

# 90. 'Dis Poetry' by Benjamin Zephaniah - A Friend to Roy McFarlane

**Fiona Bennett**

Hello and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Fiona Bennett.

**Michael Shaeffer**

And I'm Michael Shaeffer. Lovely to be with you, Fi, how are you doing?

**Fiona Bennett**

I'm doing fine, thank you, Michael, and it's great to be with you too. Now, before we get going, I did just want to say it was so great to be with you the other week with 'In the Company of Poems', with all our fabulous readers, and all our fabulous audience - and just a huge thank you to everyone that came along and donated. It was a glorious night for us, and we're just so pleased to have people there and to so usefully be able to raise a bit of funds towards keeping the podcast going. So thank you all.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Absolutely, Fi, and a massive thank you to everyone that came and read with us so beautifully. We really, really appreciate it.

**Michael Shaeffer**

We've got something of a special episode for you today. This came about after the very sad passing of Benjamin Zephaniah. You and I were having some conversations and thinking about how we wanted to mark that and to honour him and his legacy and his work. And we knew we didn't want to sort of do something immediate and rush it out, but take a slightly more considered approach. And then our very dear friend, Roy McFarlane, who we've featured on this podcast, and has appeared in various ways, in fact now, came to us with a suggestion.

**Fiona Bennett**

Indeed he did. He offered to join us in a way for this episode to reflect just a very special insight into the huge significance of Benjamin Zephaniah's work and the resonance of that work on and on into communities of poetry, of activism, and of care.

**Michael Shaeffer**

So we've done it in our usual kind of form. We've asked Roy to bring along a particular poem, but of course it is a wider conversation than that about Benjamin's work and Roy's relationship with that.

**Fiona Bennett**

So you'll be hearing myself and Fiona talking about 'Dis Poetry' by Benjamin Zephaniah - the poem that's been a friend to Roy.

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**Michael Shaeffer**

Do you want to kick us off by giving us a reading of the poem you've brought today.

**Roy McFarlane**

Yeah, ok.

**Roy McFarlane**

**Dis Poetry**

by Benjamin Zephaniah

Dis poetry is like a riddim dat drops  
De tongue fires a riddim dat shoots like shots  
Dis poetry is designed fe rantin  
Dance hall style, big mouth chanting,  
Dis poetry nar put yu to sleep  
Preaching follow me  
Like yu is blind sheep,  
Dis poetry is not Party Political  
Not designed fe dose who are critical.  
Dis poetry is wid me when I gu to me bed  
It gets into me dreadlocks  
It lingers around me head  
Dis poetry goes wid me as I pedal me bike  
I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere  
But did is de stuff I like.

Dis poetry is not afraid of going ina book  
Still dis poetry need ears fe hear an eyes fe hav a look  
Dis poetry is Verbal Riddim, no big words involved  
An if I hav a problem de riddim gets it solved,  
I've tried to be more romantic, it does nu good for me  
So I tek a Reggae Riddim an build me poetry,  
I could try be more personal  
But you've heard it all before,  
Pages of written words not needed  
Brain has many words in store,  
Yu could call dis poetry Dub Ranting  
De tongue plays a beat  
De body starts skanking,  
Dis poetry is quick an childish  
Dis poetry is fe de wise an foolish,  
Anybody can do it fe free,  
Dis poetry is fe yu an me,  
Don't stretch yu imagination  
Dis poetry is fe de good of de Nation,  
Chant,  
In de morning  
I chant  
In de night  
I chant  
In de darkness  
An under de spotlight,  
I pass thru University  
I pass thru Sociology  
An den I got a dread degree  
In Dreadfull Ghettology.

Dis poetry stays wid me when I run or walk  
An when I am talking to meself in poetry I talk,  
Dis poetry is wid me,  
Below me an above,  
Dis poetry's from inside me  
It goes to yu

WID LUV.

**Fiona Bennett**

Yeah!!

**Michael Shaeffer**

Woooo!! Roy! Wow, that's been injected straight into my veins. That was extraordinary. Thank you.

**Roy McFarlane**

Ah, man. I'm hoping if Benjamin's around somewhere listening I've done him proud. Because that's Benjamin all over, man, beauty of his poetry.

**Fiona Bennett**

What was that like to just do just now?

**Roy McFarlane**

Oh, it's funny how you try to practise a couple of times, and hear Benjamin in your head as well, because you've heard Benjamin do it so many times. But I think Benjamin would have loved this poem to be mine, and not to be a copy of him. And knowing that now I'm doing it to an audience, um, I just became one with the poem, then just got loose in it, and enjoy the...and I'm buzzing and smiling just to have read that, yeah.

**Michael Shaeffer**

Our listeners won't have the benefit that we've had of seeing you do it as well, and I was just really struck by how physical it was for you doing that. It's not a head thing this, is it?

**Roy McFarlane**

Absolutely. And so I think that's the important part when you look at some of Benjamin's poem, they are...I think there's a couple of things: they are poetry for the people, in the sense of accessible; I think he would equally have said that he embodies the poem - and I'm talking about a tradition of Black English poets that are going way, way back, but especially as part of the Windrush experience. But there's this idea of embodying the poem that you wrote, being a witness to that poetry, and also encapsulating the tradition of the oral traditions that's coming from Jamaica. So when I think of somebody like Louise Bennett, who is a famous Jamaican poet, who was unique in Jamaica in a sense that she embodied the dialect and the patois, when often time when you were taught in Jamaica, you would be learning the Romantics - you would be learning or the highbrow poets.

## **Fiona Bennett**

The thing about the oral tradition that I associate always with your poetry is that real need to communicate to the audience, which I'm not saying other poetry doesn't, of course, have that, but there's something different about that. You need to hear this. And that's often even written into the poems.

## **Roy McFarlane**

I think, when I look at 'Dis Poetry', I mean, I'm thinking of the importance to engage and to keep the audience, the reader. The other thing that Benjamin does here is it's about the sound in the hearing, especially that line where he talks about 'still this poetry need ears fe hear and eyes fe hav a look'. And it's the way that he's equally captured the language, the patois. Instead of this - t-h-i-s - we have this dis - d-i-s - and every syllable and rhythm and sound he's captured in the way that he writes this. Yeah, I like to think that in some of my poetry I've caught a bit of that, but certainly as a forerunner of what we call dub poetry - and dub poetry was a sort of poetry where the performer used reggae rhythms to enhance the beat, or to work with the beat of the poem - and sometimes if there wasn't the sound of the music, you felt it in the poem and the rhythm of that poem.

## **Michael Shaeffer**

Roy, could you tell us a little bit about how you first came to know Benjamin's work, and maybe also a little bit about how that kind of informed your own journey as a poet?

## **Roy McFarlane**

That's a great question. When I started my journey of poetry in the late 90s, I was certainly looking more to American poets like Langston Hughes and Gil Scott Heron. And I think it was in the early noughties when I started to work in equalities, and working with young people in community organisations, I came across Benjamin in two different ways. I happened to be working with Benjamin's sister, Joyce Springer. And Joyce was an equalities leader of a whole group of equalities officers in the Birmingham City Council. And we'd often put on conferences. And so we'd break up the conferences with a bit of poetry. And she got to know about my poetry. The other thing that happened during that period of time was one of the brothers called Tripper - he was an activist - and they lost a cousin, if I remember, who was Mikey Powell, to death in custody. And so I saw him on one of the marches. But Joyce was always trying to get me to link up with Benjamin. As I was doing equalities work and working with young people, I would use Benjamin Zephaniah's poem about when he got kicked up by a policeman - 'Dis policeman keeps on kicking me to death' - and he said it was a real experience. And so it was so vivid, it was so real, that when you're sat down with young people who were on the verges of gangs, or were getting in trouble with the police, you can grab their attention with his poetry. And it was like I would have an older brother in the room, sitting there with young people and say, 'okay, this

is the reality of Britain today; how are we going to work with this?' And then a couple of years later, through anthologies like 'Moving Voices', which is a whole collection of Black performance poets, you have not only the CD, but you have his words in the collection, and they talk about the history of the oral tradition. And now I'm a performer, I would always put that CD on, listen to Benjamin, and say, 'oh, that's how you do the repetition. That's how you engage. That's how you express yourself. That's how you let loose. You can! Oh my God, you can let loose on the stage!' And I think that's my teaching, that's my learning that I got from Benjamin. So I guess it was two things: being a witness to the lived reality that we were living in, and the second thing is bringing that poem to life.

### **Fiona Bennett**

What an incredible fusion of connection.

### **Roy McFarlane**

Absolutely, absolutely.

### **Michael Shaeffer**

It strikes me that there's also something about some sort of shared sense of humanity or social conscience. Benjamin, of course, was an activist through his poetry, you know, I don't think they're separate things...he seemed to me to sort of stand for himself and an integrity to him about what he believed to be right, and to talk about that without fear.

### **Roy McFarlane**

Oh, without a doubt. I think that is the key element - that Benji was a humanitarian, and spoke without fear. The famous thing that everybody remembers is the rejection of the OBE that he got on live TV. It's quite interesting - in his rise, I think he became one of the most televised poets. In the late 70s, early 80s, Channel Four was just coming up. You know, we're living in a period where we've got hundreds of channels; back then we only had two, then we had three, and then we had Channel Four. And Benjamin became the face of poetry, and he then became the People's Poet. I think - I'm sure he said something about - before becoming a poet, or in that transition of poetry and being part sometimes of the sound system - so in the 70s we had sound systems where you could go and dance, and you would have somebody standing there along with the records being put on, but you'd have somebody called the toaster, and the toaster would be toasting, dropping lyrics between tracks - and sometimes in the toasted, you would talk about the politics of the day - and Benjamin would talk about South Africa, he would talk about what was going on at that period of time, and the struggles...Palestine, he went to Palestine and India and all these places...that's, ah man, that's a man that is alive, a prophet of the moment, and not only talking and writing it, but living it and actioning it and being in those places. So not only in the toasting on the sound system, now people are saying,

'oooh you sound really good, why don't you do poetry?' And then suddenly Channel Four sees this dreadlocked guy, speaking it as it is - and again back in the 80s, somebody with dreadlocks and looking like a Rasta, is problematic. 'We can't have them...' Often The Sun had a Rasta on the front page and saying 'this is what we have to be afraid of...this is what's causing the riots.' But here we have Benjamin saying 'no, I'm a human being. I see the issues around the globe, not just locally, and I want to talk about it. And if you give me this five minutes' - I think he said it himself - 'I'm not going to talk about daffodils, I'm going to talk about what's happening right now.'

### **Fiona Bennett**

I love that moment in the poem: 'I've tried Shakespeare, respect due dere' - and then he says later, you know - I've tried love poetry, but it doesn't get me into it, you know - it's just that kind of real vibrancy. And at the same time, there is a tremendous intimacy and tenderness, a kind of ability to speak to the single listener, not just to the crowd. I think that's an extraordinary skill.

### **Roy McFarlane**

Yeah, yeah, I think he was very skillful. That part where he says: 'Dis poetry is quick an childish / Dis poetry is fe de wise an foolish, / Anybody can do it fe free, / Dis poetry is fe yu an me, / Don't stretch yu imagination / Dis poetry is fe de good of de Nation' - It says it all in those six lines. It's where he's saying listen, let's bring it down, we're doing something for the people. I think you've got to bear in mind, remember, that both of us are coming from a church, Pentecostal background, where as young men we were - from the age of 7, 8, 12 years old - put on the rostrum to preach God's word. Whether it would be for five minutes or 20 minutes, whether we would have to quote a scripture, and we'd have to quote it in front of an audience of 100 people or so.... And when you preach, you had to preach with passion. If you just spoke the word of God, if you just...talked, you would lose the audience, kind of thing. So it was almost as if we were imbued by the spirit of God, imbued by the words of God. And then we, we got the audience moving. And that is what Benjamin brings into poetry: make it plain. And yet, when he makes it plain, if you read through these things, over and over again, there's an incredible knowledge and bigger thing he's talking about.

### **Michael Shaeffer**

I also noticed that some of the truths he might be talking about can sometimes be difficult. But it really struck me that he ends this poem: 'it goes to you' - and then in capitals - 'WID LUV.' And that there is that love that's in there, that seems to me to kind of be the thing that runs central through everything he did, and everything he was.

### **Roy McFarlane**

Yeah, and I think that's great that you bring up that last line, and he puts it in capitals, he says - and again, this is what I think is part of his humanitarian side of who he is - he says: 'listen, we're going to talk hard about the issues that are around us. I'm going to tell you what I've witnessed and what I've lived through. But believe me, in everything the most powerful thing I bring to you is love. Love for a community, love for the nation, love that will make a difference - not just now, but for the future.' And yeah, Benjamin was full of love in so many ways.

### **Roy McFarlane**

I just love how playful he was in interviews. I believe he kind of played fool to catch wise as it were. And I would like to think with the humility to say: 'Listen, just don't be too clever, let's understand each other. Let's understand where we're all coming from, and that we share this journey together', kind of thing.

### **Fiona Bennett**

Roy, I wanted to ask you, you were speaking about the kind of influence of listening to that CD - and you're making me realise I've gotta go and get that CD now because it's, it's upstairs - I wanted to just bring it to a little bit more recently, like, in working on 'The Healing Next Time', whether he was kind of on your shoulder with that book, in terms of brutality and violence against Black people, people in custody, the way you manage to address that?

### **Roy McFarlane**

Without a doubt. 'The Healing Next Time' was written during a period when I was doing my Masters in poetry. And my last essay was basically explaining how the whole book came about, or why am I writing this book...why am I looking at deaths in custody, and using the sonnet form. And funnily enough, there's a section in there that talks a lot about a Rasta. And not necessarily Benjamin, but what I found in Benjamin, when we look at the Rastafarian movement, especially here in England, and especially in the 70s, and the 80s - not only was English society and the police and the sus laws causing Rastas so much problem - but even in the church, the Rastafarian was something profoundly different, even though it was about God, even though they used the Bible, even though they would talk about Solomon...all these connections...and yet we would frown upon them. And if I became a Rasta, with my hair locked up, my father would have kicked me out the house. He would have kicked me out the house and thinking something had mentally gone wrong with me. So that's the kind of stigma that was upon the Rastafarian community. And when somebody like Benjamin says, I'm embracing this beautiful thing, this thing I'm living in, and in the public arena, I'm being a Rastafarian: it's such a powerful statement. And I guess I'll bring that up that within my essay, I write about Benjamin, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Jean 'Binta' Breeze - these guys were like five, seven years older



than me, and they were the older brothers and older sisters that took the hit, took the brunt, took the...all the words... They were either just coming as five-year olds from Jamaica, or they were just the first individuals to be born in in Britain from the Windrush migration. And so, in being English, but having this Jamaican background, speaking patois and trying to navigate yourself through education, through jobs etc., they took the brunt. And now I had somebody like Benjamin Zephaniah writing it, and making it plain. And for me, it felt like, 'okay, guys, you've done that. You've opened up the door. Now it's my turn, and my experience of what I'm going through.' And especially as an equalities officer working with communities - and I saw these things, I was on the marches, I was at the funerals - I now realised, being the younger brother, I had to take up the mantle, and write it. And so being able to have a collection of these writings, not only am I inspired, but I've got to bring my voice. So yeah, Benjamin was a major inspiration within that second collection.

### **Michael Shaeffer**

Roy, we're somewhat throwing this at you, but I was wondering if you wouldn't mind reading the poem from your collection...

### **Fiona Bennett**

'In the city of a hundred tongues'?

### **Roy McFarlane**

Ooooh. And yes, yes, okay, that's cool. Let me have a look...

### **Michael Shaeffer**

We're just being really selfish.

### **Roy McFarlane**

Just to give this context: 'In the city of a hundred tongues' - this barefoot Rasta, dis Rasta - there's a repetition of that in there, and not only Benjamin used this idea of the word 'dis poetry', but a famous poet by the name of Mutabaruka, pure Rastafarian from the hills of Jamaica, one of the most globally beautiful, powerful poets. If you have - I hope somebody in our time as Poetry Exchange will come to you with a poem from Mutabaruka. But one of Mutabaruka's famous poems is 'Dis Poetry.' Likewise, I don't know who came first. I wouldn't even want to debate who came first between the two of them. So I came along knowing that Benjamin has done 'Dis Poetry', knowing that Mutabaruka has done 'Dis Poetry'. So I thought, why not do 'Dis Rasta'? And this is how this has come about.

**Roy McFarlane**

[POEM TRANSCRIPT COMING SOON!]

**Fiona Bennett**

Wow!

**Michael Shaeffer**

That's extraordinary.

**Fiona Bennett**

So beautiful.

**Roy McFarlane**

Yeah, yeah. Thank you. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That, that's Benji and Muta, and so much of my legacy.

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**Michael Shaeffer**

Our thanks, of course, to Roy for sharing that conversation with us and giving us permission to share it with you. And to Bloodaxe for allowing us to use 'Dis Poetry' by Benjamin Zephaniah.

**Fiona Bennett**

Our thanks also to Roy for sharing his own poem, in the midst of that conversation, 'In the city of a hundred tongues.' It was a fantastic experience to have that in the flow of things. And that comes from his collection 'The Healing Next Time', which is a phenomenal collection of poetry. If you don't have it already, head to Nine Arches Press. And I also wanted to mention - and thank again Bloodaxe - the book and DVD that Roy mentioned, in which he had sort of channelled many poets, including Benjamin Zephaniah, and that is called 'In Person: 30 poets', and it's edited by Neil Astley, and it comes with this accompanying DVD. And you do get poets reading their own work. And I think as the book says, it's like having an international poetry festival in your own home. And it's still available, and it's a brilliant testament to Bloodaxe's amazing work.

**Fiona Bennett**

So on the subject of books, Michael, I do want to give a bit of a shout out to this new book that's coming out, which is entitled 'Shakespeare's Sisters: Four Women Who Wrote the Renaissance' by Ramie Targoff. It is a scholarly work. It's uncovering women poets of the Renaissance - the first female poets we don't know about - how come? And it's done that great uncovering work, but it's done it in

such a lively and fascinating way, and indeed with the poetry within the book, so it's really, really extraordinary. And Ramie is in the UK and doing events...for anyone who's in London, on March the 12th she's at Waterstones Piccadilly. And you can head to Quercus Books for 'Shakespeare's Sisters: Four Women Who Wrote the Renaissance.'

### **Michael Shaeffer**

Very good, that sounds great, Fi. Quercus Books - aren't Quercus Books publishing a soon-to-be-released anthology by The Poetry Exchange, Fiona?

### **Fiona Bennett**

They are indeed. They are indeed, and there I was perusing their catalogue and I spied 'Shakespeare's Sisters' and thought, hang on a minute, that sounds a bit good! So yeah, along with 'Poems as Friends', the forthcoming Poetry Exchange tenth anniversary anthology available for pre-ordering right now, you can also find 'Shakespeare's Sisters.' So it's great to be in such good company, isn't it?

### **Michael Shaeffer**

It's great. That's great.

### **Fiona Bennett**

So let's return to 'Dis Poetry', and hear Benjamin's performance of the poem, with thanks again to Bloodaxe.

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### **Benjamin Zephaniah**

#### **Dis Poetry**

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It goes to yu  
WID LUV.

**Michael Shaeffer**

We'll be back with you next month with more poems as friends. Until then, thank you for listening.

**Credits:**

Benjamin Zephaniah, 'Dis Poetry', poem and recording from *To Do Wid Me* (Bloodaxe Books 2013).

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