British writer Benjamin Zephaniah: an appreciation

Paul Bond
13 December 2023

The untimely death of British writer Benjamin Zephaniah has triggered genuine popular grief. Zephaniah was an appealing poet and novelist with an oppositional eye, much loved for his accessibility, his honesty, his enthusiasm and his resistance to authority.

There was nothing artificial or affected about this talented writer and performer. He was a working-class man who managed to break from a life of crime to pursue an artistic vision.

His experience was shaped as a child of Windrush-generation Caribbean migrants. His mother Lineve Faleta Honeyghan came from Jamaica on a ship called the *Peniah*, but Zephaniah's research failed to discover any record of it: either she misremembered, he wrote, "or she was an illegal immigrant. In which case it would have to be said that she did a great job, and I'm very proud of her."

Her first British landlady called her Valerie, a name she adopted. She met Benjamin's father, Barbadian Oswald Springer, in Birmingham, where she worked as a nurse. Benjamin was born and grew up there.

He remained close to Valerie, learning from her a love of language and rhyme. He was later diagnosed as dyslexic, but Valerie's spontaneous rhyming and speech patterns were his formative influence.

Oswald became increasingly violent towards Valerie, who eventually left after an assault. Benjamin, aged 10, was the only one of the nine children who went with her. They lived on the run, stalked by Oswald and unable to settle.

Benjamin was also becoming aware of racial discrimination and abuse, finding his experiences at odds with Valerie's denial it was happening. He bonded with what he called "the other outcasts"—Gypsy and Irish children.

This forged a determination to fight for equality and justice, and his view that this was not limited by race or colour. To some extent, he always saw these experiences in class terms.

Dislocation, compounded by the undiagnosed dyslexia, disrupted his education. Hearing his facility with language, Valerie's church elders nicknamed him Zephaniah ("treasured by God").

He formally adopted this name through Rastafarianism. The Jamaican religious movement developed in opposition to empire. It was embraced by some of the most oppressed Caribbean people to express social concerns, while inevitably turning them inwards, including through the ritualistic use of marijuana.

Zephaniah's idiosyncratic and individualised inner spirituality reflects Rastafarianism. But his activism applied the desire for liberation against oppression outwardly and more directly.

Rastafari opposition to empire was often framed around pan-Africanism, but Zephaniah used it to voice sympathy with the oppressed more widely. In "As a African," from *City Psalms* (1992), he wrote: "As a African I danced to riddims wild in Nicaragua… I went to find Palestine… a plastic bullet hit me in Northern Ireland…"

He supported Palestine consistently and was continually interested in the wider world. He later visited China regularly, where he met his second wife. That general sympathy for the world around him also drove his lifelong veganism. His politics were largely anarchistic and humanitarian, although he admired Tony Benn, not least for having shed his hereditary peerage.

When Jeremy Corbyn was elected Labour leader, Zephaniah wrote that "there might be a fraction of a hope for a non-Blairite future for the party." Corbyn's record settled that question, preserving Labour's pro-imperialist programme and handing the leadership to Sir Keir Starmer.

Zephaniah's chaotic enthusiasm reflected his adolescent development. Crime, borstal youth detention and prison pushed poetry to one side, but it reappeared thanks to the reggae dancehall scene. At house parties, Zephaniah began toasting, a reggae form of rapping. From the outset, he was rhyming about South Africa and the Vietnam War "rather than girls and hustling."

He was still hustling, but the longer he spent in Birmingham's criminal world, the closer he got to violence and death. To escape this, and seeing greater opportunities for his performances, he left for London in 1978.

This was a politically tense period. Having implemented IMF austerity measures, the Labour government had entered a pact with the Liberal party. The far right was rampant, supported by police repression. The 1979 election of the Thatcher government unleashed a wholesale assault on the working

© World Socialist Web Site

class.

The “Sus” law, allowing stop and search on pretext of suspicion, was used routinely against young black men. Zephaniah wrote horrifically of Birmingham policemen showing him their trophy dreadlocks, torn from black men like scalps.

The rising wave of anger against this found cultural expression, and Zephaniah threw himself into performing at punk, reggae and alternative comedy events.

His first collection appeared in 1980. When Channel 4 approached him to make a documentary, he realised how cautious the British media were about discussing Northern Ireland, particularly. He later wrote of right-wing broadcasting, “I have been listening to the wrong radio station.”

Tactlessness was part of his appeal. “I wasn’t diplomatic, my poetry was raw and so was I.” His poems got “angrier and angrier because I was so eager to get my message across.” He performed at meetings and benefits during the 1984-85 miners’ strike and was active in demonstrations and protests.

He began recording with reggae accompaniment, earning respect from the reggae world—Aston Barrett reformed the Wailers to record with him. His first recording was the successful “Dis Policeman Keeps on Kicking Me to Death.” His debut album appeared in 1982.

His profile was rising, but he kept rooted. Belatedly realising the weaknesses of his second book *The Dread Affair* (1985), for example, he refused offers to republish it.

In 1987, Trinity College, Cambridge considered Zephaniah for a fellowship. Seeing this as another way of spreading creativity, he was willing to accept. The reaction from the establishment and right-wing press was vicious.

Under the headline “Would you let this man near your daughter?,” *The Sun* editorialised that “He is black. He is a Rastafarian. He has tasted approved schools and Borstals. And, oh yes, he is a poet.”

A *Daily Mail* cartoon complained, “If you hear any rumblings, it’s Keats, Shelley and Byron turning in their graves.” Zephaniah was not awarded the non-teaching fellowship. In 2011, he took a teaching post at Brunel University, where he became a widely respected and admired colleague and mentor.

In defiance of the *Mail*, he brilliantly identified with the Romantic poets in the television film *Dread Poets’ Society* (1990). He recognised and shared the radicalism of Shelley above all. Citing “Let the axe strike the tree / The poison tree will fall,” Zephaniah wrote “He’s right, I believe him.”

He always performed to all age groups, but initially resisted publishing children’s poems. He changed his mind after hearing children saying they liked having poems of their own, rather than being an afterthought in adults’ books. The result was “Talking Turkeys,” a poem about being kind to turkeys at Christmas, which burgeoned into a book.

Both book and poem have become celebrated classics. The account of Zephaniah finally relenting and closing an (adult) gig with the poem, and seeing the response—“I hadn’t realised what that poem meant to people”—is the more touching because he was unable to have children himself.

He remained uncompromising when writing for children, as novels like *Refugee Boy* (2001), later adapted as a play, show.

In 1999, he was suggested as a possible Poet Laureate. His response was “Bought and Sold” (2001). “It’s not censors or dictators that are cutting up our art,” he wrote:

“The lure of meeting royalty/And touching high society/Is damping creativity and eating at our heart.”

The result of this pressure to “Take your prize, now write more, Faster, Fuck the truth” was inevitable:

“Don’t take my word, go check the verse/Cause every laureate gets worse.”

He reminded Tony Blair’s government of this in 2003, when nominated for an OBE. Zephaniah’s response was “I shall never be considered as a Poet Laureate or an OBE sucker again. Let this put an end to it.” It also embarrassed other writers who had not been so scrupulous.

Laureateship could not be changed from within, he wrote that “it’s an antiquated role that compromises you.” Calling himself “profoundly anti-empire,” he told Blair: “You have lied to us, and you continue to lie to us, and you have poured the working-class dream of a fair, compassionate, caring society down the dirty drain of empire.”

This was a regular theme, as on “Empire,” his collaboration with Sinéad O’Connor and Bomb the Bass.

Blair, he said, had not been interested in speaking to him about his opposition to the Iraq war, nor when Zephaniah wanted to discuss the death of his cousin Mikey Powell in police custody earlier that year.

He later moved to rural Lincolnshire, but the quietness of his domestic life did not quieten his commitment. He was sympathetically perceptive on the reality of rural poverty, but wrote with evident pain at the resurgence of the far right and the escalation of racism following the Brexit referendum.

If Zephaniah’s politics were instinctual, they had a healthy basis: “When I see what people have to put with from their governments, I’m surprised they don’t rise up more often.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site