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

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Ginger John [Lunn] – **GJ**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today, I am joined by Ginger John and we're at the Camden Centre in Holborn, Central London, 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.

GJ: This is Tesco Chainstore Massacre. Tim likes this one...

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

I made the Sunday Express with this one, half a page. I did the first four lines and then the Sunday Express guy said I'd used more expletives in the first four lines of a poem than anything else. So I'll do this poem for you, I said the other 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. This is the poem I read. The first four lines are full of expletives, according to this man.

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DT: Thank you. I wrote a review for the Lunar Poetry magazine and we had a complaint that my swearing was excessive.

GJ: Good on you. Phillip Larkin would love you.

DT: First question as always, 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, I wanted to be in a band and I couldn't be in a band. I was listening to John Cooper Clarke, a John Peel session, and I went, that's like one of 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 Swells a poem called Valhalla and he printed it in Molotov Comic. That was my first venture into 'poetry' or ranting poetry.

DT: It seems a common story for most ranters, that the first outing was some sort of zine.

GJ: The zines were really big. You'd play a gig one night and a couple of days later, there was a fanzine out with a review of the gig in it. They were great. All the other fanzine editors read them and they published stuff out of other fanzines. They were like stringers all round the country. Then you had the big American things like Maximumrocknroll that used to pick up on them as well and say, can you do a bit more on that? It sounds really good.

I used to get Maximumrocknroll, they'd give a whole page to some guy that owns a fanzine in Hartlepool or something. They'd give him a whole page in Maximumrocknroll or Flipside. It was all reviews of English bands and tapes and things you'd never get to see. 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 Comic. I used to chuck bits and bobs in there as well. Attila had Tirana Thrash, Janine Booth, Big J, she had Blaze! Then there were a few others. There was Wake Up! fanzine which had other ranting stuff in it, a really big thick one, like a telephone book. That was really good. Fanzines helped a lot.

DT: When you first started writing poetry, what was the reaction of friends around you? It was not a normal thing to be doing at that time.

GJ: No. I'm a poet! When Clarkey took off and all that, it was acceptable with all the music friends I had, but my other mates basically didn't take a blind bit of notice. If you've seen my Facebook, all the plugs for this gig, not one of them interested. It's other people who've found it and come on and gone, ooh, see you there. My mates go 'urgh, all right'.

DT: Was there a similar thing with the spoken word, music scene then as in the 90s, when it seemed everyone in a band wanted to be a stand-up comedian and every stand-up comedian wanted to be a musician?

GJ: Yeah. Comedy was the new rock and roll.

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

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

DT: Spoken-word people now have made a conscious decision to be angry, whereas with ranters, that's just what you did, it wasn't as conscious.

GJ: We had the Winter of Discontent, Thatcher, Falklands War, stuff like that. When Mrs Thatcher retired, my fucking hat went out the window. You bastard, get back in there! She was great. You can rhyme loads of things with Thatch, do you know what I mean? Not like the numpties that are in now.

DT: It seems a lot of people are struggling now. The government are so plain.

GJ: Bland.

DT: It's obviously a deliberate choice because then you can't pick up on anything. You couldn't be that angry with Cameron because you'd end up being angry with Miliband. They're the same fucking arseholes.

GJ: It needs something, but not UKIP.

DT: Maybe we can have a couple more poems.

GJ: Yeah. I'll have to lubricate the neck. This is the first poem I ever writ. It's called Paranoid Attack, about travelling on the tube in London and how unfriendly people are. I've got this written down, but I should know it.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

This is called Nowt. This is my 'fuck off, I don't like you'.

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

DT: How do younger audiences take to your poems? A lot wouldn't know what cassette tape or engaged tones means.

GJ: It happened to me at the gig in Borough, what was that?

DT: At Bang Said The Gun in Borough. There were a lot of blank faces. One poem went over people's heads, just the references.

GJ: The one you're talking about is The Adverts on the Telly. They were going what? Who? I was halfway through, looking at them, going oh dear! I was seeing this big fucking tumbleweed blowing across. Nobody's heard of it! Oh bollocks. But then that was a very quick set. He didn't like me, I don't think. What's In my Shed? What's all that about? Every time he came near me, Tim was getting all right, John? I'm terrible with going, oi!

DT: How did you get involved in Stand Up and Spit?

GJ: There was the thing on the what do you call it? Listening to Peely. Then there was a little bit written about Molotov Comics in the NME by Neil Spencer. That's when I sent the thing to Swells and that's when he published Valhalla. I also read about him and Attila and said I'd like to see you. They said they were playing at Brixton so I hitched down from Manchester and went to see them.

Swells was on with Benjamin Zephaniah. I thought I like that. Swells was great. Attila was really helpful at the beginning. He gave me phone numbers of everybody, bestie friend. Honestly, I've still got them at home. Leaflets, flyers and Attila's written on the back, I played that one, do that one, they're good. Don't talk to so-and-so, talk to so-and-so. So helpful. That's what we did a lot.

I'd get a gig that they hadn't played so you'd send them the phone number. You'd go I've just done a gig there and they pay 'uh-uh'. So we all told each other about it. We were doing punk gigs as well and some of the people promoting punk did alternative cabaret, because there was no alternative cabaret when we started. You had the thing in London with Rik Mayall and all that, Comedy Store, in Paul Raymond's Revue Bar. There was no cabaret circuit. That came through us, the punks and all that sort of thing.

DT: With spoken word now, it's taken for granted you can go and read every night. There are different places, different styles of club and bar. Back then, you had to put everything on yourself.

GJ: Oh yeah, you did loads of promoting gigs yourself and stuff like that. I done gigs for them, they done gigs for us. I went to see John Cooper Clarke, that's where me and Tim

crashed the stage at Clarkey's gig at The Roundhouse. That night, I booked Attila, Swells and Benjamin, three of them to do Ipswich, Albion Mills.

DT: There was a lot happening in Manchester and Bradford. It's quite easy to get sucked into thinking everything's happening in London.

GJ: It did me harm in one sense. I did a lot in Bradford at the beginning so the Manchester lot cast me as a Bradford poet and the Bradford ones did this thing, Voices of the Valley, all the poets, Joolz, Little Brother, Swells and it's got a big thing about all this and all that. At the end bit, he goes 'another poet that was about at the time was Ginger John.' We got Dirk Spig and a few others in there, nothing against Dirk or anything like that.

I was doing more gigs than any of them and I was gigging a load more. Not as much as Nick Toczek and Seething Wells, but I was doing the gigs. They'd always say oh, we're looking for another poet, they'd go, oh Ginger's here. Oh right, bring him them. I used to get gigs on the back of Swells and Nick. We did the Intolerance Tour, the first national ranters' tour. There's never been one since.

DT: How many dates?

GJ: Umpteen. That was out of the NME. They used to print them up, tour gigs. We played anywhere and everywhere.

DT: What about the benefit gigs?

GJ: They liked us. We weren't in a band, they bunged us on with anybody. They always had a ranting poet on. You could see through it. Nothing nasty meant by it. We'd done a gig somewhere and it was a miners' benefit and Steve – Steve Drewett, out the 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, printworkers, fire brigade, nurses.

Most of the ranters were on picket lines. There were a lot of small ones, raising money. Help out where you can. We were cheaper than a band. Then, in the 80s, for a semi-name band like a punk band, you're talking £150, £200, £250, whereas you could have half a dozen ranting poets for that. That's why I think the cabaret thing came out of it.

It made cabaret artists, like the all-girls from Sheffield, the Chuffing 'Ells. They were great, they were all miners' wives and stuff like that. Then they got this comedy thing together and they toured and gigged and they were funny, entertaining, good. You didn't mind doing it for the miners and all that. Me and Swells were out fly-posting SWP, 'Coal Not Dole' on every lamppost in Bradford.

DT: Do you see a continuation of ranting poetry at gigs now?

GJ: Who's that old fella? What's that old fella creeping about for? Not a mate of Jimmy Savile's is he?

DT: Any younger poets continuing that style?

GJ: You've got Kate Tempest. You've got Emily Harrison, who's doing gigs with us. She is stormingly good and she's a wee 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. We were never encouraged, but the ranters will encourage new ones and put them on the bill.

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

DT: We could chat all evening, but we have time restrictions, so we'll wind up this with two more poems please.

GJ: Do you remember The Magic Roundabout? Thank God for that.

DT: The people who are listening can Google it at least.

GJ: They've done the film with Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams. She was Florence. It worked for me. This is what I was trying to explain. Go and Google it if you want to know who Mr Rusty is. This is called Things Have Changed On The Magic Roundabout.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

This is the last one and it's called You're Like An Unknown.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

I thank you, goodnight. On tour October and November.

DT: Thanks very much. People can find you on Facebook.

GJ: John Lunn (gingerjohn ranting poet)

DT: I'll have a link under the video on YouTube. Cheers, John.

End of transcript.