

Anthony Joseph

INTERVIEWED
BY ANJAN SAHA

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Anthony Joseph is a Trinidad-born poet, novelist and musician often described as ‘the leader of the black avant-garde in Britain’. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths College, where he is also completing a PhD with an interest in experimental Caribbean poetry and life writing. His written work and performance fuse his Caribbean background with an experimental aesthetic. Joseph cites his main influences as ‘surrealism, Jazz and the rhythms of Caribbean speech and music’. He is the author of three poetry collections, *Desafinado* (1994), *Teragaton* (1998) and *Bird Head Son* (2009) and his first novel, *The African Origins of UFOs* was published in 2006. He performs internationally and tours with his band The Spasm Band with which he has released three critically acclaimed albums. Joseph also lectures in creative writing at Birkbeck College, University of London. His new collection, *Rubber Orchestras*, is published by Salt in Autumn 2011.

Your work covers many genres, how would you describe it?

I am a poet first. The only thing you could compare poetry to perhaps is being a photographer; if you are a photographer you see the world through a lens, you are looking for an image, looking for a picture. As a poet you also look out for things that are in your frequency. If you cook you are looking for the poetry in that. If you are having a conversation with someone, you listen out for the words they use, the combinations, the way they speak, the way they deliver it. So you are always looking for the poetic element in your life. And that I think is what makes you a poet and that is why I call myself a poet. From an early age I was always interested in the poetry of life. Though I didn’t have a word for it then, I came to understand it later. It was always a feeling, an emotional engagement with language.

In the Spasm Band, the literature becomes performative. The performative element brings different meanings to the work. Can you elaborate on this?

Over the years, the lines have become blurred in the way in which I approach the Spasm Band. It’s a long story. First of all growing up in Trinidad I was involved

in poetry but music played a huge part in my life. Music was very accessible, we had records at home but not poetry books. I only started reading poetry as a teenager even though I was writing long before that.

But prior to that I was listening to a lot of Calypso and funk in the 70s and 80s. Like a lot of young people growing up then, I attached myself to music, it's such a powerful art. I wanted to be a musician, a singer, a songwriter. I came to England in 1989 to pursue music and pursue that dream. I was not fully mature at that time to know that actually I was a poet trying to fit into this musical thing. I had a band and we were doing black rock and had a lot of fun for a few years. This was the time of bands such as Living Colour and Bad Brains.

When that fell apart I started to reassess myself. I realised that I was a poet. It was quite an epiphany, a spiritual awakening. A realisation of self. It was because I was in England that I could finally understand what it meant to be a poet because of the weight of heritage of poets here. So that put a lot of things in perspective and I began writing heavily and got my first book out. But music is such a strong artform that eventually it found a way back into the poetry. Poetry is essentially spoken music. It's pretty much the same thing except you deliver it in a different way; but you are using the same language as musicians. You are using rhythm, timing, melody in the way you deliver a poem. There are all these aspects that align it very similarly to music. Walter Pater, an art critic, said, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."

So I started to get involved back with musicians in the late 90s and early 2000s and started experimenting a bit more. Whereas as a young man I was after getting signed, getting a deal, making money and doing a tour, it didn't work out. I stepped back as an adult and thought that I am going to make some music with my poems in a very natural and unpretentious way and go back to the roots and to the spiritual music that I grew up with as a child. Ironically that's what got us a deal and got us touring! It's really interesting how that happened.

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So going back to the Spasm Band, are the performances an essential part of an understanding of your work?

Yes, but there is a degree of compromise as a poet and as a performer. There is a degree of compromise working with a band, of transmitting this message that you have. It's not about getting audiences to listen to every single word. You have to find other ways, such as using the body, music, tone of voice and the atmosphere that you create, to transmit a feeling; which is ultimately what poems do. At the heart of what you are getting from a poem is a feeling, an emotion. That's why poems are so beautiful. Prose takes you away from yourself. Poetry returns you to yourself! This is what Chris Hamilton-Emery says, the editor of Salt Publishing.

So going back to the idea of performance – there is a degree of compromise and concession that I have to be aware of and try and transmit the poem in a different way. But people get it and I think that's because language is universal and human emotion is universal and people get the gist of it. And that's enough.

But yes, the performance with the band is another important aspect of my work, and to get a true understanding of the body of the work, you have to consider all the aspects, they create a whole, which is as I said a poetic approach to all aesthetic processes.

Experimentalism plays a large part in your work. What draws you to this methodology?

When I started writing as a child at about nine years of age, it was in a simple and derivative way. As with any art, once I learnt the basics of the craft I started experimenting, became obsessed with it. And I wrote constantly as I got older, trying different things, experimenting with the rhythm and sound of poems, developing my own particular voice.

Much later I discovered surrealism. A friend introduced me to Breton and Ted Joans and I started getting into the idea of reaching beyond the conscious mind. Usually you think about what you are going to write, you worry about the consequences and so you shape it into something that you think it should sound like. I wanted to move beyond that and write in a free and unrestricted way by the conscious mind; which is what Surrealism does. I was also influenced a lot by Cubism, Russian Formalism, Signs and Simulacra, Baudrillard and the whole postmodern thing. With the whole idea that a word could be a sign and could also have a meaning. Then I got into Jacques Lacan and how the brain processes language. These subjects very much informed the writing. For me writing has always been about writing and then finding that a label exists for what I am doing.

Do you find your work sits in a fairly unique position of Diasporic Influences and Experimentalism?

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Well, you have people like Kamau Braithwaite, an elder poet from Barbados who's one of the first poets that I saw writing experimentally and was a major influence on myself and others of my generation that lived in the Caribbean. Also, more currently, the poet Christian Campbell from the Bahamas. I believe he's within that same aesthetic of trying to break out of what people expect Caribbean poetry to be.

What people think makes my work unique is my bringing the Caribbean rhythm, attitude and feeling, and the European literary theories of experimentalism, surrealism and language poetry together in a way that is accessible. But coming from Trinidad with the whole Carnival and calypso thing, which are equally precious and impossible, surreal and experimental, it's not a surprise that I approach writing the way I do. My friend Lauri Ramey, who wrote the introduction to "The African Origins of UFOs" terms it the "Diasporic Avant-Garde."

Do you ever worry that your work might be too obscure for your readers?

For me you either write well or you write badly. If you write well you are telling the truth. If the truth is a bit strange or obscure, the truth will still come through. People will like it and respond to it. It's only when you contrive work and make it experimental for the sake of experimental for effect that people can see through it.

Allen Ginsberg used to say "Form is what happens." So you write your poem. If the poem works and it's experimental that's fine, it's still a poem. So, no, I don't worry about that anymore. Although with the new book, *Rubber Orchestras*, I have to worry a little because it's even more experimental than ever before!

What have been your formative experiences?

Sometimes you can't negate your influences. Sometimes we think our influences are Hemingway and Bukowski, but actually they are your grandparents, your aunt, your little sister. Usually they are the people who you encounter early in your life that have the biggest influence. My main influences were my grandmother and my grandfather, my aunt, the Mighty Sparrow, Indian farmers who worked the fields near to where I lived, the way they spoke, the stories they told. For me one of the earliest experiences was going to the church with my grandparents at the Spiritual Baptist Church which comes out of the same roots as Voodoo and Santareria – a Brazilian form of West African worship. Hearing the pastors recite in these Churches and the power and effect that they would have on the congregation, when people start to shake and, as we say, to “catch power” or catch a spirit and roll on the floor and speak in tongues, really heavy stuff. (The preacher is) speaking in one language but there is a subtext that people are getting.

Seeing that made me wonder, could you really do that with language? The way you perform a poem, could you affect people in that way? Well, maybe not the same way, you don't want them to collapse but at least to get a real strong emotion. Wow, that's really powerful and then of course, I was a romantic teenager but very shy and I was writing hundreds of love poems, deep emotional stuff. All these things make us the poets we become, everything.

Doing experimental work is fine but you have to find a way within that to connect to people at a very primal level. That's the challenge.

Blood tree

**ANTHONY
JOSEPH**

Blood tree
when freedom had meaning
like organs of heat in the evening
and the caramel body
held vibrations of the west indies
you let bled that excess negritude of fire

but the past didn't last long
it grew tired of slaves
it wept in forests of glass
where black myth was painted
in that acrobatic silence, and now,
my soul
holds the aroma of anguish.

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River Dove

**ANTHONY
JOSEPH**

At the school of near righteous priests
an old accordion speaks
with a deep voice of coins
and quick pain ringing
like teeth in the horse corpse.

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You are among the ankles of the small birds that kill.

Come, only a man with a carbide heart
could build a miracle in that blessed rock.
Halfway to glass,
galvanised as the green bottle of daybreak
in the bright world of wind and dark jute.
Intimate, thin, built with murder
in the pools and precipices of Valencia.
Wooden head, elbows of experience.
Twigs of cloth in the mouth of the river dove.

Philly's Congo Prayer

**ANTHONY
JOSEPH**

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Philly Joe released a heavy schedule
of insistent space
steaming
 overbearing
then on the second night,
Jones and his fellow Philadelphians came
from Monterey
with saxophones and an organist
who worked full time at the Middle Eastern Village
and played blue changes
ferociously,
in rhythms between
African careers and quartets
which played conventional Jazz.

That Autumn Tyner left
and went searching
for hidden improvisations,
spiritual blues
and sentimental identification
within a higher plane.
Trane drove down to New York
but Trane was only the vehicle
Trane himself said

Miles,
 sat there five, six
 sextet tracks
 with Jimmy Cobb and Don Byas.
 Bebop creation and the black pearls.
 Tenor sight.
 Congo blues.
 Leaning,
 as in gospel.

Dolphy died tragically
 but he still had 20 bars to blow.
 Accented on the eight beat,
 nervous like arpeggios.
 His security of tone, his intervals.

Trane
 played hard along the thin edge of false fingering
 in the Units Dance Band
 with the dorian scale
 and a thumb piano
 he bought in Stockholm.