



Kieron Pim, *Jumpin' Jack Flash. David Litvinoff and the Rock'n'Roll Underworld* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), ISBN: 9780224098120, 386 pages, £16.99.

Reviewed by

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Watch the end credits of *Performance* and his name appears, some way down, but it's there all the same: Dialogue Consultant and Technical Advisor – David Litvinoff. If the name makes any connection at all it might be to wonder if he was related to the author of *Journey through a Small Planet*, Emmanuel Litvinoff. (They were half-brothers.) He might have remained submerged in the minutiae of 60s East End life if not for the 'Sight and Sound' article on *Performance* in September 1995. Colin McCabe discussed Litvinoff again in the BFI book on the film in 1998 and his name cropped up the same year in a BBC film about Donald Cammell. Then, as if to cement his place in London's psychogeographic landscape, Iain Sinclair picked up on his trail when working on *Rodinsky's Room* with Rachel Lichtenstein. At the time he seemed nothing more than one of those characters who crossed between east and west London in the 1960s. There were stories about Litvinoff's acquaintanceship with Lucian Freud, and association with the ill-fated Ormsby-Gore family, not to mention his actual relationship to the Krays. As Kieron Pim's book demonstrates the story of David Litvinoff is unpleasant, complicated, sordid and fascinating.

The product of five years' research, several hundred interviews and travel across two continents Pim has done the hard miles in order to tell his story. It is not a story that comes easily to light. As Pim notes he is 'elusive; rumoured acquaintances clam up at the name's mention, trails run cold in the Carpenter's Arms' (xxii), but he keeps on trying to pursue this shadow. Interviewing those who knew Litvinoff means talking to people relying on some fifty-year-old memories; and these are people who have lived hard. Alcohol and drugs have taken their toll on many. The bohemian life was not for

the faint-hearted. For many, Litvinoff was a terrible force, for others a truly inspirational figure. For each person who remembers him with a shudder of distaste, there is an Eric Clapton or Frank Ormsby-Gore (Lord Harlech) to remember him with affection.

The introduction offers an example of the Litvinoff mythos, which can so easily confound the biographer. Following a disagreement, probably with Lucian Freud, he was knocked unconscious, either by associates of the Krays or some of the Camden Town Irish that Freud knew. He came to some hours later, or maybe the following day, with his head shaved, tied to a chair above Kensington High Street. Or was it upside down over the Fulham Road? Or was it because of something he had said not to Freud but to the twins? The story shifts each time, the kernel remaining the same but some detail always slightly changed. As Pim says several times, trying to pinpoint the truth of Litvinoff is never easy.

There are two certainties about Litvinoff, that he was born in 1928 and died in 1975. He was born David Levy, son of the second husband of the senior Litvinoff's widow; and therefore only a half-brother to Emmanuel. Growing up in poverty in Whitechapel, he followed a similar path to the Krays, except his was a slightly more political path into violence. This was post-war London and still a place where anti-Semitism was present. He knew how to dish it out early on and in all probability take it as well.

Inhaling the east End's poisonous atmosphere day after day seems to have given his personality a tint of jaundice, shaping him into a man who was primed for violence: not only eager to fight back against anti-Semites or anyone else who threatened him, but to land the first punch. (27-8)

He was an inveterate gossip; talk was his trade. Pim suggests that Litvinoff could be regarded as a type of 'batlan' (a Yiddish word for joker, fool, philosopher, storyteller, i.e. the Fool in *King Lear*). However, what may have been regarded as a charming eccentricity within the Jewish community, was less fondly regarded by others. Also, he was defiantly homosexual in a pre-1967 world. In Chelsea he met Donald Cammell, then the boy wonder of the London art scene; he also served as conduit for the Krays. Pim's book moves through the familiar locations of the Kray's story, from Vallance Road to Esmeralda's Barn, with Litvinoff as the jester and troublemaker. This was not something that Ronnie Kray was happy about and resulted in Litvinoff having his face slashed in Earl's Court in 1961, presumably on Ronnie's orders. Again, there remains some ambiguity about what happened; the story shifted slightly each time Litvinoff told it.

There is a painting of Litvinoff by Lucian Freud, done in about 1955, which Freud called 'The Procurer'. Litvinoff hated the title and this may well have had something to do with their falling out (that and his habit of charging drinks to Freud's bills). Yet it is likely that Litvinoff helped Freud to clear his gambling debts with the twins, or other interested parties. The word procurer has, of course, a pejorative association: someone who acquires sexual partners for pecuniary reasons. Litvinoff was probably guilty as charged. The book makes it clear he knew enough chorus boys and rough trade from the slot machine arcades to have made a fairly successful living from it. But the OED

lists a second definition for procurement: 'to bring about' and in this respect Litvinoff is more deserving of attention.

Jonathan Green described Litvinoff as a gangster, enforcer, practical joker, provocateur and nexus between artistic Bohemia, élitist rock and hardcore gangland (427). It is a description that permeates our understanding of *Performance* the film and Pim's book serves to gloss the first part of the film as a reflection of Litvinoff's story, or the story that he wanted to be put out there. There is the head-shaving scene, the intimidation scene, the use of language and various bit of slang. Phrases of his would crop up in Jagger's song 'Memo to Turner'. *Performance* represented an apogee, not just for Litvinoff, but for just about everyone bar Jagger and co-director Nicolas Roeg. The relationship between Litvinoff and most people was usually one of financial or sexual exploitation. With Donald Cammell it seems to have been more creative and certainly Cammell's surviving brother David seems to have some genuine fondness for Litvinoff.

After 1970, with the Krays inside, and no little amount of paranoia permeating Litvinoff's circle, he moved to a cottage in Wales. He then spent some time in Australia with the artist Martin Sharp and other members of the early 70s Sydney bohemian scene. His old powers of charm, threat, camp sensibility and humour were still evident. Pim quotes liberally from a television interview in 1971 which shows just what a performer he could be. The following is an example:

Interviewer: David what do you think public reaction will be to this exhibition?

DL: I think it will be one of massive indifference. And I believe the public will stay away in their thousands

Interviewer: Why?

DL: Well, there's several movies showing at the same time [...] I don't understand the Australian collective psyche 'cause I'm just a modest unassuming young Hebrew boy.

However, there is a sense of burn-out creeping in through the last third of the book. This life led at full throttle was never going to end happily. Litvinoff was acting as a caretaker of various properties, but he had no home and no sense of a plan or direction. He committed suicide in 1975.

So why does this story matter? In part because it gives us another means of understanding *Performance*; it also allows us to travel through the gay subculture of pre-1967 London. In both respects Litvinoff was a remarkable character. There is a picture on page 45 (a link is listed below) which shows him leading a marching band during the 1955 Soho Carnival. In busby, military jacket and tight black shorts he is every inch the essence of camp, an aspect which Pim acknowledges. He reflects back some of the attitudes towards homosexuality within the East End criminal world, which John Pearson could only hint at in *The Profession of Violence* (1972). A quarter of a century later McCabe noted that it was in 'Chelsea that [they] acknowledged publicly the homosexuality which had seemed like a bad secret in the East End but which was merely fashionable within a King's Road setting out to enjoy the 60s' (41).

But he was also a man of violence, as the account given by a former boyfriend, Richard Levesley (115–23), makes all too visible. However, even here there is some degree of ambiguity. Again and again, any account of Litvinoff comes up against the clashing account of another version. His biography emerges through the stories told about him, stories which Pim shows were carefully curated by Litvinoff, at least to begin with. His dialogues with John Ivor Goulding, which he secretly recorded, are part Pinter, part exploitation of a weaker individual for Litvinoff's amusement. Pim quotes liberally from these dialogues and in a way they do sum up something of Litvinoff's character: clever but bored, judicial but vicious, open and secretive.

As Iain Sinclair notes, this book 'nails the passing shadow of a life to the deck'. In *Rodinsky's Room* he sees Litvinoff as a model for Davies, the tramp in Pinter's play *The Caretaker* (1963). Pim shows that the model may need to be modulated a little now. Other stories about Litvinoff also require some recalibration. What remains, however, is what he brought to *Performance*; the friendships that he could count on, and the sense of a wayward talent which got lost. His tapes circulate amongst a small group who value this oral artist of the streets. This book makes some of that talent available to us all.

Works Cited

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Note on Contributor

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