

Red Shoes

By Bruce Petherick

SCENE: An Adult soccer coach stands in front of 15-20 7 year olds on the practise field. It is their first session. He is trying to get the children to speak about themselves. One of the players is standing apart from the others looking confused.

Coach: [pointing to the child who is standing apart from the others] Ok, what is your favourite colour and number.

Young kid: [thinking for a second] Red and 7.

I had no idea before this question was asked of me what my favourite colour or number was, nor why it would be important. I do remember clearly why I answered that way: The morning before going to the soccer field, I had watched the English soccer on our television, and my favourite player was playing. When the coach asked me this, I thought of the player, George Best and since the number on his shirt was 7, that was my answer. Best played for Manchester United and they wore red, and there was the answer to that question. I have never changed my affiliation with the colour red, nor the number 7, nor, for that matter, my love for Manchester United.

At both of my (government) schools we wore a uniform. For reasons that are unclear to me to this day, most Australian schools require that their students wear a uniform, even if it is sometimes inappropriate for the weather. To be honest the uniform requirements were mostly not policed (other than an obsession with the length of girl's skirts...) I was always more comfortable not wearing shoes and especially at Primary School (Elementary for my North American readers) I tended to go barefoot. Even now, I prefer to not wear shoes and I love to feel the grass under my feet. I understand that a number of Autistic people love this feeling of connection to the earth. I even would prefer to play soccer without shoes, as I love the feel of the ball on my feet, but people tend to like to stamp on my feet when I do this.

As I moved into Secondary School (a combination of Senior and Junior High) the uniform required began to become more formalised, and perhaps more adult. Dressier collared shirts and pleated pants became the regular wear for me, and always, always shoes were required. I acquiesced to these conditions, but I never knew why. No one had ever told me why the uniform was necessary other than to mention school pride. And more importantly, no one explained why I had to feel uncomfortable when I was wearing the required clothes. They were hot and made me sweat, something that I hated if I wasn't running around.

Of course, in the larger society uniforms were worn all the time; Sales clerks in the large department stores wore uniforms, and businessmen (always men at this time) wore suits and ties. The first time I didn't have to wear a uniform was when I went to University. What people wore, I think, was called "fashion"! I tried to fit in with what people wore, but most often I felt uncomfortable unless it was a (100%) cotton tee-shirt, jeans and some sort of footwear. When I started to play professional music, again, uniforms started to be required for me, and the uniform that I had to wear the most was "Black and Whites". I cannot remember exactly the first time I was required to wear this, but I do know having to ask fellow band members what it meant. The question I never asked, which I should have, was: WHY? Why did we have to wear these clothes, and why did everyone have to look the same?

There has always been a little bit of a rebel in me. I never wanted to fit in with everyone and look the same, eat the same or think the same. More importantly, I also did not want to be the focus of attention, or be at the front of anything. I think this is a reflection of my autism - never really fitting in with things because of not understanding what was going on, but also realising that I was different - in all of the meanings of that word. I hated the idea of wearing a uniform when I didn't think it was necessary so I started to push the envelope in a way that wouldn't get me sacked. I started to wear red socks to gigs. My socks were special to me - they felt very physically comfortable (again only 100% cotton) and, most important, they made me feel safe emotionally. My (now distant) memories of these early performances are mixed - I always enjoyed playing, but found the times when I wasn't playing empty, and a little scary.

I never got sacked from a gig because of my stretching of the uniform "laws", and as I got a little more secure in my standing in the musical community I started to wear red shoes. I now own 4 pairs of red Vans and I try to wear them on gigs as much as possible. I was even married wearing a brand new pair of red Vans. They are comfortable for me and the colour calms me in a way that I can't explain. Now I have more reasons to wear red shoes. They reflect my Autism and my support for my fellow Autistics!

About the Author

Bruce Petherick is a neurodiverse (ASD) musician and a creator of acoustic spaces living in Calgary, Canada. He has performed music around the world, playing various styles from classical to jazz and musical theatre. He is married to Meredith, an artist, and a social worker, and is a parent to 3 children, 2 of whom are also neurodiverse (ADHD).

As well as being an active performer and composer, he has taught at tertiary institutions in both his home country of Australia and in his new home of Canada.

Bruce has presented at many musicological conferences around the world and is an infrequent speaker at churches where he performs.

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