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[Episode 84: Thomas "Ghettogeek" Owoo; Andra Simons; Poetry Unplugged 20Yrs \(10/10/16\)](#)

Transcription by Lizzy Turner

Producer: David Turner – DT

Introduction:

DT: Hello, this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast, my name is David Turner. Today's episode comes to you in three parts. The last part is a recording taken from the 20th anniversary celebrations of Poetry Unplugged. The second section is an interview with a fantastic poet, Andra Simons. But first up we've got Poetry at the PAD. Poetry at the PAD is a monthly series of poetry evenings in Dagenham in Essex, which focuses on building new connections between artists, their work and the audience. The set-up on the night is that, after a poet's

feature set they're invited by that evening's host to talk about their writing practice. Hopefully we'll be bringing more of these conversations to you in a collaboration between ourselves and Poetry at the PAD. First in this series and first up in today's episode is the Repeat Beat Poet interviewing Thomas 'Ghettogeek' Owoo.

Part One:

Host: The Repeat Beat Poet – **RBP**

Guest: Thomas “Ghettogeek” Owoo – **TO**

RBP: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Thomas Owoo! [APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]
How are you doing, guys, you alright?

TO: Can we just give it up for the one and only Repeat Beat Poet, man, like... [CHEERING]
He's been really lovely introducing me quite a few little times and that, and always talks about Nozstock, but he never mentions, humbly, that I've competed against the winner, who- of Nozstock, so... big up to the winner of the Nozstock slam! Woo! [CHEERING] He's so humble but, like, that needs to be remembered that he, he absolutely killed it, it was a real honour to actually, um... the first little festival I ever actually went to, forget about perform at, erm, so poetry's really given me some wonderful new experiences so... this is another one, I think this place is cool. Um... it's an interesting one, I might not go straight into explaining 'Ghettogeek', I'm gonna do that afterwards. I just felt like I was gonna try and restrict myself a little bit for one piece, because if you've ever seen me before, normally I can't control my body because I'm quite theatrical and I speak a lot with my body and I'm gonna try and restrict myself for one piece to just speak.

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[00:05:03]

TO: Thank you. [APPLAUSE] So one of those, that's one of the pieces that I actually wrote for my sociology lesson. Basically I'm a teacher for the last, sort of, 13 years now and, sort of, secondary schools in North-West London, and um... I was looking for resources and ideas to teach my sociology stuff and to be honest there wasn't that much stuff out there. I trained in psychology as well, so when I did psychology there was a lot more, sort of, interactive cool games, video resources... sociology's really interesting, I felt, but there wasn't really interactive resources that I could, like, nick and adapt and change, so I eventually just decided just to use some lyrics to try and create them and then get the students to analyse those lyrics to be able to see if they can see the sociology in these raps. The reason why I called it 'sociology in rap', because they were written to hip hop beats and then I kind of slowed 'em down on this spoken word scene. And I'd love if I could do one of, another little sociology in rap, um... This one's a little bit different. It kind of requires, sort

of... I'll say pupil participation if you're up for that, like... That'll be cool. Are you up for that? [AUDIENCE RESPONSE] Yeah, yeah? So if I say, "How am I gonna market this?" You, you say, "Ghettogeek, how you gonna market this?" Yeah? So we're gonna just try and practise that, you ready? How am I gonna market this? [AUDIENCE RESPONSE] Right, I did say 'sociology in rap', so it needs a little bit of rhythm in that poetry, y'understand? Y'alright? So we'll try it again, ready? How am I gonna market this? [AUDIENCE RESPONSE] Ghettogeek, how you gonna market this? How am I gonna market this? [AUDIENCE RESPONSE]

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[00:10:34]

TO: Thank you. [APPLAUSE AND CHEERING] Right, [INAUDIBLE] why, why do I go by the name of Ghettogeek? In my AS Sociology I have to, sort of, teach a term that really frustrates me, but I have to teach it. It's in reference to a unit called 'Identity', and obviously we've got gender identity, we've got even, like, religious identity, age identity, all these different ones, but there's one little subsection called 'Ethnic Identities' and we look at things like hybridity, meaning a cultural clash of different groups of people that make up in society, and so on and so forth. And there's a term by two individuals, these names, Johal and Bains. Johal is actually spelt J-O-H-A-L, 'cause a lot of people have been searching and it's not J-O-E-L. Johal and Bains, right? They're two Sikh sociologists who've basically coined a term for, sort of, ethnic minorities, whatever that is, that's like, black and Asians was the, who they were focussing on in their studies... Explain that individuals that may look like me, and talk like me, are, according to this term I have to teach them, someone who wears a 'white mask'. I don't know about you, but I find that bloody offensive. Why can't they have other terms, like, I don't know, 'a black guy that's well-spoken'? Done. 'Intelligent', 'eloquent'. I've got a different term. What about the term... Ghettogeek. Think about it!

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[00:14:41]

TO: Thank you. [APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

RBP: Are you just gonna, like, just grin for a while? Microphone, if you so wish, my friend... [LAUGHS]

TO: [BEATBOXES] I can't do that... [BEATBOXES]

RBP: Anyway...

TO: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

RBP: Now, now. So... [LAUGHS] No, awful, um... Just so everyone knows the in-joke that just went on there... Um, while I was up in Edinburgh working as a poet, we ended up, me, Thomas Owoo and [NAME INAUDIBLE] who you may have seen earlier, ended up basically spitting bars, serious bars, and it was super damn fun. I had to make sure that that was on record.

Yeah anyway, so, I'm gonna get into it because you spoke a lot about, just, a lot of stuff that I've seen you speak about before and I've thought about recently. And, obviously, coming back, I've seen you in the BBC slam in Edinburgh as well. Yeah, there's a lot of people, a lot of people saw you; and I wanna basically dig into what made you want to start writing rap and how you came to rap as an art form, and then how you came to teaching through rap. 'Cause I mean like, rap, hip hop, and how did you get into that, and then how did you take that into the school.

TO: I think I just used to just write at home, when I was listening to a lot of Nas beats and songs and everything, that was what I grew up on. And I just, I was just using... I don't even know, to be honest, I was garage as well, old skool garage as well, so I was in-between hip-hop and garage music. And I used to just write lyrics to both of those things that I was listening to, those kind of beats, while just making poetry, written forms of work and everything, that was just my form of expression to deal with life. And then I started getting into parties and stuff, playing, stuff like that, so that was kind of like a really fun cultural experience, to be like, well we always go to these parties, wouldn't it be cool to be able to come up with these lyrics. So I mix both of those things; one, to deal with stuff that I was going through, and two, as a form of like, fun entertainment. And then I guess all of that kind of just was what I just grew up doing. And that was my, that's what kind of originated what I was kind of really enjoying.

RBP: Yeah, nice. And then, so how long were you teaching for before you thought, you know what, I'm 'a switch it up in the classroom, I'm 'a like start pounding the table, set a cipher up. How long is it until you started rapping in class?

TO: Do you know what? Like, when... I was a teaching assistant before I became a teacher, I did that for a good few years, and then went through a certain route where you can train while working there. So when I was a T.A. I was... I actually started, when I was in my third year of my degree, some voluntary work. But then, when I was sort of twenty-one, I was a T.A. in a school called Kingsbury High in North-West London, and the first lines I said to students when I was trying to get them to behave was, "Fix up, look sharp!" [LAUGHTER] Kid you not, that was the first, and then the kids were like... That was a period of time when I was like, and they were like, "What?" And it made them laugh, but I was like, "I mean it! Fix up, look sharp!" You know what I mean?

And then I would act what I'm telling them to do, so like, get the pen out or, do you know what I mean, sit down, or put the blazer on while I'm doing like, "Fix up, look sharp!". Do you know what I mean, I would just always say those lines while nonverbally showing what they were meant to do. So then they just laughed and did it because they were like, that's kind of cool! And you didn't have a go at me, you didn't tell me off, like shout at me, and I

know that song. Do you know what I mean? And that's... so I started from day one using lyrics to manage behaviour. That's what it was all about for me, managing behaviour.

RBP: Well very nice, like... so, I'm gonna... indulge me for a second; I was an awful, awful kid during English class. Literally, like English class was the boring one, and there was a teacher who one time... Basically, you know, she'd heard one of the 'new rap songs', and she came in and she tried to do it, she tried to be like, "Yo, guys, I'm 'a tell you about Jane Austen, she's so cool..." And I'm just like, "Ohhh Jesus." Full context: like, you know, fifty-five-year-old, you know, Norwich-based, elderly white woman, very very wonderful, but not wonderful at rapping... But you carry it off well, my brother!

And I enjoy it, and every time I've seen you perform... you always, you pack in so much, to such a... such, like, accessible bits, you know what I mean? So if you talk about the Left realism, Right realism view of like, you know, crime, and why people commit crime... Wonderful to see it, you know, mapped out like that, and then there was the Neo line as well... So basically, carte blanche question: just talk about some of your favourite ideas, and some of the favourite stuff you've written. I know you mentioned being academically proud of the Left and Right realist one.

TO: Yeah, the Left and Right realist one was 'cause, I think some of the other ones I was just doing out of fun, while this one I think I was a bit more purposeful, thinking, "Oh sugar, I've got to deliver a lesson in the next couple of days, and I really need to make something," and I was like, I've got to do it on this, these two theories, and in fact, normally in a scheme of work it should be over three lessons. Those two things, you learn Left, then you learn Right, and you learn to compare them. And I was like, I'm running out of time in the curriculum. And it was such a wonderful 'buzz' experience to... my mates had sent us a beat, and I was on the train like, looking over notes and trying to like, get my head around what I'm going to do with this resource. And then the beat just went, 'bang'. Hit me. And I was just like, "Oh my days." And it just came out. And then it wasn't like... I knew I had to do it, but I didn't go like, "I need to do this so it raps to that, I need to do this to rap to that."

I just saw a story, it came out and then I was like, "Sugar, this is all based on everything I've just been reading over in the last hour or two on the train," and that beat is what infused it together, so that's why I also love it as well, from that creative point.

RBP: A wonderful explanation, because I think some of the writers who are sitting here will definitely know, when you're... for some reason, on a train is a classic one, I don't know why, but when you're in a mode and the writing just hits you, and you end up just like, rambling through it and through it, and getting it down. And a lot of the time it is a way to work out something you've previously been reading or previously been thinking. It's a great way to like, prove that you understand it to yourself, if you can get it out there in a way that people understand. And obviously, that's part of what teaching is as well. You have to know the stuff that you teach. And so, major respect on that, 'cause it's a wonderful thing to be able to do. And so, how long have you been reading then on the poetry scene? Moving away from like, in a classroom.

TO: Umm, what are we now... Oh, about fifteen, sixteen months. April last year. It was a bit of a random one. I've said this story so many times but it is just random. I'm only here right now because of all my students, because they will ask, "Sir, where do you perform your lyrics? Where are your gigs?" And I was like, what are you chatting about, I'm just making resources for my lessons and that, and they were like, nah you should perform, you should perform and everything. And I did like, their school prom which I thought was so cheesy. I did 'Ghettogeek' at the school prom and that, it was crazy, so funny, and these are sixth-formers so they're like eighteen and that... But anyway, I made a deal with them saying look, if you get a certain grade in your 'A'-levels then I will perform. Yeah, an incentive.

Can I be honest with you? I was a bit mean. This is Kilburn, the school that I was at at that time. And it's a really, sort of, economically, socially deprived area. There's some really nice places off Maida Vale, Abbey Road... But like, you know what I mean, where it was... and the predicted grades for most of the students I had for my 'A'-levels, they shouldn't have even been doing the subject. They were predicted 'E's and 'D's, that's their stretch grade, some of them were retaking their GCSE English, and I was like, you're meant to get a 'B' to even enter the course, how are they even on it?

So when I said look, if you get like a 'C' or a 'B', I kind of most probably knew that they wouldn't but I wanted them to try to push for it, knowing that I wouldn't have to perform. And it backfired. One of them bloody got an 'A'... I thought, sugar, man, I've got to actually follow my... "Fix up, look sharp!" I was just like, damn Daniel! So then I was like, okay, yeah, I've gotta do this, and I just typed away like, 'poetry night', whatever. I knew of Lyrically Challenged, I went there before with my mate who was performing.

RBP: So for those of you who don't know about Lyrically Challenged, it was a night that was formerly run at Passing Clouds. If you look up what's happening at Passing Clouds, they are a great venue in East London who have basically been shut down by property developers and they've been unlawfully occupied a couple of times now. So to anybody who's watching this and wants to find out about Passing Clouds, a great club of which there are many being shut down, look up Passing Clouds. But yeah, Lyrically Challenged at Passing Clouds as well.

TO: Big up MC Angel. That's one of the people I saw back then. So I did, I think I did search that one. I knew of that one. No joy of when it was, or whatever the timing... And I wanted to try and do it in that week, so I ended up just typing and eventually just found one that said Genesis Slam. So I was like, that's cool, that's nearby to where I'll need to go. I didn't know at that time, showing my ignorance, of what a slam was.

RBP: But you just went to it anyway, yeah?

TO: Yeah I just needed to find a place to perform, and I did have a date at the time, so I thought it would be quite a cheesy way to like... [LAUGHTER]

RBP: Did you read at the slam?

TO: So yeah, I performed at the slam. I remember texting Sara, emailing her, just like, what is a slam? How does this work?

RBP: Sorry, Sara Hirsh is the woman that runs the Genesis poetry slam. She's an incredible poet as well.

TO: Yeah, 'Made To Measure' was sick at the Fringe. And yeah she, obviously being very nice, but must've been thinking, what the hell? Of course this is how a slam works! Being like, it's a competition. I didn't even know it was a competition. But um, that was just the first night I wanted to perform at while I was available to, and I wanted just to perform, and that's the one I could see. So that was the first ever time and that was in April.

RBP: And have you found that your writing has changed by being in the poetry scene? Have you seen yourself writing in different ways, performing in different ways? Because I mean, performing to a room full of like, you know... what, you teach secondary school to like, sixth form, or...

TO: A combination, I'm now teaching from four to eighteen and supporting them.

RBP: I'm not sure that a four-year-old might understand the intricacies of Left and Right realism.

TO: No. That's going to be interesting, that's going to be what the new job I've got will involve. I've told them look, give me these Year Fives and Sixes, and he said yeah, within time you'll work your way down the years. And I was like yeah, give me five years before that's gonna happen. I don't know how I'm going to do stuff with young kids.

RBP: Well maybe being in the poetry scene will like, you know... maybe you see more people who read in a different... I don't know.

TO: Yeah, I don't know, I don't know. Lyrically I like reasoning things, and you can't go on that level with... I've done it! I've done some of this stuff to like, ten- and nine-year-olds. So that's Year Fours, but anything younger, I'm like, nah.

RBP: And then what about, you in the poetry scene and how you've seen your writing develop? 'Cause basically, I've seen your writing develop...

TO: Go on, help me, help me then, what do you see? 'Cause I'm intrigued. I'm really intrigued, actually, I'm kind of you for a second, what do you see?

RBP: So when you, when I first saw you on the scene it was like an early Genesis slam. And I think it may have been the one you were mentioning. You know, your performance was, you were so aware of yourself in a lot of different ways. You were holding a lot back more and you weren't the same sort of bombastic, huge, big, dynamic performer that we've seen. But then also, I only saw like, you know, I think it was two pieces that day. And so I've seen you just write more, and write more extensively, with this whole kind of like, great

wordplay; the Marxist... market, mark this quick Marxist, all that stuff that like, I'm vibing on.

TO: Okay right, yeah, I totally agree. Like, what you see now is how I am in my class. I was always scared amongst adults, so I always got along with the kids more. So that's me, normally, in my lessons. And what you most probably did see was me kind of going, oh my gosh, I'm performing to adults, I don't really like you guys kind of looking at me... I was like, I don't like it, I feel more judged. Do you know what I mean? That's what I felt like, but with the kids I'd feel like I could be an idiot and they were totally cool with me being that, and that's me. And then they're cool, and they're totally like... I feel safe there, do you know what I mean? That means I feel safe now. That's what you're seeing now.

RBP: In a room full of poets, man, we all understand the oddities of jumping up on a stage and believing that, you know, you have something to say that's worth listening to. But you know, you rock a stage fairly well, my friend.

TO: Bless you. No, I feel confident as a teacher, everyone says that and like... so now what I do is, I come into sets like this and I see it, without sounding patronizing, like you guys are my pupils. If I see it as if I'm a teacher, and I'm just teaching my lessons, then you see what you see today. But if I see it as I'm performing poetry to adults then it all goes Pete Tong.

RBP: All that being said, you switched it up for your first poem. You took it down... So I think we can all agree it was... No, don't be vulnerable... a big round of applause, because it was a great poem. [APPLAUSE] No, it's a really good thing to be able to see you be comfortable in different ways. And so I've seen you in a festival setting recently, I've seen you at open mics as well, but then now seeing you at a night like this, a little bit more chill, a little bit more... you had a longer time so you could actually, you know, play with a couple of new things. When you think about what you're going to do here, and the conversation, what was running through your head, what did you want to talk about? Because we're coming up to the end.

TO: [INAUDIBLE] One little joke is... The theory I have behind 'sociology in rap', like... I'm in the process of making a book, an anthology that will be a revision guide, I'm gonna get it endorsed by OCR, and really going to push that to be an academic book so it will be in for college students use. It's not just, oh this is cool fun, it's academic.

RBP: Is it gonna be one of the really overpriced ones?

TO: Well what is overpriced, 'cause I'm still doing focus group market research to find out "how am I gonna market this..." [LAUGHTER] It's gonna take away my soul, I've already given up a really good job in so many different ways to pursue this dream and therefore I'm working part-time. I'm going to be hustling to try and make more money while having free time to make this.

RBP: I admire that. Because that takes a lot of strength to be able to say right, I'm going to pursue this. I'm going to lock myself in and I'm going to work at this. And it's a great project, I look forward to, you know, hopefully seeing that book in the stores.

TO: That's the key for me really. That's something I'm really passionate about. I didn't realize the impact that other students... There are students that I have never even taught that have used... the teachers have used the resources. I'm like, wow, this is something that's unique. So I'm really quite excited about that because that would be really cool to be able to leave that behind for my two little boys and say here, Daddy's got a little book for you. Do you know what I mean? That would be cool.

RBP: We have a final, you know, the kicker question. Last question right. So, it's a little thing that we do here at the PAD. We are interested in the full spectrum of the creative process. And so being able to have these events, Poetry at the PAD, with the lyrical, and then whatever we have, lyrical, critical, improvisational, and you, my friend, educational. How would you describe your creative process? That's the question. He's thinking.

TO: Yeah, I guess... I look back at my childhood experiences, everything that I kind of write is based on fortunate things that I've witnessed and seen. A lot of people never really believe those stories and that's cool. But there were some really quite raw experiences that I've seen that you shouldn't see. And those stories I use and they inspire other stories that make up things that you hear. So I always have issues about whatever I experienced and saw and personally had when I was growing up, and those little moments flash and then they spark a narrative that creates my piece of writing. [APPLAUSE]

Part Two (00:34:50):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Andra Simons – **AS**

DT: That was Poetry at the PAD. If you wanna find out more about what those guys are up to then you can find them on Facebook and Twitter, @ThePADtv. And if you wanna find out more about what we're up to, then you can find us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr and Soundcloud, or on Twitter @Silent_Tongue. And all of our episodes now are available on iTunes for Apple users and Stitcher app for Android. Next up is the absolutely wonderful poet and performer Andra Simons. I first saw Andra read at one of the Poetry Library special event- 'edition' events, and it was great to be able to sit down with him and talk a bit more about the topics raised at that event. You can find out more about Andra's work over at www.andrasimons.wordpress.com. Here's Andra.

AS: Daughters.

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

[00:33:53]

DT: Thank-you, Andra. Hello.

AS: Hello.

DT: Welcome to the podcast. I'm gonna have to do a little warning for people listening, I think it's the school run outside so there's probably gonna be a lot of kids walking past and chattering, but...

AS: I actually really love that sound. I have it right next to my flat.

DT: OK. It's better than the, er- 'cause we've got a dog exercising area out the back so quite often it's just Staffies chasing Poodles around. So I first saw you read, or talk, at the Poetry Library.

AS: Yes.

DT: And it was called 'Queer Poets on Teaching'. And what sparked me, my interest, most in chatting to you not only was your work, but there was a question about identity, and since you're introducing your work here it might be a good place to start, on how you identify. And just to... Obviously we both know what we're talking about; just to recap for people listening, the question towards the end was, at what point, and would it be progress, if the term 'queer poet' would become obsolete. And I suppose that, in the questioner's mind was that that would be a sign, a positive sign, in that people wouldn't have to claim their queerness first, but...

AS: Yeah, I guess I identify as a queer, black poet. And... we've talked about this, but I'm quite clear that the 'queer' is first, and black second, and then poet. And there are so many other things that go before, probably before you get to poet. But, in terms of poetry, it's 'queer, black poet'. And, I guess it's important for me that those things are identified because they're- it's those two things that run through my work. And other things that run through my work, in terms of identity- you could throw in 'queer, black, island poet', 'queer, black, Bermudian poet', 'queer, black, island, fat poet'... You know! [LAUGHS] All those things can be thrown in, because all those things constantly reappear in my work.

'Islandness', if you wanna say it, coming from a small community surrounded by water... a somewhat Caribbean-like culture... But then, 'islandness' of loneliness, being a queer black boy feeling, you know, the tight-knit community but still feeling quite 'islanded' in that, 'othered' in that... Yeah, so that's where my identity sort of falls. And I do- and I'm serious when I say I throw in the fatness, because I knew quite early, you know what I mean, when you grow up in a majority black culture... the 'black', 'blackness' is part- it's the underlying identity, but things like being fat, and that being a marker placed on you... you then begin to see the world- your world becomes skewed through that, and how other people relate to you becomes skewed through that, and.

So yeah. I find that here, size... In the UK, size is something very... It's, it's... Yeah, I don't really want to [INAUDIBLE] on size! But it's quite a, it's a whole other beast. And whereas, size is a beast at home as well, but here it's like you're talking about... elephants, and the noise elephants can make, and there you might be talking about... horses. You know? It's just a- there's a difference in... But anyway.

DT: Has your view on, since you brought it up... because we hadn't actually spoken about this, sort of, physical identity previously, but, has your relationship to your physicality changed, in terms of your writing, since you've come to London? Has that changed since you've left Bermuda, or...

AS: Uh, about my physicality... No, it hasn't changed- it has changed, yes. Okay, it definitely has changed. In Bermuda, when I was throwing it out, and using it as part of the work, you would hear a knowing... knowing responses coming back. There's always at least half the audience that sort of... were probably the fat kid in the family, but yet, fatness didn't deter you, it was sort of a marker. And you were still allowed to be beautiful and sexy and vivacious if you are bigger. And you saw examples of it all around you.

Here, it's a different thing. So, I don't hear those validating sounds coming back from the audience, or people who read the work. And it almost, there's something political about using or referencing size. Yeah, and referencing queerness is still political here I think, especially when you're black, and black queerness is invisible here, I think, in the UK.

DT: So it's interesting that you talk about the invisibility of black queerness over here. And I just wanted to go back to what we've spoken about before, about the reasons behind identifying as a queer, black poet, rather than the other way around. And then if you, it might be easier- I don't want to lead it too much, because you give quite a good explanation as to why that is, so maybe you could explain that a bit and then we can get onto talking about the differences over here with black queerness.

AS: Yeah. Well I mean, coming from Bermuda, and with the majority black population, examples of black queerness is everywhere, you know. There's the neighbourhood 'dyke', there's the, you know, the town 'sissy', they're all walking around, and your family noticed them and they may have pointed them out, and they might- "you don't wanna be like that," you know. Or they have stories that are there to either scare you, or entice you to secretly meet these people in dark alleys [LAUGHS].

But then when you come, when I come to a place like here, or I've lived in Canada as well... Canada was the first place that I learned of queer black, or queer people of colour's, invisibility. I had my first boyfriend, who was an older white man, and we would go out to particular- every Saturday night we would go out to these clubs and he had this particular route he liked to take. And we always started in this one pub that was just lined with black-and-white pictures around the walls, and instantly I noticed there was no people of colour in these pictures, there were all these muscle-torsoed men all around, you know, in all sorts of positions on beaches, and all sorts of things.

And I was looking for... First of all, I was new to the community, and I was looking for images that looked like me and I didn't see them. And then I remember we got in a bit of an argument, 'cause I was saying, "I hate this place," like, I found that, I felt I didn't belong because I just didn't see any images of myself. And I was like, it's hard for me to feel sexy, and beautiful... I mean, then, that's what it was about, I was boiling it down to, I wanted to feel sexy and beautiful, I wanted to feel wanted in the club, you know? And I felt like, how can I feel wanted in a club if what you deem is beautiful, is put up on your walls, is people who didn't look like me.

And then I went back to Bermuda, which is a very different thing, and there were these clubs with these fantastic black drag queens, and the floor was filled with these... spirited black people moving on the floors. And the way they, sort of, would take away gay music and subvert it by playing [INAUDIBLE] but, you know, winding and twisting and simulating sex with each other, you just felt like, this is revolutionary, you know? And knowingly doing what they were doing, they purposely would do that, you know?

And then I moved here, and once again it's, it's... You just don't, you just don't see those images as much. And also, I think, here I was- I grew into the whole... Or I saw that people don't perceive that you may be gay, or even that gayness exists amongst black people, it's a weird thing. There's this sort of complete unknowing or ignorance around it.

DT: Well you definitely wouldn't be the first guest on this podcast to talk about similar things, and UK-born people are saying the same thing as well, like, just that invisibility... And this notion that, there wouldn't even be a question as to whether you are gay or queer in any way, because of the colour of your skin.

AS: So... I mean, I saw a TV programme once about Stephen K. Amos, the comedian, he did this- I mean, it was very light, but it was looking at... He went to Jamaica, and the UK in comparison, and it wasn't an in-depth, sort of, look or discussion about it; but there was this little, sort of, experiment on the streets of Manchester, I believe, or it could've been Liverpool, where he had eight people, all of them... He had one Asian man, one black man, and the other six were white, and he just had people walking and then he got everybody to ask who was, who they thought was the gay man out of the eight men. And the only gay man out of the eight was the black man. And a hundred per cent, none of them thought the black man was the gay man. And that was, well that's a whole lot of issues among that, as to the portrayal of that hyper-masculine black male that's out there. And hyper-masculinity is not equivalent to gayness or queerness. And when I say that, I'm talking about how people perceive.

Yeah, that was an example of something that just, sort of, in a way validated what I was already experiencing.

DT: Six white men, an Asian man, and a black man sounds like the line-up of most BBC panel shows.

AS: Yes yes, exactly, yes. [LAUGHS] And I'm always going, which one's the gay one?

DT: Is it, because of this issue that we're talking about now, the invisibility, is that why you're so... is this another reason that you're so keen to hold onto the label, do you feel obliged almost...

AS: That's exactly it. When I go on stage, something comes over me that I have to assert my identity quite clearly. I refuse to go on stage and have someone, either through assumption... assume that I'm one thing, and I'm there to clarify it, whether they asked to be clarified or not. Or, I'm there to command a space and say, I'm here and I have something to say, and you're going to listen. You've already paid to listen anyway, or you're already there to listen anyway and I'm giving you a perspective, and it's my personal perspective. And I, in a way, I want you to be clear about it.

And I've been doing that for so long; in Canada, I really had this thing where I would be... often we went into these, sort of, dive-y places again, and presumably... you know, they were playing pool and there was [INAUDIBLE] and there was often college kids around, and you would get up front... and I would have this poem, just start sort of screaming, "I take Dick," you know, or whatever, and it was this sort of thing that was... I don't know what would come over me, I would just... it wouldn't be on my list of things to read, but I would find that I would do it because I had to. I felt like I had to make a statement. And it's never been about shocking, but it's about saying, I exist, and if I exist, there are loads of other people that are similar that exist, and...

DT: Is there part of you that's shouting at other people that identify in the same way, are you perhaps sometimes shouting over the crowd, and trying to reach...

AS: Yes, yeah. And what's most interesting to me is, post-show... I find it a bit here, but it happened a lot while I was in Canada, where I would read and I would have straight men, or men who I'd perceive were straight, or who would tell me they were, who would approach me afterwards to talk to me about my work. Very few times have I had gay men do it. I'm still actually baffled by that, and actually sort of saddened. But I will have often either lesbians or straight men approach me afterwards to talk about my work or admire the work in some way, or connect with the themes, some of the themes in it. And I always was interested in that phenomenon, for some reason, with me. And I still get that.

DT: I think we're going to take a reading shortly, a second reading, and I'd like to come onto talking about the performance side of things... But it does seem like, you know, that when you mentioned that idea of 'islandness'... and that's pretty universal, isn't it? Once you get into talking in terms of isolation, most people can relate to that, and it's a really strong tool isn't it? To engage people...

AS: Yes, and I think that's what it is. And also in the time I used to actually talk about... a lot of the work was the islandness, but that islandness that was... one that's solo, of feeling lonely and alone... rooted in abuse, physical and sexual abuse, which I don't- I do a bit of today, but not as much as I did then. And also there was a lot of men who were connecting to that act and finding, sort of, solace in the fact that another man was mentioning those things.

So, there are all sorts of, I guess, other themes in the work that people really... which is what you want, really. I mean, there's queerness... we all know this queerness comes in every... is multifaceted, and that other people should see reflections of themselves in that.

DT: Yes. Yeah, we'll take a second reading please.

AS: Okay... being we're doing queerness... [LAUGHS] This one's called, Long Live the Queen.

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

[00:52:49]

DT: Thank-you very much. I'd like to go on to talk about your performance background as well, and how important that side of things is to you work, and how you first got into performing.

AS: The roots of every, sort of, thing, the writing, everything I have, goes back to performing, and performing as a young kid. As someone who loved dance, and I wanted to be a dancer, and I wanted to follow my mother's footsteps and dance... And then there was a point where I thought, I'm too fat to dance. So then I went into the next thing, which was, well if I can't dance then maybe I can act. And I acted a bit, you know, as you do [LAUGHS]. And so then I went to study Theatre in school.

All along I had always written. Again, my mom was a huge influence, and so my mom, when I was very young, used to write with me and we used to have little competitions of... that's a hat, who can write the best poem about a hat, or... those sorts of things. So I was always writing as a teenager, actually, I wrote quite a lot. And then during theatre school I had written some. And when I graduated, or just before graduating, my acting coach took me in a room and he said, basically it's going to be difficult out there for you as a black Bermudian actor in the Canadian theatre landscape, it's gonna be difficult. 'Cause I was struggling with accents and everything at the time. And he basically said, you have to create your own work; the work may be there, but if you want to work constantly, create your own work.

And I took that to heart, and I immediately afterwards left theatre school, met someone else who wrote. She was dating a musician, who was friends with musicians, and we created a band that was called Stumbling Tongues. That woman was Sandra Alland. And that's what I did when I was in Canada.

And then I started moving into writing for the page, but always maintaining a performance. And when I went to Bermuda, I continued to perform through that, also had a band as well, and then I came here and I had a sort of performance duo with a drummer named [INAUDIBLE] He played a drum kit and I sort of performed with that. But at the same time I was always trying to keep them theatrical, an element of them theatrical. So I still perform... I've moved a bit into video as well.

DT: Do the performance and writing, the acts of performing and writing, do they still run in parallel, or do they diverge at all?

AS: What's different now, the difference is, then I would write for performance. Now I write for the page and then translate that onto the stage. So I don't necessarily think about writing for performance anymore. I write for the page.

DT: Why do you think that is? What's different now?

AS: I actually enjoy the challenge of writing for the page. I enjoy the beauty of creating for the page. You know, there's this white space and it's sort of like this bottomless pit for language. And all the nuances that you could capture on the page, I just love that. How you could shape it, and structure it. And the editing process, I love all that element for the page. And then once I do that, then the other challenge is, how do I bring that to life on the stage. Which isn't as difficult as I think it is, because I think more and more I tend to write almost monologue-y... and so transferring that to the stage isn't a big leap for me.

But then around that is, how can I do more with that, how can I bring in movement, because the dancer in me isn't gone. I still want to be the dancer, the fat dancer, and I still want to feel like I'm floating. You know, there's that part of me that wishes I was Nina Simone. So I'm going to sing, whether you'd like to hear it or not.

DT: So your performance stuff, then, it's quite collaborative now, is it?

AS: Because theatre's collaborative, so because I'm still rooted in theatre, because I work best collaboratively, even when I'm writing solo. I like the action of... and I don't find that a lot here in London, I like the action of writing a piece of something, then taking it to a group of friends, reading it, see what they think, going back and working on it again.

DT: Actually I do remember that from the Poetry Library. Because hadn't you all met, on the panel [INAUDIBLE]

AS: [INAUDIBLE] We had all met, this was several years ago, and it was probably, in the UK, my most creative period. Quite a lot of work came out of that period.

I mean, that's something that music, and film, and theatre, as art forms, have; it's integral to how they operate. And writing doesn't necessarily have that.

DT: Do you have any ideas, even if you've never mentioned them to anyone else, as to why writers might be a little bit reluctant to get into that process?

AS: I think because so much of writing is thinking. And I think I once heard, I don't know who to credit it to, but I actually heard quite an established, I believe he was an African writer; and he said ninety per cent of writing is thinking, and I was like... wow, that's okay because that's what I do, you know? I tell people I'm writing but actually I'm thinking. And then when that ten per cent comes, you never know when it's going to come... You still have to go away and allow those things to germinate and stuff. So I think that might be half the

reason so many writers need quiet. I don't, I actually like noise. I need to focus, I need the noise to make me focus. But I know so many of my friends that wake up very early, and everything has to be really quiet. Or they write best when they take a retreat in Wales or Ireland. Or Spain. Or Devon.

Yeah, I think that may be part of it. Though I think that's changing, I think having a spoken word scene in particular, where you see each other regularly because you're on the scene, and you're performing on the scene. And you're hearing other people read. You're almost, in some way, responding to what you hear. That, in a way, is collaborative, even though it's not formalized.

DT: Yeah I would definitely agree with that. There is a very definite conversation happening isn't there? At all spoken word events. Whether you want to enter it or not. You're listening, you're part of it, aren't you? That's inevitable.

AS: Now I used to run a spoken word night in Bermuda for three years, and you're part of that conversation again, you hear someone get up and read, and if I didn't like what they had to say, I pulled something out of my little collection, my pile of papers, that was in direct response to that. Or I'd write something the next week, and other people would do the same.

DT: Yeah, it was it was definitely that element of... You explained how keen you were to talk, which meant I really wanted to have you on here for a chat, because it's... I wouldn't have started this podcast if I didn't think it was vital for people to talk about their work. And I think it's important to remind people as well that you can be part of the conversation just by listening, can't you? You don't have to actively engage. But it's just a shame that there aren't that many points for... You know, because enough people are willing to have a conversation, it's just difficult to get to that point.

I think though, we may be running out of time, so we might have to take a last reading, please.

AS: Okay, this one's called, Title.

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

[01:06:27]

DT: Thank-you very much. Thanks for joining us.

AS: Thank you.

Part Three [01:08:20]:

Poetry Unplugged 20Yrs

DT: Finally for today's episode, a collection of recordings taken from the twentieth anniversary celebrations for Poetry Unplugged. And for those of you that don't know, Poetry Unplugged is a weekly open mic night, usually held at the Poetry Cafe in Covent Garden, central London. Though from now until Spring 2017 it will be held at the Betsy Trotwood, which is a pub on Farringdon Road, whilst the Poetry Cafe is refurbished. For more information about the night, and how to get to the temporary venue, go to Poetry Unplugged on Facebook, or email poetryunplugged@gmail.com. The basic premise behind the anniversary night was that the three main hosts from the past twenty years all invited some regular readers from their respective eras.

The event was split into three sections, each hosted by one of the three regular hosts. And I've done the same on here so that you can keep some sort of track of who is reading and in what order. First up it's John Citizen who was host from 1996 to 2001, and he invited along Paul Birtill, Dean Wilson, Tim Wells, Jason King and Tamsin Kendrick, and this section ends with John reading himself.

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End of transcript