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Benjamin Zephaniah

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Abstract

Benjamin Zephaniah was born in England (in Birmingham) in 1958. His father, a Barbadian immigrant, worked as a postman, and his mother, of Jamaican origin, was a nurse. His interest in reggae led him to become a deejay on the local sound system scene and his approach, based on the resort to sarcasm and biting social commentary, made him really popular. This encouraged him to write short poems and to recite them, but this time with no musical accompaniment. Zephaniah's first collection of poems (Pen Rhythm) appeared in 1980, and in the following years he carved a remarkable reputation on the local poetry scene as a performer of hard-hitting, political pieces.

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In 1985 his second collection (*The Dread Affair*) came out, and contributed to launching Akira Press, an independent black publishing house. Zephaniah's other poetry collections include *Rasta Time in Palestine*, *City Psalms*, *Talking Turkeys*, *School's Out*, and *Too Black, Too Strong*. The poet also released several spoken-word recordings and CDs to reach a broader audience (*Free South Africa*, *Dub Ranting*, *Rasta, Us and Dem*, *Back to Roots* and *Overstanding*). All these recordings make ample use of varied musical styles, from African percussions to reggae, dub and electronic music.

In 1987–1988 Zephaniah was short-listed for the post of 'Creative Artist in Residence' at Cambridge University, and then for the Chair of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, which triggered a controversy in academia over the value and literariness of Zephaniah's art. Benjamin Zephaniah is also famous for his numerous appearances on television (*Eastenders*, *Dread Poets' Society*, *Crossing the Tracks*) and on the radio (*In Living Colour*, *Poetry Please*, *The Ranking Miss P*) during which the poet reads/performs his poems or gives his views on various topics. Clearly Benjamin Zephaniah is a major player on the British literary and cultural scene. Known for his uncompromising stance on animal rights, race relations, women's rights and the environment, he never fails to express his views in a frank and outspoken manner. For instance, in 1999, the poet left a think tank on education he had been asked to join by the Blair government, and stated that he did not want to be in any 'talking shop' that would only be a public relations exercise to boost the government's popularity ratings¹

More recently, in 2001, Zephaniah published a new book entitled *Too Black, Too Strong* (Bloodaxe Books) which can be seen as a return to the militancy and outspokenness that made him famous in the early 1980s. This collection contains many angry pieces like 'Bought and Sold' which begins with the lines:

Smart big awards and prize money
Is killing off black poetry
It's not censors or dictators that are cutting up our art.
The lure of meeting royalty
And touching high society
Is damping creativity and eating at our heart²

In fact, this poem recently appeared in an article published in *The Guardian* in which the poet explained why he had turned down the O.B.E offered to him by Tony Blair's government. Zephaniah explained that the word empire 'reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers were brutalised'.³ The poet simply could not contemplate going to Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen, since she is the person who symbolises this empire. This anti-Establishment stance is sure to cause a stir, but this is precisely Zephaniah's intention: his art is primarily a reaction to established values, colonialism and other -isms.

That said, *Too Black, Too Strong* is not 'one big angry protest piece' but contains many thoughtful poems on the new, multicultural Britain that Zephaniah symbolises. For instance, the poem entitled 'Carnival Days' is a beautiful meditation on the relationship between the old imperial centre and the margins:

On days like these the elders say
Astronauts can see us dance
Glittering like precious stones
On dis rocking British cultural crown⁴

Other poems like 'The London Breed' and 'The Big Bang' celebrate the multicultural nature of today's British society and they show that Zephaniah's poetry is constantly changing and reflecting the society it grew out of. It is a living, moving poetry. Although originally recorded in 1996, this interview was updated in February 2003 and thus constitutes a fair representation of Zephaniah's continued political and poetic stance.

NOTES

¹ 'Poet Quits Top Think Tank', *The Voice*, April 12, 1999.

² Benjamin Zephaniah, *Too Black, Too Strong* (Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2001), p. 1

³ 'Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought', *The Guardian*, November 27, 2003 (online).

⁴ Zephaniah, *Too Black, Too Strong*, p. 46.