

THE BARD OF STRATFORD



Interview with Benjamin Zephaniah

27-year-old Benjamin Zephaniah who lives in London's East End has been nicknamed 'The Bard of Stratford' by sections of the press. His style of communication, known as Dub Ranting, is performance poetry both with, and without, reggae music. The West Indian dialect is exaggerated but the message is clearly rooted in the British political experience. With a pamphlet, album and single to his credit, his regular live appearances range from Miners' benefits and youth clubs to the Edinburgh Festival and the Black Penmanship Awards. Next month he will be touring Europe with his band. Here' he talks to Caroline Rees.

Could you give us a brief personal history?

I was born in St Elizabeth, Jamaica. I came over here when I was seven. Then I went to school, and became a burglar when I was about 10, started playing truant, getting in trouble. I just did everything that everyone else did. I went to approved school, I went to borstal, I went to jail.

What was the jail sentence for?

I've been inside a few times. I'm not going to give a story of being reformed. But the energy it was taking to do all that crime, a lot of it petty, I'm just putting it into poetry now. I got in trouble once for fighting with a police officer in the Bull Ring. One time, I got a two-year sentence

for something I'd never done.

I know what police have done to me. My mates come across good police. I haven't got an anarchist view about this. You *need* people to look after people, even if it means just crossing over old people. You need people on the streets who are public servants. But don't remove them from the people. There's one thing I love about China. Everyone has turns at being the police. When you get stopped, if you think his arguments are wrong, you can almost arrest him! I thought that was really strange, but why not?

How would you describe what you do?

I'm just someone who wants to express myself, and I'll use anything I can to do that. That happens to be a bit of writing, a bit of music and poetry, a bit of poetry on its own. But, it's no good getting on stage singing about this, that, and the other, and not doing any work in the community. So I go round to schools, community centres, even mental hospitals sometimes, doing poetry and talking.

When did you start writing and performing poetry?

When I was 12 or 13, toasting over the microphone. And that was just rapping, off the top of my head. We used to listen to a lot of Jamaican music then, with Jamaican messages, so I wanted to do the same thing with an English slant to it. There was a power cut one day and I just carried on without the music! Then I started going on demonstrations. I started experimenting with writing songs and rhythmic poetry, and managed to get a little pamphlet out. From there, everything took off.

How did the Benjamin Zephaniah Band come about?

I had a band before. When I started, because I was putting poetry on the music, it sounded very unusual to everybody. This was about six years ago. Then I started doing a lot more on my own, and the band disintegrated. This band has been together for about a year.

People didn't find you so weird on your own?

Well, the weirdness made it quite successful! At the same time, I think it got popular because people saw it, at first, as just being

political. Thatcher was really unpopular, you know, when there were riots and things. People were interviewing me and saying: you're a bit lucky in a way. I was doing it a long time ago. It's just happened that people are taking more notice now. Everybody was saying: What have you done in writing? I couldn't even read or write. This was an oral thing. Poetry that I'd read, or prose, spent too much time going round something. I wanted my stuff to be straight to the point.

When I first started to get into the hands of the press, people used to come up to me and think I was some kind of a mystic. Some kind of a Great Thinker. The biggest word I use is probably 'inflation' or 'immigration'. There's a bit of swearing, because I swear normally. There's a bit of humour. I'm quite strong about my thoughts politically, so that comes into it.

What sort of audience are you getting?

Just lately, I've been to Sheffield and I played two places which were just round the corner from each other. One was a completely white audience, and one was a completely black audience. So it all depends where I play and who does the advertising.

Why do you think you appeal to so many white people?

The press are more inclined to go for white-orientated things. I do a lot in the black community but they don't review it. The most satisfying work is not commercially advertised and financially it doesn't pay.

Do you set out to speak both to black and white people?

That's quite consciously done. It's a black person speaking but so everyone can understand - dread language mixed with my socialist politics. Without music I wanted to appeal to lots of different people. One time I was doing the punk scene. The toasting that I did originally was so fast and so West Indian that a lot of black people didn't understand it. Those are my roots but in England in 1985 you've got to reach a bigger audience. Poetry was too easy to do, to just stand up and read it. Toasting was too difficult so I did it halfway.

How choosy are you about where you appear?

I'm hardly choosy at all. So long as people understand what I've got to say, as long as they are not my enemies. I don't expect everyone in the audience to be 100% with me, but at least I've said how I feel and not left it to a politician.

Do you want to influence people politically through your poems?

I believe most people *do* think like me. Now, that may sound a bit arrogant but I feel basically most people want peace. I am a practising Rastafarian, but I don't see my mission as converting everybody to religion. That is one thing that causes war, so why should I come and add to the war? Unlike saying 'war is stupid', I go a bit further so it's not so middle-of-the-road. I say:

'Stop the war stop the war
Military powers we know who you are
All your allies have guiltiness
And the *people* don't want no nuclear mess.'

Governments go to war. *People* don't really go to war. What I'm saying is not to convert people to my politics, but to say: listen, let's tell them exactly how we feel. If we have arguments, we work it out. But we don't leave it to the politicians.

What role would you give to politicians?

There's a great saying by some ancient Chinese writer that I could quote, but I don't know it. Basically, it meant a politician must, first of all, be a person. I want to know that my politician's literally next door. I want to know that I *can be a* politician. There are places in the world where that's happening, to a certain extent. In India, for instance, where the government's conservative, you still get people at the grass roots doing co-ops. They've a whole little economy of their own.

We've actually done it in our own way here. We had a bookshop. From the bookshop came a Co-operative Development Agency and that helped set up workers' co-ops, such as a print shop. Then we started this housing co-operative. If we want builders, we get them in the co-op - baby-sitters, everything. Most of my musicians live with me. All the children are ours, etc. It's nice in '85 that we're still doing it.

Would you put a label on yourself politically?

I'm a strange mixture really. I can only get

my views from what I see and what I learn. I believe Rastafari is like God without religion. It allows me to look at Buddhism, Christianity, Marxism, everything. I've been carrying locks since I was about 13. One time, I really used to like sports cars, sex with girls as much as possible, having lots of money, worrying what I looked like in front of people. I used to not think much about politics, and think everything was rosy and all right, you know.

At one time I'd have said: No! Don't call me a socialist. But if someone gave me a 50-50 mark, it would be more 60% socialist. A better way to describe me further is a Garvey-ite. Garvey believed that everybody had the right to control themselves, that black people should not be put down. He believed in a bit of socialism, a bit of capitalism. He believed in things for the good of the people. You can't just shove something off because it's capitalism. There are things about England that I really hate, hate, hate. Angry! Other things I say: Well, you could only do this in England. Governments are governments. I want *people* to start talking now.

So what action can people take?

I smile because this sounds like an anarchist view, but I feel people should realise that they don't necessarily have to vote. We always seem to have a bit of faith in the political parties. You say: I'm going to vote for this one because it's not as bad as that one. In some way, people should make a protest.

More realistically, even more immediate, are issues like the GLC, the bomb. More people should come on the streets. Someone said to me: Why are there not a lot of black people supporting CND? So I said: Why is it that a lot of white hippies are supporting CND? On all the council estates round here, everybody's against the bomb but, if you mention 'reds', they get a bit uptight. If CND's really what it is, you should all be able to make a stand. I support CND.

What do you think of the GLC's Anti-Racist Year? You make jokes about it on stage.

I went on the first show that launched it and said this is a joke. I come here for the laugh of it. But I'm still going to do my thing. Even some of the GLC staff agreed. Unfortunately, this is the way people notice it. You have a year for this, a year of that. . . All these benefits for Ethiopia,



Benjamin Zephaniah Band in concert, London, January 1985.

like I say at the end of 'Stop the War':

'They tell I that they want to make the world free
But yet they're just draining the economy
So when dem talk about their food for the famine
I shall tell dem it was their war from the beginning
And it would not be there if they were willing
No, not if governments were willing.'

So do you believe there is any value in the Band Aid record reaching No 1?

It's a bit of corn and a bit of wheat to feed the people. As Garvey said: If we don't see a united Africa, then Africa will always rely on other people for help. People are starving in Ethiopia, people are fat from champagne in Nigeria just down the road. Africa must be free, independent, strong. Not a Great Power. We've been downtrodden so long, why be angry again and start more wars? Why should black people in England try and be better than the white people in England? Let's show them how to live. Why should black Africa be stronger than Russia or America? Let's just be an example to them.

And the riots?

It was an explosion of people really. It wasn't black. It just happened to be in the areas where things are bad, where black people are. The police and the Govern-



ment have ways of cooling it down. They put a Marcus Garvey Drive in Brixton, and a nice little Wimpy house. . .

Now with the miners, they can exercise and practise. They can get back to us later! No big thing.

MISS WORLD by Benjamin Zephaniah

Beauty is about how you behold
more than silver more than gold
If I say I am beautiful
know this is not incredible
cause beauty is about how you greet
de everyday people dat you meet
You are beautiful so all rejoice
your beauty is a natural choice.

My sister is a beautiful girl
she don't want to be Miss World
her value is not prize money
more value than a pearl
My sister is a beautiful girl
human delight
she could be out of sight but she would
rather stay and fight.

Her legs are firm and sharp
best for self defence
dis daughter kicks like wild fire
so cause no grievance
she won't walk the platform
to upsex peoples lust
and you can't get the number of her height
age or bust.
She don't want to go to the market
to be viewed like a slave
the viewing time is over
put de judge in the grave.
She don't need to go to the market
cause she's already won
Beauty contest no contest
she don't need to run.

I talk of people in society who judge you by
your looks, den, give you a number dat is
written in a book, and lustful eyes from all
around come to look at you, dey judge your
lifetime by a quick interview.

My sister is a beautiful girl
but she don't want to be Miss World
Her personality can not be rewarded by no
Judge or Earl.

My sister is a beautiful girl
she needs no contest
and you can't put her with another judging
who's the best.
And you cannot judge my sisters heart
By looking at her breasts.