t have any home at all. What we did was ask them what they wanted to do. The politicians needed to do something. They said to us ‘do what you want, but just do something.’ Music was a way of representing their lives. So we took them into a studio and after twelve months we had four rock bands composed of young men and young women who had been sleeping on the streets before. It was like ‘we are as tough as this guitar riff.’” The result was an extraordinary youth music pro- ject called “let a thousand stones roll” (LAT TUSEN STENAR RULLA). “I understood because they were just as hooked on music I was when I was when I was like 17 or 18. The thing was the two other guys I was working with were musicians also. They’d been playing in professional bands and they had a rehearsal room. I didn’t really have the experience of playing in bands, I didn’t consider myself as a musician, but they were. So we took the kid —25–30 of them—to this rehearsal room and I was the one who had the ideas of how to make a—so to say—kind of project out of that. I understood that they were hooked on music but no one could play. So we taught them how to play—for a year—we went to this room and we taught them how to play. So, four rock bands came out of this group of 30 to 35 kids. It was equally young guys and girls … the

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girls immediately started to write song. The good thing with rock music is all you need is three chords—with punk maybe two—you plug into an amplifier with distortion and it sounds pretty good, even if you can’t play.”

The youth workers had a rock band too fronted by Ove, albeit it one with a very different musical role in the project. While the young people played the songs they had written about their lives, the youthworker’s band provided a kind of history of rock music. They did this through their repertoire covering old blues and R&B tunes like Big Mama Thornton’s *That’s Alright Mama* and *Cell Block Number 9* with songs by The Who and the Sex Pistols’s *Pretty Vacant*. A TV documentary was made about the project and attracted political interest and financial support. The youth centres of Göteborg were transformed into rehearsal spaces and involved thousands of young people, and the former street kids were turned into teachers.

Ove worked as a field social worker on the *Let a 1housand Stones Roll* project between 1979–1984. At it’s high point a hundred bands had formed within the project involving seven hundred young musicians using a 100 rehearsal spaces throughout the city. The project also ran a venue in the city centre called *1he Rock House* that still exists but now renamed *1he House of Music*. The young people also ran their own fanzine called *Hoxy Poxy* and in the early 1980s they wrote and performed a rock opera. Ove’s involvement in the project made him reflect on the relationship between playing music and learning how to live with others. “You don’t just learn how to play the guitar, you learn how to communicate with your friends, who should play this part and who should play that part. Here we have to have a stop and a break. They have to coordinate all their activities. They have to decide what kind of songs they should play, they have to write the songs, they have to build the rehearsal room, they have to furnish it. So lots of learning processes are taking place. Not just cognitive but emotional and all about your inner self and your picture of yourself as someone who knows something.”

As the young bands performed for free in local youths they sometimes returned to placed from which they had been previously excluded. Ove remembered: “One of the youngsters said when they

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came up to a youth club up in Angered (a north eastern suburb of Göteborg). He said to them ’I used to be hanging out in this youth club but you always used to throw me out because I was stoned, now I am coming back and I play in a rock band. I play my own songs and you won’t throw me out any more because I am not stoned anymore.’”

There is a link here too between Ove’s interest in the power of music and the psycho-social dimensions of human experience that foreshadowed many of his later interests and through his training as a psychoanalyst. “I became more interested in psychoanalysis because I wanted to try and make sense of how music affects your inner life. How is it related to the unconscious and such things.” He remembered: “I started to read Freud and all these people from the object relations school in England like Winnicott.” Central to the theoretical underpinnings of his work was the idea that the modernisation process limits the expressive potential of students or workers. Ove developed the idea that music was a way of express- ing these excluded or repressed parts of the self. In 1985 he wrote a book entitled *From Dreams You Weave* that picked up these themes in combination with an account of his experience as a social worker. This led him to collaborate with musicologist Johan Fornäs and Ulf Lindberg on a research project into the place of rock music in young lives. The book drew some inspiration from the *Let a 1hou- sand Stones Roll* project but extended its ethnographic scope. The book that was written from it has been translated into English and is entitled *In Garageland: Youth, Rock and Modernity* (Routledge, 1995).

While Ove Sernhede has a unfaltering intellectual and political investment in the power of music he has never been a naïve popu- list. By the 1990s he turned his attention to the complex psycho- social musical and racial dynamics of what Roger Hewitt calls the ‘black through white syndrome . At this time Ove was also writing journalism for Swedish newspapers reporting on developing debates about multicultural cities within cultural studies visiting London and Birmingham and providing commentary to a Swedish audi- ence on the ideas of writers like Paul Willis, Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Paul Gilroy, Phil Cohen, Roger Hewitt and Mica Nava

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(see Sernhede 1993a, 1993b, Røgilds 2003). This is moment when I met Ove for the first time and perhaps predictably my memory of that first meeting is dominated by an enthusiastic of exchange of opinions about a blues record!

Fathers & Sons

On the 23rd March, 1993 a conference was held at the University of Umea on ‘Cultural Studies and Discourses of Ethnicity’ organised by Aleksandra Ålund and Raoul Grandqvist. A whole series of writ- ers and academic gathered for the event including Vron Ware, Paul Gilroy, Nora Räthzel, Flemming Røgilds and Michel Wieviorka and it was here that I met Ove for the first time. Ove gave a paper on ‘Black Music and White Adolescents’ that was later published in an edited collection of papers from the event (Sernhede 1993). Using tools from psychoanalytic theory he argued that black culture and black musicians act as surrogate fathers for white adolescents—par- ticularly young men—whereby the figure of the bluesman stands in partially as a substitute father that supplement Oedipal rivalries which alerted patterns of socialisation. This is not necessarily har- nessed to anti-racism as exotic and caricatured portraits of blackness could be reproduced here as the Otherness to which white youth aspired.

The cover of Muddy Waters’s album *Fathers and Sons*—released by Chess Record in 1969 (Chess LPS-127)—in many respects pro- vides an iconic visualisation of Ove’s argument. I remember talking to him about the record at length that day in Umeå. The cover designed by Don Wilson parodied Michelangelo’s fresco *1he Crea- tion of Adam* from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Don Wilson re-painted God as black bespectacled figure in cheap sunglasses reaching out to Adam portrayed as white figure. The image por- trayed the ethos of the recording making the collaboration between blues God Muddy Waters and a generation of largely which musi- cians as a kind of ‘black through white’ act of blues alchemy. The album included a younger generation of musicians like guitarist Michael Bloomfield, that Ove had also written about in his paper, and harmonica player Paul Butterfield and bassist Donald ‘Duck’

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Dunn. Ove and I debated the degree to which psycholanalysis could unlock what was going on, a conversation that has continued to this day.

Ove remembered that wonderful meeting as we talked in Haga in 2015: “I found it very strange that all of a sudden blues music became so central for the development of styles within European youth especially the working-class subcultures. It was a puzzle that I was trying to figure out.” Just like *Not Fade Away* coming out of the speakers of that reel-to-reel taper player, I asked? “Yes. What happened when I listened to the Rolling Stones, I understood Ok it wasn’t their music they had taken it from somewhere else and I started reading on the back cover of the LPs. That was the start of my interest in black music and how much it can be a carrier of mes- sages and engagement and how it can empower people. The civil right movement and soul music and all that.”

Here the blues and black music is a carrier of a “complicated desire” for white adolescents both a symbol of what they would like to be but also a reminder of what they can never be. “I was argu- ing that there is a kind of Oedipal revalorisation and I was talking

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about how complex it is. It’s all about identification and I am also relating it to a changed patterns of socialisation and family patterns that is transformed in the industrial society and the late capital- ism” he remembered. This research provided the basis of Ove’s PhD thesis that he completed in 1994. After that he raised some research money to look at similar issues in relation to contemporary hip hop culture focusing initially on white middle-class kids based in the centre of Göteborg. Ove felt he needed to compare the white Swed- ish appropriation of hip hop with the way young people of migrant heritage were drawing on the same forms in the suburbs of the city. Unlike the UK or the US, Sweden suburbanises its poverty and new migrants are settled on the edge of the city. As a result much of the debate about ethnicity and racism has focused on the suburbs. His research in the Göteborg suburb of Hammarkullen (Hammer Hill) looked at the ways in which young people from a variety of diverse cultural backgrounds use music, this time hip hop, to win space for themselves beyond the confines of their highly segregated

and stigmatised urban environment within Swedish society.

Ove explained that it soon became clear that the priority for his work was not going to be the white middle-class hip hoppers. He explained: “they were extremely well-read they’d done their research but after six months I felt I have to focus on Hammarkullen. I couldn’t be in two places at the same time.” He got more involved with the groups of musicians and rappers and a musical collective called the Hammer Hill Click. Then in 1998 Ove found himself in the midst of tragedy. On the 29th October fire broke out at a club night at Backaplan in Göteborg and 63 young people lose their lives. Among the victims are two of the members of Hammer Hill Click. Ove remembered: “I should have been at that gig, two guys who died I’d researched. When you have a situation like that … I really felt I had to leave my career as a researcher. With all my interviews I had to put it away, at least for a while. Then I became—not really a social worker—but I knew how to get resources to these kids from the municipality, to get them into therapy. I mean I worked with that kind of stuff. I met the parents and introduced them to how to get their rights and some of them didn’t speak Swedish so good. I went to dinners with them and informed them of their rights and

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who to contact. The whole system with cemeteries and how to deal with the hospital how do you manage to navigate that. Then you are in shock, you have trauma, your son or your daughter has died or is in hospital. I was deeply involved in that.”

Ove’s conduct through this period conveys a lot about the moral and political force of his way of being a scholar. He summed up in the following way: “I have never been interested in being a tradi- tional academic person. You know writing articles for those kind of journals that nobody reads. Lots of people don’t really see me as a scientist, they see me as an agitator but I want to be part of the university. I started the Cultural Studies department, I started the centre for urban studies but my idea with those institution was that they really should be in communication with the society outside.”

If You Down With This

From the late 1990s Ove has been focused on understanding racism and segregation in the suburbs of Göteborg (Sernhede 2002). “You have to remember Göteborg is one of the most ethnically segre- gated cities in the OECD” he said. This is why Hammarkullen became such an important site for his research and political work. The suburbs are also a space of refuge, diversity and creative cultural expression.

“Their parents some from all over the world: over fifty ethnic groups in the suburbs. But, even then there is a pattern of mixing and building new kinds of identities. The young ones don’t see themselves as Swedes, or Somalis, or Argentineans, they see them- selves as part of the hip hop nation. They see hip hop as a global tribe. To me there is something interesting about this ‘local culture’. They consider the area as a ‘reservation’ and they make connections with excluded people around the world. Hammarkullen is not part of Sweden but part of the excluded peoples of the world. They blend Aztec Mythology with Malcolm X and hip hop as part of their her- itage to form a dissident political culture. Music is the thing that invites people into this Third Space.” As part of his research he has organised groups of young people from Hammarkullen to visit hip hop organisations in Cape Town, South Africa. Music provides

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the key thread in Ove Sernhede’s theoretical, political and cultural work. What is extraordinary about this is the degree to which he combines research and writing with organising and developing practical forms of intervention.

Once again music was the medium within which the most of articulate voice of the suburbs was expressed. This combined the political repertoires of hip hop with Latin American mythology. Ove explained: “They had parents from Latin America—political refugees—and of course they know their Che Guevara and their Fidel Castro or whoever but they also developed this mythology of the Indians tribes of the Andes. Those Indian tribes like the Mapoto tribe that were never conquered by the Spanish conquis- tadors because they moved higher and higher and then they went down and took the Spaniards at their backs. The thing was in Ham- markullen it is also high up in the mountains in a sense. They devel- oped this mythology that Hammarkullen was really the Andes of Sweden or Gothenburg. In the same way that the Spanish conquis- tadors could never beat the Andean tribes. The Swedish police could never beat the kids of Hammarkullen. They wrote lots of songs related to this. They took their names from these Andean warriors of Latin America. They had this parallel kind of idea of being on the outside … They wanted to resist Swedish society. There are no factories in Hammarkullen. The only people who work there in the area are teachers, social workers and so on. The teachers and social workers come from the centre of the city of course—Middle-class white people. So they say that their is a changing of the guard at five o’clock because then the teachers and social workers leave and go back home and then the police comes and the security companies.” Ove is always attentive to the emergent voices of political opposi- tion that emerged out of these stigmatised and marginalised areas. He continued: “At that time the hip hop culture was a community that was an expression of resistance against the segregation and the way the police treated the kids out in these areas.” The over the last fifteen years the composition of the population of Hammarkullen

has changed and with that so has the shape of its politics.

“Now their is a different politicisation because many migrants are coming from the Middle East and these new formations don’t

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really like music and some of the parent don’t allow the kids to get into music at all. Still we have radical rap groups with a background in the Middle East but what you see now is a radicalisation that is more political.”

However, the legacy of black America has remained a strong influence, particularly a group in the suburbs that modelled itself on the Black Panthers. Ove explained: “In the financial crisis of 2008 the industrial structure of Sweden was also hit by this crisis. And Volvo which is the main car building factory which is in His- ingen or Torslanda—this island on the other side of the river—and those who formed the panthers were original working for Volvo and they were made unemployed. They fired maybe a 1,000 persons and most of them were young immigrant people. It was mainly a working-class area and we had an intense confrontations between young people out on the streets—unemployed and frustrated and so on. Some of them went to the Volk High School which is a kind of adult education centre run by the workers party and the trade unions and when they got into that and wanted to educate themselves. They got in touch with ideas about the welfare state and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. There were like four guys who went to these adult education classes that were in history and social science.”

Ove recalled: “Then they asked the teacher—I know the teacher because she’s working in Hammarkullen now she’s a great woman like 65–70 years of age—she is really a activist. She rented a movies about the Panthers and these guys when they saw that movie they flipped out. ‘This is what we want to do!’ So they started to raise demands against the local authorities in that part of the town saying ‘we are fired from the factory, lots of kids out on the streets get in trouble with the police, lots of drugs coming in—we need a place where we can meet, where we can discuss, we can develop strategies to change our lives and so on.’ That started in 2011 and they got out a petition and thousands of people write on that paper. Then they had lots of other people who want to take part in this struggle. Then they say how are we going to organise, what shall we call our- selves? Then this guy Morat from Kurdistan who was the most bril- liant of them as far as I understand, he said: ‘We are the Panthers’.”

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“Then he has borrowed all the books from Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale. He was totally devoted and they started to organise themselves as the panthers for the restoration of the suburb. That became a huge thing. They occupied the meetings the politi- cian had and made their demands. There was such a strong pressure that the politicians gave them the youth club. They started to do other things campaigning against police brutality, they occupied the morning paper, it was a kind of liberal paper that writes a lot of bullshit about the suburbs and immigrants and such things so they occupied the newspaper because they had written something that was completely wrong about a guy from this neighbourhood. So they wanted and apology from the newspaper and they got it. The head the newspaper had to go because it was such a scandal. They were in newspapers they were all over the place and they organised this 1st may event in 2012 out in Biskopsgården and 6–7,000 people came and they had Bobby Seale coming to give a talk.” Ove raised the money for Bobby Seale visit and lecture.

In addition to Bobby Seale rapper Dead Prez visited and played for free and contributed to a seminar with the local hip hoppers. The dialogues were critical and sometimes fraught. Ove explained: “There is this gangster mythology also in those areas and if you haven’t been to prison then you are not really a tough guy. The Dead Prez was so angry about this attitude and he really gave a kind of lecture talking about ‘if your are in prison you are unable to change society. You have to be on the streets.’ All these guys were— you know—they were ‘OK, OK, OK’. It was amazing.”

Ove’s work and scholarship is distinctive in its capacity to com- bine a therapeutic quality with analysis and political mobilisation. He donated the royalties of the book he wrote about his experiences in Hammarkullen (Sernhede 2002) to finance a CD of local rappers the Hammar Hill Click. He is both a listening post and a curator of encounters where thinking takes place and where new ideas emerge. “To me, I have seen the university as a platform, a kind of arena … I have never been locked into a structure. I have always tried to find a way to be free and the main reason for that is I want the university to communicate with what is happening outside the university.” For him the university is not confined to the campus, knowledge is

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mobile and the place of thinking is everywhere. “I want it to be a part of the society … ethnic minority groups, The Panthers, artists from Latin America or whatever. That is why I arranged courses out in Hammarkullen.”

The physical and social gap between the young people of the suburbs and the institution of education remains. This is a topic that Ove has focused on in his recent work (Sernhede 2011, Beach & Sernhede 2011). “We applied for money to do research on school: why? Because the most creative the most rich the most interesting cultural things that happens in Gothenburg happens out in the suburbs. It’s where the kids do films, music, dancing—I mean on an extremely high level. At the same time the school results are very bad. At the same time there is an enormous richness of cul- ture. All these school out in the suburbs are really bad in terms of results. At the same time anyone who is talking about what’s new and interesting in the cultural expressions they all came from the same areas. So I said to myself I want to get into these schools and find out how this is possible. Of course, it is not because of the teachers because they are really trying. It’s the curriculum and tests and the new kinds of control systems that makes it impossible for those kids with parents that have no academic background to suc- ceed in school.”

The structure of educational testing within increasing audited and market driven forms of learning is the key aspect in Ove’s attempt to explain this situation. Before our meeting in Haga, Ove had been making this argument to a conference of 500 teachers. “The intense testing of these kids out in the suburbs makes it worse. That means the kids out there are not allowed to take their own experience and lives into the school and discuss that. That means they feel that school don’t belong to them. It is part of a Swed- ish society that they don’t have any connection to because they live out there in the stigmatised suburb and maybe 30–4 % of all males are unemployed. The school have to be opened up and let the experience of the young people from those areas in. It has to be possible for them to see themselves in it. I interviewed the kids and they said: ‘we should start every term, every semester with us educating the teachers in what we have gone through. My parents

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should come here and teach them about what it means to be an exile and go through like eight different countries before we come here ’ That’s what I was talking about today at the conference.”

It’s My Life: A Coda

During his stay in London in the early 2000, where he was a visit- ing professor at the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths, Ove returned to his love of sixties music and rhythm and blues. He commented in 2002: “I am returning to the roots of my own interests. When I heard Bo Didley at the age of fourteen it was like someone knocked me in the head. I was amazed. To do this research in London was, so to say, returning to my own past. I didn’t know that when I wrote the application, but just now I can see it was. I have spent hours in the British Library listening to the oral histories of musicians involved in this scene. I don’t know what I’ll get out of it but something keeps me listening. I am still fasci- nated with London. It has been inside me all my life.” In the decade or so since this time, Ove has put this project to one side choosing instead to focus on the urgent priority of analysing widening urban inequalities and the social life of the suburbs.

Music remained at the centre of his life and work linking his political analysis of the racially debarred aspects of urban life with how shared forms of social experience provide the basis for collec- tive mobilisation and cultural politics. This is all combined too with Ove’s psycho-social and therapeutic interests in internal life and the care for individuals. In a way music in Ove’s through provides the link between our most intimate internal experience and capacity for creativity. He reflected on this in our conversation in Haga in 2015: “When sociologists talk about music they see it as something that is related to your identity, in a sense … if you are into that genre you wanna be that kind of person. Of course that’s one aspect of music. To me there are other aspects that affects your inner life because … music’s a tool that you use to get to know yourself. I mean music is a kind of language, which goes beyond or is underneath the verbal language, still it is full of meaning. The meaning of what is playing, the tune, the notes and so on—it is not obvious. It is something

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that relates to your own personal history or your experiences and so on—your feelings. So, for example when I am home writing I have like ten different records that I put on and it’s like Bill Evans the most lyrical [pianist] or Franz Liszt very passionate slow or Schubert this extremely vulnerable but still full of feelings lots of jazz musi- cians like Miles Davis or the ballads of John Coltrane or whatever. It puts me in a certain mood, it puts me in a mood that says you are in a safe place, I know this music I have been listening to it for twenty years but still its the same records. I can stop that and I can go into the music because it is so rich even though I have heard it a thousands of times I hear new things every time I listen to it. It is also possible to let the music be a kind of safe haven or something that carries me, a container or something.”

Music also calls our attention to how social life is lived. “In another mood I could use music in another sense. To play music, why do people play music? I think it’s a way of being social when you don’t—so to say—rely only what is said in the verbal language. You know that feeling when you do the right thing, when every- body is doing the right things, it is the kind of communication that is beyond everything actually. I mean you are in heaven, I mean you just feel good. It’s so good to get that feeling … to me in that sense it can be compared to orgasm.” Is that the reason why James Brown sings “I feel good , I ask? “Yes, that’s right. When you are together with your mates and you play and it feels good and everybody … you see he’s smiling and then he smiles when this guy does some- thing on the drums or whatever. And it is just as good as it could be being a human being actually … I think so at least.”

There is no surprise that Ove’s son—Henning—has become a professional musician. “Yes, I like that very much I really love to see him play. He’s a rather shy guy actually but when he is on stage and when he is playing his guitar he has this timing and he doesn’t over do it.” Henning is a successful guitarist receiving critical acclaim recently in the UK for his recordings with Benjamin Folke Thomas particularly his album *Rogue State of Mind*, 2015 (Bucket of Brains BOB151). As a musician Henning has a command and gentle authority that is quite reminiscent of his father.

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Ove is a kind of cultural instigator able to lever resources for his projects that bring people from disparate backgrounds and experi- ences together. As a scholar, I think of him as a kind band leader or a producer of urban life making sociable and ethical forms of knowledge. In a time where academic professionalization licenses individualism and institutionalises selfishness Ove’s life and work offers an alternative model for an intellectual vocation. Our times might be against his emphasis on political engagement and cul- tural activism in academic life but the example remains. Part of the problem is that academics have become self-policing with the result that intellectual life is academically circumscribed. I am not sure if Ove Sernhede ever asked for permission from his Head of Department or academic manager to do any of the things he has achieved. His DIY ethos is an exemplar of what David Beer (2014) calls *punk sociology*. Rather than building and consolidating an aca- demic career he has remained loyal to the next political and social priority that matters.

Following the arc of Ove Sernhede’s work over the course of 25 years three key commitments to therapeutic, analytical and politi- cal work remain consistently present and music is the place where they meet. At the end of our conversation in Haga I asked him if he thought he would ever return to writing about *Not Fade Away* and his first musical love affair with sixties British blues. “In a couple of years I will be retired and then I will come back to the Roll- ing Stones, the blues and the London scene in the sixties.” Given everything that Ove has said in this joyful conversation, it seems almost ridiculous to ask him why music is so important. I feel the need to try one last time regardless. He pauses for a few seconds before giving one final answer, “well … music is an expression that comes from humans and if you want to understand or relate to humans that is one way of getting in contact with what it means to be human. It’s like breathing … I mean you have to breath and you have to talk to be human and music is also part of that.” Yes, indeed. Let a thousand stones roll.

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