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[Episode 27: James Massiah](#) – (May 2015)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: James Massiah – **JM**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today, I am joined by host and founder of The A and the E, James Massiah. Hello James.

JM: Hello, how are you doing? I'm good.

DT: As always, we're going to start with a poem.

JM: This is Death Dance.

[The author has not given permission to use this poem in this transcript.]

[0:01:17]

DT: Thanks man. How are you?

JM: I'm good, I'm good, I'm good.

DT: Thanks for joining us. First question is: why poetry?

JM: Why poetry? So I think poetry was given to me, not by the gods, or anything as conceited as that, but my mum, my parents I suppose, were a Christian family, read a lot of The Bible when I was young. We had to memorise verses to read out in church on the Sabbath and also, Mum bought us lots of reading material when we were quite young, so Allan Ahlberg, John Agard's *Laughter Is An Egg*, then all of the anthologies you get in school as well. So I did a lot of reading when I was young and it just felt like a natural progression to produce my own.

The spark came really through grime, Dizze Rascal, even before *Boy In Da Corner* album, hearing sets on the radio that he'd do with Wiley and the Roll Deep guys on pirate radio and that felt like my voice. It was like taking the literary heritage I'd been given by my parents and mixing it up with the more contemporary voice of grime.

DT: I just want to point out that, this is for Liv Wynter's benefit, that I get your references, because she treats me a bit like a granddad.

JM: He gets it, Liv, he gets it.

DT: Do you see yourself first as a poet or an artist who writes and performs poetry on occasion?

JM: That's a good question. I guess I'd say a poet first and foremost, only because my early inspirations were poets, or they identified as poets. So Benjamin Zephaniah, I mentioned John Agard earlier as well, people who were poets. Mutabaruka, a dub poet, was something my dad would play to us in the house, as 'this is important', almost separate from even the gospel music we'd hear at home. Mutabaruka was separate, it was 'listen to this' and these are people who would almost create time capsules with their words. I wanted to do that.

DT: You had spoken word presented to you on a pedestal.

JM: I'd say so, yeah. Definitely I had the literary heritage, but then my dad would always mention the dub poets as well. Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka, even John Cooper Clarke, you know. Evidently Chickentown, my dad is always quoting little bits of John Cooper Clarke. So yeah, the performance element was also seen as very important and hearing Mutabaruka on record, my dad was 'blow the dust off it', then put it on the turntable and you'd hear it. That felt more immediate. It was a different experience to reading poems before.

DT: It's obviously different, it doesn't mean one is better than the other. You do music as well, is there a massive overlap?

JM: You have this genres or titles and they definitely serve their purpose, but the difficulty sometimes is that you almost feel inhibited by them, so I see myself as a poet first and foremost, that's my primary trade if you will, but around 2012, a friend of mine who was making music under the name Conrad the Scoundrel at the time, now Conrad Kyra, he was producing music and rapping over the beats that he made. He often encouraged me to rap. I mentioned before grime as an early influence, but there came a point when partly out of a need to distinguish myself from MCs and rappers, I'd say 'no, I'm not a rapper, I can't rap'.

Now it doesn't feel like there's quite such a need to make that distinction anymore, but certainly at a point in time, I had to make that distinction. I was like: 'No, Conrad, sorry, I'm not a rapper, I'm not going to rap'. He was like: 'Man, I feel like you'll add another dimension to what you do. Even your poetry, if you were to take on rapping.' Around 2012, I started to rap. I mentioned Boiler Room earlier, a lot of friends of mine were DJs working there. Boiler Room, NTS, East London stalwarts I suppose now. Just being around them and their music. Joshua Idehen, another poet.

DT: I saw him for the first time recently, he is amazing.

JM: He's someone who tows that line really well. It was hearing the stuff he did with LV, really heavy, electronic, pulsating beats that you want to dance to. Then every now and then, seeing them live, he would say something that was more poetic, then he'd rap something that was more metric and on beat. Hearing him back in 2011/2 made me think yeah, I can do that. So in terms of the distinction...

DT: Do you think the distinction/conflict is more in the artist's head?

JM: I think there's also the sense that to be a good anything, you have to focus on that one thing. That may all be true, but just to say you can focus on different things at different times. So at the moment, I'm focusing on poetry, next week I'm focusing on producing music, in a hour's time I'll be focusing on DJing. Two hours later, I could be focusing on theatre.

DT: There isn't that much difference between those things, you're just trying to grab people's attention and connect with the audience.

JM: I used to get really upset when people would say to me: ‘Man, that comedy you do is amazing.’ It’s almost like these labels come with ideas attached to them. So that idea of being a poet, the highest command of language, then the lonely rapper or the comic, the court jester, they’re all essentially doing the same thing. It’s the labels, images and stereotypes attached to them that make it difficult to see oneself as either one or the other.

DT: Maybe we could have another poem.

JM: This one is The Funk.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be used in this transcript.]

[0:11:16]

DT: Thanks man. I mentioned The A and the E at the start. From the outside, it appears to be a collective, but it’s mainly you, isn’t it?

JM: A&E really is a philosophy. It’s the way I see the world and the lens through which I view my artistic practice. It stands for different things at different times. Regards to poetry, it’s alive eternally. I mentioned that I was a Christian, had a belief in eternal life after this one. I lost faith, became atheist, I’m now sort of agnostic or something, but it was like trying to find a new way to live forever. I kind of thought through art, through poetry, I could kind of do that.

Also, the idea that when you’re creating art, to have a view for the future, to create work that’s important now but will have some kind of lasting effect. It operates in so many other ways. AE, also that All Equal kind of philosophy from which I view the world and society. You have to know your allies from your enemies, but that those battlelines shouldn’t be drawn along sexuality, gender, class, race or such things.

With that ethos, I want to create a space for people who felt the same way to tell their stories. Even some stories that aren’t political or philosophical, sometimes you hear trivial work, in that sense that’s political as well, because sometimes you need to hear a bit of nonsense, as it were. You get these amazing nonsense poems, the same letter over and over again.

DT: Often you get an equally strong political message in the mundane and banal. I think it’s a shame when poets can’t focus on the small things because they have an equal right to be heard.

JM: It’s good we’re on the same wavelength. That’s almost what I would have said. I love it sometimes to hear a poem about cheese. I tend to find poets may be – it’s not an accusation of all poets, of course not – but there is a time when I notice that some people take themselves too seriously. Life is dark and there’s a lot of real shit happening, but you can let your hair down sometimes.

DT: Poetry can be an escape. One of my favourites was an open-mic thing, a guy called Donald Chegwin, who has this poem about zombie men made of onions. Hilarious. He also has a poem about eating stuffed owls, brilliantly written.

JM: I guess The New Funk Breakfast Show is also a nod to a different philosophy of my life. The idea of function.

DT: This Breakfast Show that James is talking about now is a radio show on NTS Radio, which I found on the Tune In App. Can you find it elsewhere?

JM: NTSlive.co.uk.

DT: I'd recommend the Tune In App anyway.

JM: Tune In is a radio App?

DT: My friend, I mention her far too much, Kyla Manenti who runs Union in Putney, she was on Wandsworth Radio, so I downloaded it to hear her.

JM: That new funk, the idea of function. Whatever it is... My humble belief is that an artist should know the function or the purpose of what it is they're creating. Once you know what your poem's meant to do, it will do what it's meant to do. Sometimes, you think someone's trying to write a massive political poem that's going to change everything, but they've gone about it in the wrong way. Sometimes if a poem's meant to be silly or funny and does that well...

DT: That's my point about Donald. It's so deliberate, it works. If anyone is stupid enough to ask my advice, I tell them you can be boring and banal and have that very dry delivery, but you have to know why. It has to be considered.

JM: This thing that was on, there was a lot of talk about it the other day, Malevich and the Black Square and the importance of that at the time, within the context of other works coming out, that being revolutionary for what it was then. He knew what he was doing when he did that.

DT: That's one of the best exhibitions I've seen in a long time and sums up the point perfectly. What people miss about his black canvas is that it was hung up in the top corner of a room, which in the Russian Orthodox tradition he was part of, was reserved for a painting of the Virgin Mary. It was hung in place of an idol. It wasn't just black paint on a canvas. He was prolific, though you couldn't like everything.

JM: 90% of everything is shit apparently.

DT: I'd say about 98%. Or everything I do! But back to The A and the E, it has a definite agenda with issues of gender, sexuality, equality. Why do you think that spoken word is an important tool in dealing with these issues?

JM: Christian, went to church, heard sermons. Some of these sermons would change my life. From a young age, I was used to seeing someone in front of a microphone delivering something that could potentially be life-changing. I've come away from the idea of thinking of myself as a saviour of mankind, delivering a sermon, so I guess the idea was to create a space where everyone could tell a truth as it were. That's why the philosophy's important. I can't police what people are going to say in their microphone.

I make it very clear that we do have this identity, that we do believe in this All Equal thing. It serves as an excluder if you will, people who might come and deliver the hate speech. I think it's important to let people express themselves and their own truths, because everyone has their own story at the end of the day. All the clichés coming out now! Before the A&E started, I worked at American Apparel and it was a completely different world to what I'd been in before.

The people I met, not everyone, but most of them were at art school, studying Art at the higher, bigger London universities. Hearing their stories really broadened my perspective. I can probably say that meeting me and me offering them a different perspective enriched their life in the same way they enriched mine. So through seeing the beauty of that unity, I wanted to create a space where that could happen on a larger scale, people from different spectrums of the societal universe, could come together and see shit, we're actually not that different and the places where we are that different, see where there's a means to form a bridge.

I reckon the best way I can do that is through poetry. It's entertaining and it's a direct means of communicating an idea.

DT: It has the potential to be a really powerful medium, but it can extol the ridiculous as well.

JM: I've played a lot with what the E could stand for. So Arts and Ethics or Arts and Equality, Arts and Entertainment. None of those have worked. But it's entertainment, ethics.

DT: Every time an event's advertised on Facebook, it has a different graphic. The A and E are always changing. Or putting up pictures of me!

JM: That picture of you was on TV the other day on London Live.

DT: That's too self-regarding so we're not going to talk about that. Maybe another final poem please.

JM: This poem is called South London Style.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be used in this transcript.]

[0:25:58]

DT: Thanks man. So like Lunar Poetry in general, we try to talk to everyone as much as possible, but I love it when it's all South London.

JM: The A and the E feels very South London.

DT: Dirty Sarf. A couple of questions to finish up on. What have been your main influences as a writer and performer?

JM: I often talk about how much I hated university, but it did serve its purpose. I was exposed to the beats, the romantics. Earlier on, I did mention Dizze Rascal some of his stuff is just amazing. Hearing my language spoken and being aware that other people spoke this language and heard this music made me really want to tell my story as well, and gave me a sense that the language I speak is valid.

DT: Was that the first time you heard others speaking creatively, as you spoke?

JM: I think I'd say that. At school, we'd listen to these mixed tapes. That was fine, that was a local thing. My parents knew who Dizze Rascal was at the time, that wasn't uncool, that was like he's validated, the fact my parents know him and he was winning Mercury awards. It gave me the sense, or the hope, that I could go that far and that my voice was important and necessary even.

DT: He had some pretty bright tracksuits, so he was pretty easy to recognise.

JM: He had some amazing leather jackets. All in yellow on the I Love You video and then Boy in da Corner album, which that came from, was him in a black tracksuit with the devil horns. Dizze Rascal, perhaps a little bit more recently than that, The Roadside Genius who used to operate around here, they were affiliated with a lot of the street gangs here, but their music was brutal and crushing and nihilistic almost. I suppose at a time when I was still in the church, that was my guilty pleasure. My lens into the other side.

Now in the equality conversations we're having, I feel like I have something to balance it. Protest belongs to the middle classes, it feels like now. The people who are really struggling haven't got time to protest. It feels like they're too busy struggling.

DT: That's huge, we haven't got time to go down that path, but I completely agree. The people who are on the bottom are there for economic reasons and they've been fucking shit on from a great height. Who would you recommend to our listeners to go and see?

JM: David Turner. 100%. That was one of the most exceptional performances we've had at the A and E.

DT: I had performed at an A and E event and that's what James is referring to.

JM: Man. He probably wouldn't appreciate this because he's going away soon and he kind of likes to be anonymous, but there's another night that happens in the South East. We

have a mutually beneficial relationship, so people who know A and E know Luke Newman, singer, poet, wordsman, actor, whatever you want to call him, he's a force. If you ever get the opportunity to see Luke Newman, curator of Steez, definitely check him out. There are so many people, there's so much going on.

DT: Check out James on NTS Radio. Check out the A and E.

JM: The website is theaandthee.com

DT: And they're on Facebook as well as the A and E. We will put links under this video.

JM: And there's my website, James Massaih.com, that's a link to a Tumblr site, also Twitter.

DT: I would recommend The A and the E, take a trip down there. Thank you, James.

JM: Big up Lunar.

End of transcript.