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[Episode: Keith Jarrett](#) – (February 2016)

Transcribed by David Turner – 28/2/2017

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Keith Jarrett – **KJ**

**Conversation:**

**DT:** Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today I'm in Camden in north London and I'm joined by Keith Jarrett. Hello Keith, how are you?

**KJ:** Good.

**DT:** Before we get into chatting we're going to start with a reading.

**KJ:** So, this is about my name. For those of you who think I may have been named after the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett or after my father Keith Jarrett. I wasn't. This is how I got my name.

...a new spelling of my name

For my birthday they rescued my name from a bargain bucket in Barking  
Too cheap to afford a new one

Dog-eared and ragged, they wiped it down best they could  
Said I was an old soul anyway

I would have been a Lindsay Russell Daniel or Kurtis  
But they gave me this one to suckle on

So I chewed, bit, kicked and rattled it  
Till jazz piano lullabies tinkled out on my baby stool

I carried it to school on my shoulder  
My friends called it *Jarrett the Parrot*, *Keith the Chief* and *Mellow Man*:

It was the way its yellow eyes shut on top of class desks  
I guess it was because it lacked focus.

Older now, it became a pet I couldn't bear  
To hear barked out on buses

I tried to drown it in the River Lea  
It still skulked behind like a bad wind

My name was too dirty, too old  
Too much like my father

At home, I was LK Junior Daniel D  
And anything but  
my name

But my name got bigger and grew claws  
Stretched to 5'8" tall and became solidly built



**DT:** Actually, we were just chatting before weren't about people being able to access poetry and why they might not be interested in poetry and what might be blocking them off. Maybe that point of, if people were aware more that maybe the poet is just asking questions rather than trying to make a point.

**KJ:** Yeah or be smug.

**DT:** Yes, be smug or be smart. Or tell you something and if you don't understand it then there's something wrong with your analytical mind, or something. But maybe people would be more comfortable if they were aware that maybe it's just a question.

**KJ:** And, also, something that we haven't yet discussed. In education, I know for a fact that a lot of GCSE syllabi... Syllabuses? No, it's syllabi. They really focus on... And, in fact, not just English but outside of that, everything is focused on, "What is this person trying to say? What does this mean?" Rather than, sort of, drawing your own interpretation and just enjoying the experiential element of poetry.

There are some poems that I don't fully understand, which I really enjoy and I get my own meaning from it. I'm sure it's very different to what the author intended but if you go into a class room there's a pre-packaged answer which is usually right or wrong, or you have to justify it in some way. There are poems that, yeah, as a practitioner I do have to pick apart certain poems and think about why this works or why it doesn't. But every now and again I do like to just read a poem and say, "I don't care about all of that. How does it make me feel?" And I think just like music, it's something that brings about feeling. It should, not always, some poetry leaves me cold but I avoid that.

**DT:** There is so much about, that's natural that that would happen. I just find it strange that anyone would treat any piece of art as an endpoint to anything. Maybe it's just something that seems so natural to me that I can't understand why it would be any different. But, I've always felt like any piece of art being put out into the world is the start of a discussion, rather than a definitive answer to anything.

**KJ:** Yeah.

**DT:** Most of the painters I know, their paintings aren't ready it's just that the exhibition came around and the work had to go on the wall. I don't think anyone really feels like their work is finished in any way. It's perhaps as ready as it will ever be but that's a different thing from being finished, isn't it?

**KJ:** Very much so. That's a really good way of thinking about it actually. I do keep meaning to go to more exhibitions and I feel somehow, you know, there is that thing... Poetry is a form that chose me, mostly because I was... I was always put off art, as in drawing and painting and I never thought I was any good at it. So, I do have a natural stumbling block to that and I do now go and see more exhibitions than I used to but there was that barrier there. I didn't feel that I was literate in art. I feel, probably, a lot of people feel the same about poetry.

**DT:** I think there are a lot of similarities. I've said this a lot on the podcasts that I have a background in the visual arts and there are a lot of similarities between the way general public, that aren't involved [in art], view painting for example and view poetry. We probably don't have enough time to go into it properly but people don't, and understandably so, don't want to be made to feel stupid. And if you don't understand something it's easier to dismiss it than perhaps ask for an explanation. I think the two things the two art forms are very similar.

What have been your main influences as a writer and or performer?

**KJ:** As a writer, I have so many and it's difficult because I do think... Because I do write poetry and fiction I feel the poetry side has been much more performative, it's much more out there. The fiction stuff is just me, just writing on my own and having a couple of stories published in the odd magazine and, you know, just chipping away at the novel. On the performance poetry side, there are so many. At the moment someone like Danez Smith, I think. But, I think hip hop was an early influence growing up, so a lot of American like end of the 90s rap. When rap was actually good!

**DT:** You're showing your age now Keith.

**KJ:** I know I am.

**DT:** Because the kids are saying 'Grime' now.

**KJ:** See, I don't mind Grime. It's this 'Trap' stuff, for me, it just sounds really... And it's fine, I know that it is purely aesthetic. I understand that everything thing is to do with aesthetics, what connects with you, what connects your time and everything. But at the moment it feels like a lot of so-called rappers are just like st-st-stuttering, like, "Deh-beh-deh-beh-deh-beh". It just makes me want to say, "Come on you can do it! You can make a full sentence". That's mean. So, yeah, I would say a lot of rap initially. Poetry wise, I'm having a blank.

**DT:** Actually, it's a bit of a cruel question to spring on people.

**KJ:** It's really cruel!

**DT:** Because there's so much to talk about and mention.

**KJ:** There is, at the moment I'll just... my influences change all the time. At the moment, there are people like Kei Miller who I have been influenced by in a, kind of, role model-ly way as someone who switches from writing a novel, which is where I first discovered his work, and then like five different books of poetry or something ridiculous like that within a few years and then goes into essays and short fiction as well.

So, to be able to blend that and to be able to switch voice as well, people who switch their voices and who can refer to different people. I mean, in terms of short fiction, someone like Junot Diaz his early short stories in a book called Drown, I first read it and thought, wow,

here's someone who is able to write in English with a very Spanish speaking aesthetic. Someone who will just slip into like Dominican-Spanish words without feeling the need to gloss, without feeling the need to translate, without...

And it makes sense and it's, sort of, even for those who don't understand... I do because I lived in that country for a year. There are so many references and things that not everyone will get but it's not there to make you look stupid. It's there because it works and it needs to be there. There are plenty more, this conversation could last a long while.

**DT:** No no, it's good to just have a few. It's nice because there are always new names coming up. I think we should take another reading.

**KJ:** Okay, I'll do that.

Whom shall I fear?

On one of my agnostic days  
my brother telephones.  
The ringtone is muted or I am dancing  
to the news anthem – its urgency thrills –  
so I miss our chance at a conversation again.

I am storing my news in chaotic segments  
waiting to break them, piece by piece,  
these blocks that clog  
the six thousand mile gap  
that separates us.

\*

And then the cashier enquires whether I have a loyalty card.  
And then I reply that I am an atheist.  
And then he fails to see my humour.  
And then he scans my atheist chorizo slices  
with the same indifference as my unholy cheddar.

I double up my bags.

\*

When I believe that hell isn't inside my body  
and inside this fever-stained night  
and inside the rage of below-the-line rants  
I read when I cannot sleep;

when my dark skin does not carry immigrant fear,  
when I do not take offence wherever I can find it,  
building a home from these brickish men  
with petrol bomb eyes;

when I can finally wash the Vaseline circles from round my eyelids,  
and laugh the sin from my belly  
and chip at the ingrained history worn too thick around my waist,  
when it is no longer a lifeboat  
when whom shall I fear? has eaten up my adversaries

then I shall walk seven times around these walls  
with nothing but a scarlet thread  
and a hollow promise to clothe me.  
I shall conquer this city.

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**DT:** Thank you very much. You touched on, briefly, about the way poetry is perhaps presented in schools.

**KJ:** Yes.

**DT:** We're going to talk a bit about your background in education but it might be better for you to explain, yourself, how you got into spoken word education.

**KJ:** So, I had been performing a lot of poetry over the years and I had also done some work in schools, mostly mentoring and occasionally getting involved with poetry and using poetry as a way of mentoring. I was approached by a guy called Peter Kahn in Chicago and he was trying to put together a program in conjunction with Goldsmiths University and a school in East London to train up spoken word educators, full-time spoken word educators.

And this was the first time it had been done in this country and it was quite scary and I went through a long series of interviews. In the first year of the program six of us started working in this school while also doing an MA at Goldsmiths which is called, "Writer/Teachers". It is looking at writers in the educational system, looking at a lot of pedagogical and educational theory and just looking at our creative practice as well.

It was a very intense experience, I was involved in a more full-time basis for like two years and then I had a year of just doing ad-hoc work in schools before, now I'm involved in a full-time PHD. But that experience really shaped me and the programme has been running now for four years I believe. I don't want to count the years! But it's been running for a while there are people...

I was going to say below us. Not below but the people who continued and come up since. There's a few of us still working full-time in schools or at least three days a week, because the idea is... A lot of times, schools roll out people to do... One of the things, you know, was National Book... No, so it was World Book Day yesterday.

**DT:** That's right.

**KJ:** Although, I think America does it on a different day.

**DT:** Yeah, I was wondering how 'global' it was. I think it happens everywhere but it's probably different days.

**KJ:** I think a lot of places around the world have a World Book Day, I know that here and in the Middle East and a few other countries, at least, it was yesterday. But other places it's in May, a bit like Mother's Day. Maybe there are linked, books and mothers? I haven't bought anything for my mum, that's an aside. But, you know, I'm sure thousands of poets up and down the country were invited to schools yesterday.

They rock up, they're parachuted in, they do a workshop or three probably bouncing from class to class. Some of the kids get really really excited and they write new stuff or not [perhaps] really underwhelmed because they don't know this person who's just been parachuted into their school. Then they go and it's forgotten and the idea with the spoken word educator program is; no, you have someone who is a resident in that school who knows all of the politics, who knows the kids gets to really nurture their talent and really also have that space which is separate from the curriculum.

That's the important thing, it's not part of the national curriculum where you get young adults and children to explore emotion explore what's on their mind. A lot of things come up, especially right at the beginning where they've not really had the chance to express themselves other than in terms of what is expected from them to pass an exam.

And suddenly they're talking about their home lives or how they feel about certain things or... I've been in situations where pupils have 'come out' or they've talked about how they feel being bullied or, you know, attitudes to race. All sorts of things come out in a poetry exercise and the idea is, obviously, it's a literary endeavour but it's also an emotional one and it's not separating the two. It's also not saying you have to be examined but you are examining yourself and language.

Also, you know, the whole thing about excluding you'd think that people who don't speak English as a first language would find it difficult. Actually, this is where, in that time, you're exploring language and you're looking at how you can play with meaning. Often, I've worked with pupils who speak English as a third, fourth or fifth language even and who haven't spoken English for a long time who've really taken to it. Because this is something exciting and new and you can play with it, without the pressures of the curriculum. So, yeah, that was my sales pitch for the course.

**DT:** Having taken part in the course to become a spoken word educator. How open were schools, immediately afterward, to taking people on from that course?

**KJ:** It's a difficult process. We had match funding from the Arts Council in the first year which meant that the school that employed me, for instance, they were able to take a risk. They paid half the rate that they would have paid to a teacher and then the Arts Council matched that so that was great. The school was very open to having me there, initially, of course there are always politics. There always school politics and the management!

And, of course, if you are doing something where pupils are able to express themselves certain things do get flagged up. So, it's just as important to know the people who are working in the support services. I mean, it's rewarding, I think a lot of schools are scared of something like that because it's a big commitment but when you find the right school that is able to take it on then that is great. You're singing.

**DT:** I went to a seminar run by Jacob Sam-La Rose. For those who don't know is also a spoken word educator from south-east London or is based in south-east London at least at the moment. He made a very good point during the day that there's a very big difference to running a course if you're going in for half a day or a day. So, you're talking about here, the difference of being allowed to build up a relationship with pupils and develop something because...

As he was saying, it was usually the politics that got in the way and if you're just turning up for the day... It's the same in any job, if you're just turning up into an office space for a day it takes a while to get to know who's interested in helping you, who is wanting the course to run. [KJ: Yes.] I think it's important for people to... Because, I think a lot of people now, because people want to make a living from spoken word or poetry and education is obviously quite a good... You know, if you can get into it, it's quite a good way of making a semi regular income from. I think it's important for people to know what the realities are because you're not just let in to teach poetry. That's not the way it works.

**KJ:** No no no. There's a huge process and it's making sure that you're... Just like walking into any office, you can walk into an office and do a yoga workshop, or something, for half a day and that's fine. But then the minute that you're an employee then there are different terms and there are loads of things to negotiate and then you have to find out whether you're right for that place as well. So, Jacob he is now directing the project.

**DT:** He's running that project? I assumed he must be involved in some way. Yeah. And I think maybe that's all we've got time for today. Actually, I really want to talk about education more but maybe we can meet up again and chat about that? Because I think the reason most people would consider the fact that they hate poetry so much is because of the way it was presented to them in school.

Most of us carry... I'm making a wild guess that the way you feel about your drawing skills have probably got something to do with education or what happened when you were younger. If things are presented more appropriately to younger kids, they'd be much more open-minded as adults towards this thing you're trying to make a living out of, 'you lot out there' so talk to the kids. We'll finish with a reading please.

**KJ:** Okay.

## 10. Ten Ways to Avoid Hearing Him Say Sorry

I

Change the subject.

The weather is plentiful; the rain is problematic;  
the third stair still snitches on you, even ten years later  
when you try to creep upwards unnoticed.

II

This close up, your dad's head  
is like the large Dutch pot above  
the kitchen cupboard. Leave  
that to stew for a few minutes.

III

In Latin American Spanish  
ahorita is an imprecise way of saying not quite  
now. Feel your tongue curl  
up on the r. Flick it out like a Swiss knife.

IV

No entiendo inglés.

V

Use find and replace to destroy the word  
or press backspace till your PC beeps a void.

VI

Beat him to it.

I'm sorry I didn't answer your texts.

I'm sorry for ever being fifteen years old.

I'm sorry I took the knife out the house. It wasn't like that. I promise.

VII

Sorry isn't the hardest word to say;  
for me, it's world and the way it whirls empty  
in my mouth.

If you're, say, Yonosuke,  
the Japanese student I taught  
scrawl will sound like a mess  
of consonants surrounding one lonely vowel.  
It is one of many things you cannot vocalise.

VIII

The search engine told me  
in Japanese, I'm sorry  
is pronounced: Suminasen

IX

Lo siento.

X

I am sitting on the third stair of our conversation  
in a home I lost the keys to, many years ago,  
sifting through letters that still come in my name  
and I want to look you in the eyes and tell you  
it's ok.

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**DT:** Thank you very much. Just to finish, do you have any blogs or anywhere people can go and check out what you're up to?

**KJ:** Yes, I keep a blog every now and again which is <http://www.zoneonetosix.blogspot.com/>. All words, 'one' O-N-E.

**DT:** I'll stick that and the link to your Twitter account in the description to this episode so people can check those out.

**KJ:** My Twitter account is [@KeithJLondon](https://twitter.com/KeithJLondon) and I think I have Facebook things as well but I'm very easy to find now if you just Google Keith Jarrett.

**DT:** That was great, thank you very much. I look forward to chatting to you again. You lot, clear off.

**End of transcript.**