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Rags to Riches

by Sue Hitchcock

I knew Arthur Brown, not well, but well enough for him to greet me by name after he became famous. What follows is in part speculative but seems possible.

I blame it all on where he grew up, maybe I should say, I credit it, as the outcome was brilliant. Arthur came from Whitby, where his parents ran a boarding house. Whitby is notorious for its diabolical connections, which may be the result of Bram Stoker's "Dracula" or maybe the author was inspired by the latent atmosphere of the town. Arthur was a bright boy and his parents afforded the expenses involved in his attending a good school in Leeds. He grew to be a tall young man with a splendid, resounding voice and a concern for fairness. A career in law, maybe as a barrister, could have suited him. So he enrolled at London University to study law.

Too many distractions – jazz clubs, cinemas – led to his failing his first year exams, but a second chance at Reading University might save him. Maybe – but this scion of Oxford University, without its intellectual brilliance, was more reactionary than its parent. There were no left-wing societies, not even C.N.D. although Aldermaston was nearby. The only outlet for Arthur's voice for justice was the Folk Club.

A small group of like-minded friends decided to form a Diner's Club, where a pair of friends would cook dinner for the group. It usually resulted in a lot of drinking and singing. One of the members was Malcolm, a wan young man with a wicked sense of humour, who performed hypnosis and other types of voodoo, skills he had acquired, he claimed, from his grandmother, the last authenticated witch in Derbyshire.

Was there a mole in the group? So many of these bright students failed their degrees. Arthur? I don't remember. They went their separate ways. Arthur abandoned his former ambition and became a musician. He rebranded himself, became as magic, outrageous and frightening as he could be. He became "The God of Hellfire". What had inspired him? Maybe Whitby, maybe "Dracula", but it led to a gold disc, and a powerful influence on a generation of musicians.