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[Episode 76: Ölmo Lazarus \(July 2016\)](#)

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: Ölmo Lazarus - **OL**

Transcript edited by: Harriet Foyster - 9/05/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Today I'm joined by Ölmo Lazarus, hello.

OL: How you doing mate?

DT: You may remember Ölmo, if you've been avidly listening in the way that you should should do to this... [Ölmo appeared early on in 2015 as part of the duo Tory Town Poets](#) which is now no more.

OL: No more. Yes.

DT: In fact, I think, did you split up the day after I interviewed you?

OL: To be honest I think the podcast was the breaking point.

[Laughter.]

OL: That was one of the last things we actually did together though, yeah.

DT: I'm systematically breaking poetry. I just thought it would be nice to have Ölmo back, because we didn't really a chance to talk as an individual about your poetry, it was quite laden with how the duo worked. Before we get chatting we'll probably start with a reading I think.

OL: Okay excellent. This poem is part of new collection of poems which I'll hopefully be bringing out soon. So, you can get some sneak peeks in. This is called The Earth Exhales.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:02:19]

DT: Thank you. Just because I didn't do any research I had meant to listen to the last conversation we had so we wouldn't revisit stuff but I suppose hopefully the audience has grown a bit and there probably are people that didn't hear that. What am I waffling about? Yeah, I don't care that I didn't do any research, we'll go over some stuff if we have to.

OL: Absolutely.

DT: How and why did you get into poetry?

OL: Wow, I don't really know when I started writing poetry if I'm honest because for me I got into poetry through music. I started out as a teenager in a couple of punk bands and all that kind of stuff. And I don't think lead singer was ever... Lead vocalist is probably more accurate than saying lead singer. I made noises with my mouth and I was at the front of the band. And so writing for me started off with that. Over time then that kind of punk stuff we were doing started becoming a bit more of like hip hop sort of stuff, still that DIY punk ethos, and the idea of having social responsibility through what we were writing, but more of an electronic hip hope style using sampling and more rapping on the vocals.

And then what happened was when I was writing with Sioni we were The Tory Town Poets and we were very much like a hip hop sort of collective making hip hop music. Now what happened with that was over time it never... We never turn around and said "let's become

poets." What happened was the beats stopped and the writing continued, the vocals continued and we were writing increasingly more complex pieces. These pieces were pieces that won't fit into beats anymore and it just kind of naturally evolved into poetry. And that's kind of how I fell into spoken word really.

I remember I went to my first ever open mic night which was [Mr. T Thompson's](#) night in Covent Garden, [Lipped Ink](#). And I was vaguely aware of spoken word as a thing, there were quite a few viral videos that had been knocking about with spoken word stuff on. But it wasn't until I went to this open mic night and I sat there and I saw people getting up and doing what they do. I was just like "I've come home! This is the scene, this is what I need to be doing. This is kind of what I have already been doing but didn't realize there was other people doing!" It was a bit of an epiphany for me. I might have been the last person in the country to find out about spoken word.

DT: It was before me.

OL: Was it really?!

DT: Yeah definitely. Yeah, the beauty of naivety, hey? Believing in community, right on. No this is still one of the strongest parts of it I think. Actually, talking about lyrics because I sort of touched on this a bit with Gary Johnson the other day when I was interviewing him... And strangely enough I interviewed you both in Pitsea, outside Basildon, for the first occasion. He was talking about... So, he considers himself a lyricist still, I think I'm right in saying that, and he uses poems as lyrics. Has your writing style changed much from writing lyrics to now writing poems?

OL: Yeah, it's been a very gradual process. When I look at the first book myself and Sioni when we were writing together and what we produced, when I read that now it very much reads like the hip hop stuff did minus the structure of rap lyrics, and minus the beat. But it still very much feels like hip hop in a sense but what I was very very interested in was the delivery, the performance, the rhythm of my voice and all that kind of stuff. In hindsight now, probably at the detriment of my actual writing, my actual meaning, my actual words, you know.

So, I feel like I've become more of a poet as the years have gone on, especially now that I've started writing sometimes for the page, so I can't even necessarily say that I'm one hundred per cent a performance poet anymore because now I've started having to think about... Because the thing I found about when you make the transition from having to do a performance with music, when you do a performance with music you've got your voice and a beat to hide behind. When you do a performance without music, just spoken word, you've got your voice to hide behind.

Then you do poetry for the page and there is absolutely nothing to hide behind. Everything that you write has to be on point, everything that you write you have to be able to defend and say why you picked that phrase, that word, that term, what you mean. So, I'm finding now, now I've stripped it right down it's making me a better writer.

DT: So you feel like it's more of a gap opening up now for you between performance stuff and page writing?

OL: Yeah.

DT: Because, as I said I can't remember exactly what we spoke about last time and because we know each other a bit, now anyway, I can't remember whether it was on the podcast or whether we've spoken just socially, but that seems like a change for you. I seem to remember before that there wasn't as much of a division in your mind perhaps between page and stage, but now you feel that.

OL: Yeah. My writing has changed, I think. I think I'm a different poet to the poet that I was a year or two years ago. My life has changed an awful lot, I've had a couple of very big upheavals in my life and I think often your art does reflect your life. And so maybe my writing has... Maybe this is what it is, maybe I'm getting old.

[Laughter.]

But yeah, my art has moved on with my life in some respects so it's very different. I mean I still do... When I go and perform, especially at open mic poetry nights, I find myself actually performing my older stuff because at a spoken word night sometimes... It depends, it depends on the night you go to. Some spoken word nights you can't tell the difference between the spoken word night and like a poetry reading. But some spoken word nights, I don't slam myself, but it's very much like the kind of slam poetry scene. So, you read the crowd and sometimes those more punk, hip hop things that are based around the rhythm of my voice and mucking about with word play and rhyme, really work for those events. Other events it's more like...

DT: I think from talking because... I used to try and avoid talking about any page/stage divide because on a very basic level there isn't a divide. But of course there is, because people wouldn't be talking about it. What seems to be coming up from a lot of writers now is that perhaps what's important is to acknowledge that there's a difference, but to just accept and realize that you can stand on both sides, simultaneously.

OL: But I do that. I do try my best to. Saying that I've moved on to the page and that I'm doing more stuff for the page now, I still absolutely love performance. And I still think as well that performance, for me, is one of the most important parts of my practice. Especially... I'm very passionate about bringing art to places that haven't previously been exposed to art, be that towns or audiences that haven't previously been exposed to your particular art form. And they are often the hardest gigs.

I mean I'm the guy that brings poetry to pubs. I often find myself performing in pubs in Essex alongside a couple of punk bands or a couple of rock bands or something like that, and I'm that guy who... There are people out there on a Friday night trying to have a beer after work and I'm the one saying "who wants to listen to some poetry?" So, I'm very passionate about performance. I mean I've been heckled, I've had stuff thrown at me, I've been told to "F off" by audience members and stuff during those kinds of gigs.

DT: That's just family parties!

OL: That's it yeah! But then you get one or two people who maybe have never seen spoken word before and they come up to you at the end of that gig and go "mate that was really good, I really enjoyed that! I can see where you're coming from there." And you think "yes! Winning, one person at a time."

DT: Actually something has just popped into my head. Because I've never been in a band, in any position never mind trying to be a vocalist or a singer or anything, I'm just wondering are there any differences between being a lead vocalist and being a performance poet, or carrying out the two things? Because I think it's easy to assume that they would be very similar but I'm not sure. Just because I haven't done...

OL: There certainly are similarities. There really are similarities, but a little bit like how I said with going from... On a page you've got nothing to hide behind, in performance you've got a microphone and your voice to hide behind, I found as a band I had a beat or before then I had a guitarist, a bassist and a drummer to hide behind. And I don't mean hiding in the sense that... I'm not putting down anyone that is in a band or a singer or anything like that, not in the least.

Just that I would argue, for me, I didn't feel as exposed maybe. I think when, as a poet, you get up there and all you have is your words and voice you are completely exposed, you're completely naked. Whereas with a band there's a momentum coming from everyone else that you're doing it with. I mean I've done little bits of actually performance poetry as collaboration.

So, myself and another artist from Essex, Cherry Scott, we do a poem together called Jack and Jill and when I've performed that poem live with her that has felt a little bit like it did when I was in a band. You've got someone else up there that has got your back and if you stumble they'll pick you up and you're, kind of, ticking over with each other. So, there are definitely similarities but a bit more exposed, a bit more naked, a bit more vulnerable as a poet, I would say.

DT: Yeah, so you've got to just be maintaining the energy for a set I suppose.

OL: Yeah, and definitely as well when I perform in places like pubs and stuff, with music there is no reason why you don't talk over a band. Someone comes in and plays music in a pub, they're supposed to be there in the background, you're supposed to be able to enjoy a pint and have a chat with your mates while the music is going along.

And I think as poets who perform very regularly in poetry cafes and poetry nights and stuff, we have been totally spoiled because we believe everyone is going to listen to us. And we go into a poetry night and if somebody talking during somebody's poem in a spoken word night it is the height of rudeness. If somebody starts talking over you in a pub when you're doing poetry it's to be expected.

DT: We've just recently started doing our magazine launches in a bar in Peckham called the Peckham Pelican and it's a really great venue for this kind of thing because they have an open-door policy which means you can put events on for free but then you're not allowed to charge on the door. So, you get a mixture of people, and so you do get people turning up because they haven't been put off by the idea of there being a poetry night on. So, you get groups of people eating pizzas and drinking beer and we try to make it clear to them that you know if you're having a conversation that should be allowed to continue, as long as it's sort of respectful, not shouting.

But you can see certain poets do... I don't think it puts them off but it is a sudden change. Not everyone in the room is listening. But what it means is you do end up getting people staying for longer, I think. People are much more inclined to leave if you tell them to shut up and that they have to listen, because then they have to engage and if they feel intimidated by engaging then the likely thing is they'll just turn around and leave. Plus you can't, in a pub, tell people to shut up.

OL: I think it's unhealthy, as a performer, to instantly believe and expect everyone to listen to you and give you their undivided attention, why should they? If people aren't listening to you maybe your performance isn't good enough.

DT: Controversial...

[Laughter.]

DT: No absolutely.

OL: You know what I mean though. I come from a teaching background, don't I? And as a teacher I've had to talk to student teachers that I've trained in the past before and they said "oh it was horrible, the children were talking over me." Maybe the children were talking over you because your lesson wasn't very engaging. Likewise, in an environment like that, hecklers, people shouting at you with something different...

If you haven't got the audience's total undivided attention, maybe one: it's not the right venue for you and you need to be at a bit more of a quieter poetry recital for your art form. Or two: maybe your poetry wasn't engaging them and maybe you need to think about maybe it's something to do with your performance or maybe it's something to do with your writing, what you can do in order to engage them.

DT: Absolutely. I want to get on to talking a bit about what you've got coming up and what you've got going on at the moment. But before that we'll have a second reading I think.

OL: Yeah sure. Right this one's called Mobile Data.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:18:06]

DT: Thanks for that. The reason that I invited Ölmo here today was because two weeks ago, perhaps...?

OL: Something like that.

DT: You posted a photo on Facebook about a tour coming up, and I haven't looked into it at all since then so you'd better explain what it is?

OL: Alright. Basically, as well as being a spoken word artist and a poet I'm also a teacher, and a massive part of my practice as a poet is running poetry workshops and helping develop other writers. Not so much with adults, more with teenagers and kids, especially junior age children. So part of my work is going into schools and working with schools and running spoken word events, performances, I organize the [Basildon Primary Poetry Slam](#) which is ironic because I've never actually performed in a slam myself, but I organize one! And that's an event where I get between five and six local primary schools together.

And I train teams of five poets from each school throughout the year and they get to go head to head in a poetry competition in June. And yeah so that's part of the work that I've been doing. But what ended up happening was I had quite a few public bookings come up, so bookings at festivals and other events open to the public where I was going to be running workshops for communities. So, I did whatever I do when I get four or five dates in one month I pretend it's a tour, and I advertise it as such. Pretty much meaning I'm really busy this week and I'm not going to make five separate posters.

So I've got some work coming up with the [Village Green](#) and [Village Beach](#) festivals organised by [Metal](#) in Southend and in Grays. And I've been booked as an artist to run poetry events there, so that's going to involve work with kids during the day, helping them develop their writing, and at the end getting them to perform on stage. I've also got some work coming up at those festivals with [Quest Music Services](#). Dorian Quest is a bit of a local legend in the kind of Grays area because he runs the [Thames Delta](#) Nights. And they've been good enough to have me as their resident poet.

I've had a residency with Thames Delta for the past six months where I perform at their events and I also get other Essex based poets to come and perform at their events. Now he's putting on some hip hop workshops at the Village Beach Festival so there's going to be a DJ teaching kids how to create beats, and there's going to be me there teaching kids how to write raps. It's going to come together with, at the end of the event, the kids actually going on to one of the big stages in front of the people at the festival and performing their beats and performing their raps to people.

DT: Sounds good. I can't believe you didn't contact me about it, a hip hop workshop.

[Laughter.]

OL: Maybe next year man.

DT: I think I'm the funniest person in the world, sorry. Have I broken your stride now?

OL: No no you're absolutely fine. Basically, that's what it is. If anyone is interested and wants to log on to my Facebook page which is facebook.com/olmolazarus, my dates are all up there. Hopefully more will be getting added. As I'm developing these poetry workshops I'm hoping that this is not going to be a one-off tour, this is going to be a big thing, it's going to continue.

DT: I'll put a clickable link in so people can get to your website.

OL: Appreciate that, cheers.

DT: So for anyone listening, it's easier I think than spelling stuff out online, or on the recording. I was at an event on Tuesday and actually the event doesn't matter that much but a guy called [Peter Kahn](#) was there. He was the guy that initiated or started the [Spoken Word Educators](#) MA at Goldsmiths University. I think he's from Chicago, if he's not from Chicago most of his work has been done there with the University of Michigan. He was talking about the importance of slam poetry to engage with younger people and get them into spoken word.

I'm just interested, because you said obviously, you don't slam yourself, I hate the form, I really can't stand it, I don't like watching it, I don't like trying to force my writing into that pattern, but it does seem like a really, really efficient way of getting kids into it. I don't want to talk about it too much because you've done it, you've got experience. But I'm just wondering is it because the format of it takes away the fear of not knowing what to write? Because there's an immediate time structure.

OL: Yeah. I mean personally don't slam, and I don't do that because I believe that slam poetry often, not always, but often rewards one type of poetry and then that kind of automatically makes that kind of poetry seem better than other kinds of poetry. And that's just to do to with the format of it. But the reason why I use slam poetry as a way of engaging kids is twofold really. One: as you say, there's already an established style. They can go and look it up, they can see it.

And the style itself is very hip hop and very performance orientated, and that will engage young people a bit more than... You go down the Lord Byron route and they're not going to be as interested in that, they're going to be more interested in seeing someone like [INAUDIBLE] or someone, doing some kind of slam poetry, playing around with word plays and all that sort of thing. So yeah it engages them. But also, I'm trying to get schools into poetry. Now for schools to get into poetry, I found it helps an awful lot having the slam as a central point, something to work towards.

I'm not saying "hi do you want to hire me as a poet to come and do some poetry just because it's good and it's lovely?" And I think it is good and lovely but it's quite a hard sell. If I say "it's good and it's lovely but there's also a competition at the end of the year and the local papers are going to be invited and your kids are going to be there in their school uniform, it's going to raise the profile of your school," it's a selling point. Schools love it.

Schools love a little bit of competitiveness as well. And actually this is where I find this a little bit paradoxical for myself because one of the reasons why I'm not into slam poetry myself is I don't agree with competitiveness in a sense that this poem was better than that poem, or this poet was better than that poet because it's so subjective it's unreal.

However, the schools do love that. And actually, the kids quite like the competitive element of it as well. They go out there representing their school and trying... So many kids at school, how often are they going to get a chance to win trophies if they're rubbish at football and they can't run and all that kind of stuff? The only real chances they're going to get in school to win trophies are going to be at district sports and those kinds of events. Whereas now the bookworms can go and they can come back with a trophy for the school. How cool is that?

DT: Yeah, I suppose that's perhaps why the slam thing fits the American model. It does seem, and I'm sort of making all my judgements on films that I've seen because I haven't been to school in America so I don't really know, but it does seem like they're equally as likely to reward academic work in schools as they are sporting achievements. Whereas in this country I think you're right sporting prowess is sort of the only thing that really gets you rewarded.

OL: Yeah well you get your grades and stuff for academia but you don't tend to get that "look at me holding up my trophy in assembly haven't I done really well?" kind of thing.

DT: I was just about to say this point came into my memory because I once went to a seminar run by [Jacob Sam-La Rose](#). But you were there, weren't you?

OL: Yes! I was. That was literally where we met. That was up north somewhere, wasn't it?

DT: Yeah it was in Sheffield. It was grim up there. I was up there interviewing Helen Moore and it was a really interesting trip and I had the next day free, and Jacob Sam-La Rose was running a seminar called Apples and Snakes, wasn't it? About being a spoken word educator in schools. And I was just coming back to your point about offering something that the schools understand, not just what kids understand. Because that was a big point of his day, wasn't it? Marketing yourself as an educator and getting what often are quite cynical... You know if you're trying to convince a school to take you in, they're unlikely to take risks on you, are they?

OL: Yeah, it's hard. I've got one foot in both camps. As a poet, I sometimes have that desperate frustration of "come on you don't need a reason. Let's create art for the sake of creating art! That is a form of human expression and the children need to understand that!" But then as a teacher I understand the pressures that they're under. The curriculum time is tight and they've got people like Ofsted coming in. So, Ofsted come in and go "oh so you've paid out some money to have this poet come and work with your kids for six weeks. Why?" "Oh because we thought it would be lovely"... No.

You're going to get dragged through the dirt for that. But if they can go, like Jacob Sam-La Rose was saying, "here's a reason, this is how..." and it's up to the poet to kind of research this and find this out... "This is how this is going to tie in with your curriculum, we're going to tick off these objectives." I know it's horrible and cynical to have to think like that, but unfortunately, we do live in a world where we sometimes have to think like that. And that way we can offer something to the school that they're more likely to take.

DT: How easy was it to convince schools... I'm thinking about the primary school slam, it was around Basildon, wasn't it?

OL: Basildon Primary Poetry Slam yeah.

DT: How easy it was that to convince schools to get involved with?

OL: I started small. So, last year I only did it with three local schools. Now one of them... The school that I'm hired by for most of my work, one of them is in an academy with this school. So, we were in a partnership with one school. The other school is a school I went to as a kid. So, I totally started off with people who I knew. But after we had that one event and the local papers came and made a big deal about it, I was able to promote it on Facebook and things like that. It's been much easier this year because I've been able to turn around to schools and not say "hi, do you want to get involved in this thing that might be a thing that I'm thinking about doing?"

I'm saying "hey do you want to come get involved with something that's quite well established now and was a massive success last year?" So, we jumped from having three schools to having six schools involved in this one. And already there are two or three more schools that are interested. I don't know how big it's going to get. I don't know how big it can get, it's actually a little bit of a worry! If it gets too much bigger I'm not sure how manageable it'll be.

DT: Actually I'm still quite intrigued with the primary school slam. Could you just run through the structure?

OL: Of how the actual competition works?

DT: Yeah.

OL: Okay. So, it tends to start with me introducing the poetry slam, thanking everyone for coming and all that sort of stuff, then we kick off with normally me doing one of my children's poetry performances. Not the depressing shit you've been hearing today.

DT: The dragons!

OL: Yeah, the stuff with the dragons, yeah that kind of stuff. I do my poems about dragons and trolls and werewolves and a whole manner of other grownup things. So I'll perform a fun poem like that to kind of warm everybody up. Then what we do is we work through all the children who perform in a random order and I have a panel of three judges.

So, this year I had a local artist, a trustee of a local arts charity, and I also had a children's author. So, three people from the community who are in some way involved in writing, books or education, I have those invited. And as the children perform the judges make their notes and make their scores.

Now the scoring system I have developed is a maximum of 30 points per poem. So, it's not like normal slam, it's a made up one that I've done. Maximum 30 points per poem. Now 10 points available for the quality of writing and all the children's poems are submitted in book form first so they can be read by the judges and all that kind of stuff. Because I think that's important. You know a kid who might be totally shy and struggle in the performance may well have written a beautiful poem. They deserve to get some points for that. The next 10 points are for performance. So, again the child might not be the world's strongest writer, but my God they've overcome some fears, they've performed and they've really put themselves out there. So, there are 10 points available for that.

And the next 10 points is something that we really promote in the Basildon Primary Slam. 10 points, bonus points, available for children's self-expression. One of the things I'm very very interested in promoting is children being able to develop opinions and ideas of their own, and to express their own opinions and ideas. I think far too often we tell children what's right, what's wrong, what's this, what's that and actually I think in my practice as a teacher I try to develop an ethos in my classrooms where children can question things and children can bring up ideas and discussions so that's something we try to foster through this.

How much has the child used their own voice? So, for example we had a couple of kids do some really... They must have been studying it in school or something... Really beautiful pieces about deforestation in the rainforest. Then one child was absolutely brilliant. He got a lot of points for self-expression because he had written a poem about his dad's driving, and about how much he thought his dad's driving was really dangerous and crazy. And it was brilliant, the poem was called Speed Demon. He goes "he drives so fast he drives back to the future, he needs a driving tutor" and all this kind of stuff. And to see him perform that and to see his dad go bright red and cracking up in the audience was brilliant.

So, we have those 30 points available for each poem and at the end we'll have some singers or something perform while the judges deliberate, and then we get on to actually giving out the awards. Every single kid that takes part gets an award. They had certificates last year, this year I printed all of their poems into a book. So, I wanted everyone to go away the winner. But then we have a runner up trophy and a winner's trophy. Something I made a point of was after the runner up and the winner took their bow I invited every performer, and there was about 30 of them this year, every performer onto the stage to do a massive bow together and I did a bit of speech.

DT: Sounds like quite a nice way of scoring in that there are ways of rewarding different elements of the whole project because obviously, the slam doesn't begin and end with the slam itself. There's the workshop, working with the kids...

OL: It's a whole year. Really that slam is a year-long project and that's just the end of it.

DT: Yeah, so it's good. I suppose it's important that the scoring reflects the whole project. We're going to have a final reading and then we'll just recap on some details.

OL: Okay. This one was a bit of a challenge I set myself. I'm writing a bit of a book at the moment and this one was a poem that I was going to write throughout an entire night. So it starts off with when I was getting ready, I went out drinking, and as my night unfolds every 10-15 minutes or so I was adding a line to my phone. So, it kind of evolves with that night out. So, it was a bit of an experiment really. It's called Valuable XP.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:35:35]

DT: Thank you very much. Yeah, we definitely have to wrap up here because of the time but maybe if you just reminded everyone quickly as to where they can reach you online and check out dates and things.

OL: The best place to find me online is Facebook, it's where I'm most active, and that's [facebook.com/olmolazarus](https://www.facebook.com/olmolazarus) and you said you'd stick that below.

DT: Yeah.

OL: And I'll give you my Twitter and all those bits and bobs so we can stick them there and all.

DT: Excellent. Thanks very much! Thanks for coming along.

OL: No thank you for having me as always, cheers.

DT: Clear off.

[Laughter.]

End of transcript.