

Linton Kwesi Johnson

This militant dub poet from the heyday of the critical punk-reggae axis—one that forged a lasting musical identity—tells it like it is.

text *Graham Brown-Martin* (graham@trace44.com)
photography *Danny DaCosta*

One of the joys of writing is that you occasionally get to meet one of your heroes, and for me, Linton Kwesi Johnson is up there in my top ten, along with other inspired and cantankerous wordsmiths such as Mark E. Smith. I'm in good company, too, as fellow Brixtonian, David Bowie, name checked Johnson in a recent interview in Vanity Fair, listing Johnson's "Forces of Victory" album as one of his all-time top records.

Born in Chapelton, Jamaica, in 1952, Linton arrived in London in 1963 to join his mother who had emigrated there two years previously. He was educated at a state comprehensive school in Brixton before graduating with a sociology degree from Goldsmiths University, which presented him with an honorary fellowship in 2003. As a young man he joined the Black Panthers, and inspired by the words of W.E.B. DuBois, organised a poetry workshop within the movement. He was first published in 1974 with his first volume of poems, "Voices of the Living and Dead" followed by a landmark second volume, "Dread, Beat an' Blood" coinciding with a film made by the BBC of the same name. He is only the second living poet ever to appear in the Penguin Modern Classics series of books with "Mi Revalueshanary Fren".

He is about to release a new recording and DVD of his performance 'Live in Paris' on his own LKJ Records label (Lkjrecords.com) containing performances by Linton of a number of his most popular writings at the Zenith in front of any audience of 10,000. He is also celebrating 25 years at the reggae frontline. I recently met up with him in a bar in Herne Hill, near Brixton.

TRACE: Did you ever imagine that you would still be doing this 25 years later?

Linton Kwesi Johnson: Not at all, it's absolutely amazing. Far beyond my wildest dreams. It's funny how life turns out.

So why do think that you are still attracting a young audience?

It's not really a matter for me to speculate on, but I think that people are always discovering reggae and want to hear it from the source.

Reggae is having a post hip hop renaissance, what are your views on modern commercial hip hop?

Well, in spite of the current emphasis on money, clothes, women, sex and cars, there still seems to be one or two hip hop artists who are producing conscious material that are saying something about the human condition, and where black America's at. So I think that there's still a lot of good things happening in hip hop.

Black culture seems to be something that is packaged and marketed for sale these days, do you have a feeling on this?

Surely it's always been like that, it's just got bigger that's all. It's always been commodified, packaged and marketed since R&B until today. All these hip hop millionaires, good luck to them.

The U.K. seems less preoccupied than the U.S. with the notion of race, why do you think that is?

The black experience in the U.S. is different from the U.K. Largely it's historical, despite getting rid of people like Jim Crow and all that, race is very much under the surface of American social life, politics and culture. They still fly the Confederate flag in some parts of the southern states. A lot of African Americans are living in developing world conditions in the United States, and so like Jamaica you've got the gangsters as a consequence of poverty and despair who become role models for the kids.

Do you think that the visualisation of such role models on television and in the media propagates the problem?

It's another form of American cultural imperialism. We're all subject to the effects of media, but not all of it is negative, and there are still conscious artists coming through. It's too easy to assume that people do negative things as a consequence of negative images on television.

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There's often a negative view of Jamaicans in the U.K. media. Why do you think that is?

I think it's often to do with the way things are reported by the right wing press, such as the Evening Standard, Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph etc. It's to do with sensationalist reporting. It's more newsworthy to report the negative than the positive. Jamaica has made an immense contribution to social and cultural life all over the world. Marcus Garvey revolutionised African American thinking, and built the largest international movement of blacks in recent history. Bill Morris has made a positive role by being an active trade union leader in the U.K. Jamaicans have reached high status positions in public and business services throughout the world. There is a problem however, and it's foolish to pretend that there isn't. Jamaica used to

be a transshipment point for cocaine coming from Colombia. Anywhere there's a culture of poverty, and jobs are barren, of course it's going to have an impact. Hence the proliferation of gangs, guns and turf wars. There are a disproportionate number of Jamaican women in British prisons as a result of drug trafficking, but it's the abject poverty in which they have been living that has brought them to this. Ironically, poverty has gotten worse since the post-independence period amongst the genuinely poor, whereas the rich have got richer.

But why do you think that is? Jamaica flirted with communism in the '70s.

Jamaica never flirted with communism. That is a myth! Manley proposed a form of democratic socialism no different from old Labour. During the '70s, Jamaica naturally had good relations with its close neighbour of Cuba. The only organisation that came close to communism was the Workers Party, led by Trevor Monroe, who is now a respectable senator in the upper house. But they were discredited over their involvement in the counter-revolution in Grenada and that was that.

There were free trade zones set up in Jamaica which amounted to legalized sweatshops, how could this have happened?

This was a result of the policies of the IMF.

You're obliged to go to them for loans, and you are compelled to remove any trade tariffs to allow their products in while not letting yours out.

You've been an activist since your younger years. Do you believe things will improve?

You can't tell what's going to happen, but you have to have hope and be optimistic, and one gets hope when one sees all these anti-globalisation mass movements appearing all over the world. It means people are conscious about what is going on and want to do something about it. Sooner or later, governments are going to have to listen. ■

Linton Kwesi Johnson's new CD and DVD "Live In Paris" is released on LKJ Records in February