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[Episode 38: Ginger John](#) – (June 2015)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Ginger John – **GJ**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today, I'm joined by Ginger John. All right, John?

GC: How are you doing?

DT: We're at the Camden Centre in Holborn in Central London and about an hour and a half away from the Stand Up And Spit gig, which has been organised partly by Speaking Volumes and the man himself, Tim Wells. Before we start chatting, we're going to have a couple of poems from John.

GC: This is Tesco Chain Store Massacre. Tim likes this one.

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[0:01:30]

This is called, I'm in the Sunday Express with this one, half a page. In the Sunday Express, the guy said I used more expletives in the first four lines of the poem than anything else. So I'll do this poem for you. I read it on the night and after four lines, he said: 'I'm not listening to this with my wife'. I said: 'Well, there's the door. Fuck off.' That's the expletive I used. So this is the poem that I read. The first four lines are all full of expletives, according to this man.

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DT: Actually, I wrote a review for the Lunar Poetry Magazine and we had a complaint that my swearing was excessive.

GJ: Good on yer.

DT: So I said: 'They shouldn't be so fucking shit, should they?'

GJ: Philip Larkin would love you.

DT: So first question always is: why poetry?

GJ: When the punk thing started and all that, I suppose it's a bit of a cliché because all the ranters say this, they wanted to be in a band. I couldn't be in a band and I was listening to John Cooper Clarke, John Peel session, and I went: 'That's like one of my mine. I write stuff like that. And I've got the accent.' So I did a bit of stuff, then I read about Seething Wells and Attila the Stockbroker and I sent Wells a poem called Valhalla and he printed it in Molotov Comics. So that was my first venture into poetry. Ranting poetry.

DT: It seems a common story with ranters, that the first outing is some sort of zine.

GJ: The zines have been really big. You play a gig one night and a couple of days later, there's a fanzine out with a review of the gig in it, know what I mean? They were great. All the fanzine editors read them and they published stuff in another one, there were like

stringers all round the country, writing all these things. Then you had the big American things, like Maximum Rock and Roll used to pick up on them and say: 'Can you do a bit more on that? It sounds really good.'

You used to get a whole page, some guy that owns a fanzine in Hartlepool or something, and you give him a whole page in Maximum RocknRoll or Flipside and it's all reviews of English bands and tapes and things that you'd never get, addresses that you could write to and go: 'I'll send you that tape.' Fanzines were good. Plus, we had our own fanzine as well, Swells had Molotov Comics, I used to chuck bits and bobs in there as well. Attila ran Tirana Thrash, Janine Booth, Big J, she had Blaze and then there were a few others, Wake Up fanzine, which had a lot of the ranting stuff in it, which was a really big, thick one, like a telephone book, that was really good and quality.

DT: So when you first started writing poetry, what was the reaction from friends around you? Was it a normal thing to be doing at that time?

GJ: No, not at all. I'm a poet! When Clarkey took off and all that, it was quite... Except for the music friends I had, the other friends don't take a blind bit of notice. Have you seen my Facebook, all the plugs, not one of them are into it, it's other people who've come along: 'Whoop, see you there.' But my mates would go: 'Yeah right.'

DT: Was there a similar thing with the poetry scene, spoken word scene, and the music scene, comparing it to the 1990s when it seemed everyone that was in a band wanted to be a stand-up comedian and every stand-up comedian wanted to be in a band?

GJ: Yeah. Comedy was the new rock 'n' roll.

DT: So what have been your main influences as a writer and performer? Are they different?

GJ: I get ideas from basically anything I see, observe. I like jokes. A lot of mine are punchlines from jokes I've done, or done a joke and fluffed it up a bit. But things that piss you off. Politics. I'm a bit political. I got told I was a bit political, anyway by Granada TV.

DT: It seems that spoken-word people who are doing it now have made a conscious decision to be political or to be angry, whereas with the ranters, that was just what you did. It wasn't as much of a conscious decision.

GJ: No. Well, we had the winter of discontent, Thatcher, Falklands War, stuff like that. I must tell you, when Mrs Thatcher retired, my fucking act went out the window. You bastard, get back in there! For stuff, she was great, you could rhyme loads of things with Thatch, know what I mean? Not like the numptys that are in now.

DT: It seems a lot of people are struggling now to be political in their poetry or art, because it's all so banal. The government now are so plain, deliberately so.

GJ: It's the same thing. Bland.

DT: It's obviously a deliberate choice. You can't pick up on anything.

GJ: They're all part of the same thing.

DT: I was discussing this with Janine. Before the election, you couldn't be that angry with Cameron, because essentially, you ended up being angry with Miliband, because they're the same fucking arseholes. When rant happened, there was a very definite...

GJ: It needs something, but not UKIP.

DT: So we've started talking a little bit about the ranting. Maybe we can have a couple more poems.

GJ: I'll just lubricate the neck. This is the first poem I ever writ. It's called Paranoid Attack, it's about travelling on the tube in London and how unfriendly people are.

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[0:10:50]

GJ: This is my... fuck off, I don't like you.

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[0:11:57]

GJ: If Little Brother was here, he'd call that 'a shopping-list poem'.

DT: Before we get talking about the ranting stuff, I just want to ask how younger people take to your poems when you're giggling? There are a couple of references there, like 'engaged tones' and 'cassette tapes', a lot of people wouldn't know what that means.

GJ: It happened to me at the gig in Borough, Bang Said The Gun.

DT: I was going to mention that. You did one poem and a lot of references went over people's heads.

GJ: The one you're talking about is Adverts on the Telly, people were going: 'What?' I was halfway through, looking at everyone, going: 'Ohhhh dear.'

DT: I was going to ask you about it after the gig. I understood the references, as a very young child, and I was quite a bit older than the audience.

GJ: I was on the stage and there was this big fucking tumbleweed blowing in front of me. There was nothing I could do about it, I was 'Oh bollocks', do you know what I mean? That

was a very quick set. He didn't like me, I don't think. What's in me shed? How fucking pissed are you? What's all that about?

DT: How did you get involved with the other guys at Stand Up And Spit?

GJ: The thing on the what do you call it? Listen to Peely. Then there was a little bit written about Molotov Comics in the NME by Neil Spencer, so that's when I sent the thing to Swells and that's when he published Valhalla in Molotov Comics. I also read about Attila and all that sort of thing, and I said: 'Ooh, I'd like to see you.' He said: 'We're playing Brixton East in a couple of weeks', so I came down from Manchester and went to see them. Swells was on with Benjamin Zephaniah. I went: 'Ooh, I like that, I'll have some of that'.

Swells was really helpful, Attila was really helpful at the beginning, he gave me phone numbers for everybody, honestly, I've still got them at home. I've got gig leaflets, flyers and Attila's written on the back and it's just chocka, 'do that one, play that one, they're good, don't talk to some of them.' Really, really so helpful. That's what we did a lot of. I'd get a gig they hadn't played, so you send them the phone number, say: 'I did a gig there, they paid.'

So we all told each other about it. We did punk gigs as well and out of the punk stuff, some of the people promoting punk started doing alternative cabaret, cos there was no alternative cabaret when we started. You had the thing in London, Rik Mayall and all that at the Comedy Store in Paul Raymond's Review Bar, but not a cabaret circuit. That came out of us and the punks and all that sort of thing.

DT: I think that's one of the most interesting things we talk about now, with spoken word. We take it for granted that you could go and read every night if you wanted. There are different places, different styles of club and bars. But back then, you had to put everything on yourself.

GJ: You did loads of promoting stuff yourselves. 'I've done gigs for them, they've done a gig for us'. I was in Ipswich about this time as well and I went to see John Cooper Clarke, that's where me and Tim [Wells] crashed the stage, at Clarke's gig at the Roundhouse. I booked Attila, Swells, Benjamin as well, three of them to do Albion Mills in Ipswich. Good stuff.

DT: Coming from Manchester was a pretty good location to get involved with things. Between Manchester and Bradford, there was a lot happening there. It's quite easy to get sucked into thinking everything's happening in London all the time.

GJ: It did me harm in one sense, that I lived most of the beginning in Bradford. The Manchester lot classed me as a Bradford poet, the Bradford ones did this thing called Voices of The Valley and it's all local poets, Joolz is in it, Little Brother is in it, Wells and it's got a big thing about all this and all that and at the end of it, it goes: 'Another poet about at the time was Ginger John.'

We got Dirk Spig and a few others in there, nothing against Dirk or anything like that, Mr Hughes as he is now, but I was doing more gigs than any of them. I was gigging loads more

than any of them. Not as much as Nick Toxic and Seething Wells, but I was doing the gigs and they'd always say: 'Oh, we're looking for another poet.' They go: 'Oh, Ginger's here.' They were like: 'Oh, bring him then.' I used to get gigs on the backs of Swells and Nick as well.

DT: So you had a lot of people putting on gigs.

GJ: We did the Intolerance tour and that's the first national ranters' tour.

DT: How many dates?

GJ: Umpteen. Some are on there. Weekly. That was happening in NME, they used to print up tour gigs and they printed every week. We played everywhere and anywhere.

DT: What about the benefit gigs?

GJ: They liked us, didn't they, we weren't in a band or anything like that, they'd bung us on with anybody. They'd always have a ranting poet on. There was a good quote on Steve Drewett once, nothing nasty meant by it or anything. We'd done a gig somewhere and it was a minor benefit gig and Steve, dead dry, out of Newtown Neurotics, he went: 'I wonder how many benefit gigs the miners will do for us when they go back to work?' We did that for the print workers, fire brigade, nurses, we were on picket lines, most of the ranters were on picket lines.

There was small ones we did and all that, raising money, you help out where you can. We were cheaper than a band. You're thinking then, in the 80s, for a semi-named band, like a punk band or something, you're talking £150, £200. You could have a ranting poet, half a dozen of them. That's where I think the cabaret thing came out of it. It made cabaret artists as well at the time, like the all-girls thing from Sheffield, the Chuffing 'Ells, know what I mean?

They were all miners' wives and all that, then they got this comedy thing together and they toured and gigged and they were funny and entertaining. Really good. You didn't mind doing things, know what I mean? The miners and all that, me and Swells were out flyposting SWP 'Coal not dole' things on every lamppost in bloody Bradford.

DT: With gigs you go to now, do you see a continuation of ranting poetry in younger poets?

GJ: Who's that old fella creeping about for? Know what I mean? Jimmy Savile!

DT: Are there any young poets that continue that style of poetry?

GJ: You've got Kate Tempest going out there and Emily Harrison, who's doing gigs with us at the moment. She's stormingly good and she's a little diddy thing as well. She's got the spirit and all that. I'm all for them. If they've got the spirit and want to call themselves

ranting poets, get on with it. Unlike the other ones, we were never encouraged, but the ranters will encourage new ones and put them on the bill. I'm all for that.

I'm just hoping the interval, we've got an interval tonight, I hope they all dive on stage like we did. When the interval comes up, a load of them jump on stage and start doing their poems or whatever they want to do.

DT: I could chat all evening, but we've got time constraints, so I think we're going to wind up with two more poems please.

GJ: Do you remember The Magic Roundabout? Thank God for that. I didn't want to do any poem that goes over your head.

DT: People that are listening can Google it, at least.

GJ: They've done the film with Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams. She was Florence. Worked for me. Go and Google if you want to know who Mr Rusty is. He's not very rude. This is called Things Have Changed On The Magic Roundabout.

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[0:23:19]

This is the last one, called You're Like An Unknown.

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[0:23:54]

I thank you, good night.

DT: Thanks very much John. I suppose people can find you on Facebook now?

GJ: John Lunn or Ginger John, Ranting Poet. Thank you.

End of transcript.