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## An interview with Benjamin Zephaniah

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### Abstract

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ERIC DOUMERC

## An interview with Benjamin Zephaniah

**ED** *Could you first tell me about your background and where you come from? What was your childhood like? What was it like to grow up in England? Do you feel English, West Indian, both or neither?*

**BZ** Well, I was born in England. I was born in the city of Birmingham. What was my childhood like? It was a very rough area; I remember many of the buildings, much of the area was still flattened because of the war. It wasn't an area that when I was young was a particularly black area. Every day you were reminded of your colour. That was it, really, I mean... The good thing about it was, because it was tough, because we always had to fight on our way home and things like this, it kinda toughened me up for the future.

Do I feel English, West Indian? I don't know ... I don't really have this problem about identity. Politically I'm British, you know. I've fought for my rights here. Culturally I feel as African as ever, but both of these things are irrelevant really, because by the nature of travelling the world, because of travelling the world, I've become a kind of internationalist, I could settle anywhere in the world. If I do go to a place, then I may tune in to the BBC to hear the news. If that makes me English, that makes me English, but I could never sit down with the English and drink tea.... So, there you go.

**ED** *When did you first get interested in poetry? At school? Through some friends?*

**BZ** I got interested in poetry before I knew it was poetry. I thought it was words that sounded the same, words that meant something. I quickly understood the difference between words that conveyed anger, words that conveyed love. I didn't particularly know what the words meant, but the kinds of emotion that they were trying to express, and I love rhyme! So there was a particular time when I would just say 'I play with words', 'I have fun with words'. It wasn't till I came across people who read poetry or who said 'you know, that's actually poetry', but until then I was just playing with words, and I don't remember the time when I started, I was just doing it all the time.

**ED** *Would you say that your poetry is influenced by mainstream British poetry? Do you like this type of poetry?*

**BZ** I do like some of what you call ‘mainstream British poetry’. Shelley, for example, is one of my favourite poets, but I wouldn’t class Shelley as mainstream. He’s probably mainstream now, but in his time he wasn’t mainstream. No, my poetry is not influenced by mainstream British poetry in any way really. And I mean, I evolved as a poet not knowing any mainstream British poetry, not knowing any poetry really except for the poetry I heard on the streets.

**ED** *Do you consider yourself as a dub poet or is this label inappropriate? Linton Kwesi Johnson, Martin Glynn and Mutabaruka do not like that tag. What about you? Which of these poets do you feel closest to in terms of craft and creativity?*

**BZ** Well, I’m a rastafarian, and that doesn’t mean that I agree with all rastafarians; it means that I came to see God through Rastafari, and my vehicle into poetry was the form of dub poetry. And so, to a certain extent, I think that when these oral poets say, you know, ‘Don’t call me a dub poet! That’s not me!’, they’re almost denying their roots. I mean, I’ve done LPs and films and things which have nothing at all to do with the dub form, but if somebody called me a dub poet, it’s not the worst thing in the world: they’re just acknowledging my roots. Maybe it just happened that they haven’t kept up with me, and they haven’t heard my jazz poetry, or my funky poetry. But I wouldn’t deny my roots, I am essentially a performance poet, a dub poet. I mean, when you’re looking for terms, I think I can take on most of these terms, and I feel comfortable with them. It all depends on who’s saying it really.

**ED** *What about the influence of Dee-jay music and of reggae in general? Do you use reggae rhythms in your poems?*

**BZ** Most of the time I do use reggae rhythms consciously in my poetry. Again it can’t be helped. Do I have to sit down and go ‘Right! Let me deny all this heritage I have, all this music I grew up with. I mean I also deejayed on sound systems and told jokes. It would be silly for me to deny all of those things! But reggae is probably the strongest influence I have. And I’m happy with that.

**ED** *You often use the word ‘rant’ or ‘ranter’? What’s the difference between a deejay and a ranter?*

**BZ** Well, the term ‘ranting’ was popularised in the late 1970s- early 1980s by people like Attila the Stockbroker, and there was a poet from Yorkshire called Little Brother, even John Cooper Clarke. And it was, if you like, the white form of dub. It was poetry that you ranted out, it had a very

working-class rhythm to it. And there was certain things about my poetry, the speed of it and the pace of it that also had something in common with rant, hence the title of my first record, *Dub Ranting*. And I think it's a great title because it just kinda really captivates what I was doing: I was taking this very Jamaican artform and mixing it with my 'Britishness' if you like, and I came up with this term 'dub ranting'. And, as I said, to rant is really to shout and I do that in my poetry a lot; I don't kinda lie back all the time and be like a cool voice behind a rhythm. Sometimes I'm wild in front of the rhythm, ranting over it! So that's where the term 'rant' comes from.

**ED** *Are you totally committed to performing or do you acknowledge the importance of the printed word?*

**BZ** I think when it came to *City Psalms*, I started to think a lot more about the printed page. *The Dread Affair*, for example, was a good book, but it simply had my performance poems written down. The thing with *City Psalms*, the book after that, was that I did start to think about the page more. And *Propa Propaganda* was my pride and joy really because I thought a lot more about poetry on the page, and I do think that there is a performance poetry there, but you don't have to have heard me to really appreciate the poetry. So more and more I am acknowledging the printed page but I have to say this: at the end of the day the people I want to reach are the people that don't read books anyway, and I still care very much about performance poetry because it gets into the places where the books can't reach.

**ED** *Could you tell me about the current Black British poetry scene? Is it easier to get your work published today than it was ten or fifteen years ago?*

**BZ** It's not easier to get your work published today. A lot of the publishing houses that were around ten or fifteen years ago did rely on grants. We had a lady who kinda ran the shop here called Mrs Thatcher and she really cut down on the grant system. But in many ways it showed that so many poets kinda had to rely on grants, and when the grants went, they went with the grants. If you like, the few of us who are surviving now are surviving despite the kind of market forces that we have to fight against. We're kinda surviving in a commercial world. I mean I think I survive as a poet because I sell records and as performance poet I sell books. And as an actor, I act. At the moment I am scripting a film, but if a poet was gonna hang around and write for the shows to go on stage, that's very difficult. We're going back to an era when there are small community

centres, and if you're a performance poet and you're good, you can get work and keep moving around the various centres. But unfortunately there's not as many as there used to be.

**ED** *Is Black British poetry a kind of 'fringe poetry' or is it slowly getting into the mainstream of British culture?*

**BZ** I think it's slowly getting into the mainstream of British culture ... I mean, every week [in 1996] I was on BBC Radio 4, Radio 1. I've had various programmes on mainstream TV. So slowly 'Black British poetry' is becoming main stream. That could be a good thing and a bad thing. I think it's a bad thing if it kinda waters the poetry down, and you're always fighting against that. I had a book that was number one on the children booksellers' lists, and I felt it was getting a little bit too sloppy. So then I put out a hard-hitting album [*Belly of the Beast* released in 1996 on the Ariwa label] and a hard-hitting book called *Propa Propaganda*, just to let other people know that I am still against capitalism. But although I am an angry black poet, you know, I care about the environment and I can see beauty in all kinds of natural things. Basically there's a lot of other elements in me. I don't sit down all the time just cursing the government!

**ED** *Your poetry seems to be characterised by a wide range of themes and subjects: race relations, police brutality, the environment, male chauvinism, the royal family, the oral tradition, etc. Would you say that this feature of your poetry reflects the evolution of Black British poetry or that it is just a characteristic of your own poetry? In other words, has Black British poetry broadened its horizons or its scope over the last fifteen years?*

**BZ** I've got to have seemed to be plugging Radio 4 a lot here, but on Radio 4 there was a whole programme [in 1996] about black poetry and it was all about love poetry. I think fifteen years ago that would have been impossible: a reading by black people would have had to be about the police or about racism. Yes black people kinda all over the countries write in different forms. You know, I fall in love and I feel love as well. So I mean, I've written poems like 'Kissing', and 'Food', and 'Animals', and 'Me', and style and fashion and school, because they are things that I experience.... And we have to let people know that the black experience is not one all the time of running away from the police! So it's broadening; I think it has to, to survive.

**ED** *Levi Tafari and Martin Glynn often use the word 'griot' to define their poetry. Do you consider yourself as a modern-day griot? Is a 'ranter' a modern-day griot?*

- BZ** Yes, a ranter is a modern-day griot. To a certain extent, I do consider myself as a modern-day griot. If you like, a ranter is a good English translation of a griot — someone who stands on the corner or moves around the town, doing poetry that's kinda newscasting in a way.
- ED** *What is the role of the Black British poet today? Is it the same as it was fifteen years ago?*
- BZ** Yeah! To write poems! But, quite seriously, I mean, there are some issues that are very important to the black community which do not get aired in the mainstream media, and in the black community there'll just be whispers that, you know, something has changed in the immigration law, or somebody has been killed in a police station. And then the poets really come into their own, because there were times, especially a few years ago, when we would be employed by the C.R.E ( the Commission for Racial Equality) and people like this to go round and inform people what was happening, because we could not get no airtime on the various stations and that role still happens today. But I suppose now, we've got maybe a little easier access to the media, but there is still a need to kinda go out there as it is.
- ED** *The words 'slogan poetry' have been used to describe ( or criticise) your poems? Do you consider yourself as a political poet or just as a poet?*
- BZ** I consider myself just as a poet really. I mean, I can pick up many poems of mine which are not political. The idea of slogan poetry ... I mean, I think only white people can say that, or black people that are trying to act like white people, who have won literary prizes or things like that ... I mean black people wanna be free, and I'm not scared to stand up on stage and say that. If somebody wants to say that's a slogan, I don't give a fuck until black people are free! I mean I kept saying 'Free South Africa', people were saying it was a slogan, but I didn't care until South Africa was free. I don't say it now, it doesn't make sense now, but at the time it was important, and it was a line, a kind of sentence that people remembered, and, I mean, it was the poetry of demonstrations, and really the poetry of the people in that sense, because it was in the people's minds. Some of these poems are never written down but they can remember them. So I'm not quite sure ... I mean, 'to be or not to be' has become a bit of a slogan. That doesn't mean it is kinda irrelevant. So I don't really think we do 'slogan poetry'; I mean, we may have a kind of call and response, and there may be a repetitive nature in our performing style, but, at the end of the day, when we have a people that are not being published widely, they have to make poems that capture the people's imagination and if I

would have sat down and tried to describe a rose in five hundred different ways, I would never have been heard. Because I got on stage and said things that people were feeling, whether they be slogans or not, that made people listen to me and the white world to me, and I know I don't expect to win any prizes from white people.

**ED** *Is Benjamin Zephaniah a happy man?*

**BZ** Yeah! Benjamin Zephaniah is a bloody happy man! Yeah, well, I'm a happy man... Personally I can't complain, but if I look at the state of Black British politics, I'm very unhappy and there's a lot of work to do. I mean, we had the opportunity a few years ago of emigrating to South Africa and I really wanted to go, but there's so much work to be done here politically. And, you know, I'm not happy about the way everything is becoming American, and greed taking over ... and everybody in Britain nowadays wants to win the lottery and win a million pounds. I'm not happy about the fact that more black people are dying in police cells now than there was in the '70s. How can I be happy about that? I mean, we live in the middle of an area [East Ham, in the East End of London] which is full of racial attacks all the time. I cannot possibly be happy about that at all! So, I'm happy to be here; I just want to change here.

**ED** *Your latest collection, *Too Black, Too Strong*, contains many hard-hitting pieces in the 'protest' mode. Is that book an attempt to go back to the radical dub poetry that made you famous?*

**BZ** I have enjoyed putting humour into my poetry, and I think, in *Too Black, Too Strong*, basically I was feeling very angry about the situation politically in Britain, and worldwide. I thought we were evolving into a world where we knew the price of everything and the value of nothing, where the word 'terrorism' has been corrupted, because it's only terrorism when some people do it, and it's not terrorism when other people do it. And I just wanted to make a very strong statement about how I felt. I don't think radical dub poetry is devoid of humour. I don't think that is the way to define it. As well as being very serious, humour is a part of it, but for me it was certainly an attempt to get back to the politics, get right down to the nitty gritty, and I think the title, *Too Black, Too Strong*, I chose because I thought that some people would be offended by it. I really wasn't trying to be politically correct to anybody at all. This is exactly how I felt at the time, and I thought some poets as well would be offended by it. As I said earlier, a lot of poets were writing to win awards and not really dedicating themselves to the art and using their voice to speak.



- ED** *You wrote a number of poems about your Black British 'identity' ('The London Breed', 'The Big Bang'). That theme seems to be important in your work.*
- BZ** I suppose so ... I don't sit down and think 'I'm going to write lots of poems about identity'. There's a poem I wrote called 'Knowing Me' in which I actually say 'I don't have an identity crisis'. And that's what happens in Britain a lot of the time. People come up to me and say 'Do you feel black? Or do you feel Jamaican? Or do you feel African? Or do you feel British?' And, you know, I don't sit at home thinking 'Am I black, am I British?'. I happen to be black, I happen to be a Rastafarian, I happen to be British. If I have a political identity, it's being part of the world community. It is real true globalisation. It's not the kind of globalisation that multinationals want, but I want to be a citizen of the world. So you know, being black and all that, being British and all that stuff, it's not really that important to me. I mean, it's important, but the most important thing is being a human being, and if there's a French person that's suffering, they mean more to me than an English person that's living okay, and I'm gonna be concerned about the person that's suffering. I'm not gonna say 'They're in France and I'm in England' because, to me, the important thing is being a humanitarian.
- ED** *The poem entitled 'Knowing Me' reminds me of 'The Angry Black Poet', which appeared in Propa Propaganda. These two poems deal with the commercialisation of dub poetry and echo Mutabaruka's 'Revolutionary Poets Have Become Entertainers'. Do you sometimes feel that you've become an 'act', an entertainer?*
- BZ** Normally, when I'm going on stage, I'm very relaxed and very friendly with people, but there was one person that introduced me as an act, and I refused to go on. I waited for him to come up, and I almost beat him up.
- To a certain extent, when I perform on stage, there's an entertainment element to it, but I don't like to call it an 'act'. An 'act' seems to imply that it's made up, that it's phoney, that it's not true, and even when I'm on stage and I'm telling all kinds of jokes, all these things come from real life. But to a certain extent, some people are going out on a Saturday night, they may say 'shall we go to the movies? Shall we go and watch a film? Shall we go clubbing or shall we go for a meal? Shall we go and listen to Benjamin Zephaniah?' And they see it as a night of entertainment. Now I'm sure they don't see it purely as entertainment because they know what Benjamin Zephaniah is gonna say to them, or they know what Benjamin Zephaniah is gonna talk about, and not all of it is gonna be entertaining. You know, when we are talking about racists putting

knives into people or refugee women being raped in Poland and things like this, I don't think that's entertainment, but this is put in the context where they're at a show. This is just the kind of constraints we have to work under, but I don't first and foremost see myself as an entertainer. I see myself as a griot in the African tradition, which is a travelling poet who is a musician, who is a bit of an actor, who is a newscaster, who is a storyteller, who is a political agitator, who sometimes also may put humour into his work, and that's it, but certainly not an act.

I think the irony about Mutabaruka's poem 'Revolutionary Poets Have Become Entertainers' is that there's some truth in it, and there's some truth in it for him as well! He's become an entertainer in some people's eyes, but I know that Mutabaruka deep down inside is a poet. Let me put it like this: 'Our intentions are good!'

**ED** *Your latest collection also contains an introduction or a preface in which you tell your readers about how you see yourself and what keeps you going as a poet. Did you feel the need to reconnect with your audience or did you write that preface to set the poems in their proper context ?*

**BZ** I wanted people when they come across the names like Stephen Lawrence and Michael Menser to have some understanding of the situation we're in, I mean, and hopefully point them to some research if they didn't really know the names. Yes, I wanted to put the poems into context and to say 'This is Britain, these things are really happening'. In the introduction, there are a lot of figures and facts. These are the facts and figures, this is the Britain we're living in now, these are the contradictions and idiosyncrasies and things like this in Britain right now. So that was the reason why I wrote that introduction and personally to let people know how I felt and why I was writing these things.

**ED** *Has the Black British poetry scene changed much since 1996?*

**BZ** There are probably just as many venues for the performing, but those venues have changed. Those venues used to be a lot of community centres and places like this. Now those venues will be pubs! And being somebody who doesn't drink and doesn't smoke, I find pubs strange — full of people who drink and smoke. But I haven't performed in Britain, for a real tour, for about four or five years. I've been touring in South Africa, South America, Asia. I've just finished touring in South Korea. Before that, I was in Libya. Before that, I was in Argentina, and in China. I'm just leaving in two days' time to go to Jamaica to make a radio programme, and after Jamaica, I have to go to Papua-New Guinea and then later in the year Australia. So I don't really know that much about the current British scene.

An interesting development has happened in that America is becoming just as strong or even stronger an influence in Britain as Jamaica was. So a lot of the performance poetry is now taking on elements of rap. Some people would say I was doing that a long time ago, but my rap wasn't inspired by America or American rhythms.

And there's also a lot of Asian poetry now. One of the most interesting developments in the poetry scene in Britain is Asian women's poetry — Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi women. And the reason I find them interesting is because theirs is a voice that hasn't been heard. A lot of them have been behind the veil for a long time, and now they're beginning to come out.

**ED** *Is there anything you would like to add ?*

**BZ** I suppose I am still, in this age of technology and mass communication, I'm still very impressed by the fact that people still wanna come out and listen to poetry. And probably more so for me right now, because I don't tour Britain that much. When I say I'm gonna do a tour of Britain, the venues are packed out on the whole! And that really impresses me: all these people wanna come and listen to a mad man like me just performing the words that he's written in his living room! So that really impresses me and gives me hope.