

Linton Kwesi Johnson



Selected Poems

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Selected Poems

Linton Kwesi Johnson was born in 1952 in Chapelton, Jamaica. He came to London in 1963 and later read sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Whilst still at school he joined the Black Panthers, helped to organize a poetry workshop within the movement and developed his work with Rasta Love, a group of poets and drummers. His first book of poems, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, was published by Race Today in 1974. His second book, *Dread Beat an' Blood* (Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975), which signalled the emergence of a new voice in Caribbean poetry, was followed by *Inglan is a Bitch* and *Tings an' Times*. LKJ, as he is known in the world of popular music, has enjoyed a successful career as a reggae artist on the global stage for over four decades. His albums include *Forces of Victory*, *Bass Culture* and *More Time*. He founded LKJ Records in 1981. He has been awarded with, among others, a Silver Musgrave Medal from the Institute of Jamaica, an honorary fellowship from Goldsmiths, honorary doctorates from Rhodes University (South Africa) and the University of the West Indies, and an award at the thirteenth Premio Internazionale Ultimo Novecento, Italy, for his contribution to poetry and popular music. In 2020, Linton Kwesi Johnson won the PEN Pinter Prize. He lives in Brixton, south London.

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To my mother

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INTRODUCTION

Chanting Down Babylon

I first heard Linton Kwesi Johnson perform in 1975 at Goldsmiths College. The audience included south-east London locals like myself, college students, academics and people who actually remember the sixties, and thus it can properly be described as varied. What struck me then and now, as I look back across a gap of more than a quarter of a century was Linton's wide appeal. His appeared to be a poetry of inclusion, popular and broad based in the best sense of these terms, speaking a truth that cut across race and cultural differences in a form that people from a variety of backgrounds found irresistible.

By then the characteristics of vintage LKJ were in place: the burgeoning goatee, the trilby, the serious expression, the gravelly voice and deep monotone delivery, the chant and mantra style, all proved mesmerising. He sometimes rocked with the rhythm by bending his body forward a little and shifting his weight from his left to his right foot and back again, all this between stanzas as the musical interlude took over. And his audience rocked with him too, applauded, whistled, stood and called for more – more of his passion for politics, his commitment to local, national and international issues of social justice, the moral imperative informing the poems, the tension generated by his performance, the provocation of feeling and thought in his audience, the memorable nature of it all.

Black and white youth in south London in 1975 gravitated towards reggae produced in Jamaica and exported as 45s to record shops in Peckham, Deptford, Lewisham, Brixton, Ladbroke Grove and other Meccas for black Caribbean life. The slow and repetitive bass line of reggae music from that era invited DJs to launch their verbal gymnastics on the instrumental B-sides of 45s. DJ talk ranged from encomiums to potential lovers who needed just a little more persuasion before they gave it up, to political tracks about the Rastafarian's

struggle for survival in the land of the bald heads, as all agents of capitalism were dubbed.

Homegrown, that is, British, reggae bands began to emerge at the same time, for example, the enduring Birmingham-based reggae band Steel Pulse and London's Aswad. But for authenticity, apart from the yearly fixture of Europe's biggest street party, the Notting Hill carnival, all eyes and ears were trained on the Jamaican imports. Those imports brought us not only Jamaican life but also, in addition and by extension, all Caribbean life and its concerns in a raw state of play. Sound systems in a battery of huge speakers and powerful amplifiers performed at private parties and nightclubs and promulgated the most recent imported 45s and, later, 12-inch releases.

The lyrics talked of far away struggles, the MPLA in Mozambique and the fight against apartheid. But we viewed it all as one struggle, one mind roving the globe for issues that might unify black people flung worldwide by the 500-year-long system of slavery. Marcus Garvey freed black people's minds from a slave mentality early in the twentieth century and restored the glory of Africa to blacks lost in the Diaspora, slavery's aftermath – thus chanted the reggae DJs. And we believed it at least for as long as the musical accompaniment lasted.

The improvised work of DJs sounded like the best kind of verbal invention: heavily indebted to rhythm and rhyme, socially and politically aware, memorable and wedded to song. The lyrics told it like it was. They left no room for ambiguity, though the approach to a subject ranged from distanced and ironic to metaphorical and laconic. If on some occasions they employed outright scorn and derision then the targets were often the very deserving – lying politicians or bigoted police – who they handled on other occasions with the pristine gloves of metaphorical conceit. The DJs never failed to be didactic and eye-opening; they proselytized and won over with argument and information, not to mention a foot-tapping, head-shaking, spine-twisting drum and bass.

By the time Linton came along it all made perfect sense: a poet based in London talking about London obsessions in the same loved format. Most of us knew Britain better than any other place, but a few youths arrived here in their early teens with a foundation in a Caribbean aesthetic of calypso and reggae. The Mighty Sparrow's calypsos hailing out of Trinidad vied for airtime with Louise Bennett's sing-along stories of Jamaican folk culture composed mostly in comic quatrains. LKJ's dub poetry spoke to the heart of the British experience of inner-city black youths. But, above all, Johnson's was an original poetic form rooted in Caribbean oral culture, his influences ranging from Kamau Brathwaite (Barbados), Amie Cesaire (Martinique), Christopher Okigbo (Nigeria), and the Last Poets (USA).

Another aspect of youth culture found in Linton's poetry is the preoccupation with socialist principles and ideals. Linton tracked inequality and chanted for the rights of the individual even as his work captured exactly the spirit of youth frustration and ambition and confusion. The wide appeal of the work seemed to be this coalition of a call for fair play on the political level with an accurate rendition of the mood among young people on the psychological level.

LKJ's poetry in obedience to these ideological, cultural and psychological influences maintains a reggae rhythm and a regular iambic mostly tetrameter line-beat. More often than not his lines begin with a trochee and the poems sustain a rhyme scheme locked to a few rhyming sounds, same word sounds or word endings, rather like the ballad, the sestina or villanelle. His poetry is an epicure of this familiar metre and rhyme served up into a reggae rhythm. LKJ's English language, seasoned by Jamaican creole, extends the range of the poet's palate with a certain directness, viscosity and muscularity of creole verb forms and compound words.

LKJ's poems about politics dramatize the black struggle in Britain so that straightforward propaganda is garnished with striking imagery and phrasing and elevated into memorable poetry. The politics includes international concerns, so no myopia there. This set of principles is not represented by any state system and is more a state of

mind, a will towards an eradication of poverty and a disarming of despotic authority.

His eulogies often show his technique best. He indemnifies personality while simultaneously situating that life in its times so that the poem is both a praise song of the person and a stocktake of the times that shaped that person's life. When he writes about the death of his father in 'Reggae fi Dada', the poem is simultaneously an evocation of Jamaica's manners and mores. The individual never stands alone but represents society in ways poetry can take the measure of. Linton's work chants back to life the conscience of a society put to sleep by a politics of greed.

His appeal and influence on a generation of writers has to do with this sense of a moral intelligence at work. In a genre famous for producing cornucopias of over-privatized, over-aestheticized, precious navel-gazers, practitioners of poetry who actually believe they can fruitfully disengage from society and create a space on the planet free of the gravitational pull of politics, LKJ's presence is an ethical compass. His influence on me is political and ethical, then inevitably aesthetic. I loved his chants and rhythms then (still do) and they spurred me on to write, but not like him; I could not then, I cannot now. His lyrics direct me to poetry as a force to be reckoned with in society and as something my life cannot do without.

Rather than seeing the event poems as only issue-based, as simply traceable to key moments in the black experience and socialist struggles of the seventies, eighties and nineties, a reader of or listener to LKJ should go for the *feel* LKJ shows for those times. His poetry captures the tension of that era like no other writing coming out of the poetry community. He represents a cluster of emotions geared to black life, youth experience in the inner cities and international socialism. The listener is encouraged always to think, but that thinking is full of fellow feeling. For these reasons the poetry is in the expression. Organized around rhythm and rhyme, imagery and phrasing, rhetoric is yoked into art.

Irony and humour not usually associated with protest politics often figure in LKJ's poems. He pokes fun at poetic careers and

ambition, and is ironic about the benevolent capacity of powerful rule from above. His ironic outlook and occasional humour add complexity to his moral and ethical vision.

Then there is LKJ the dreamer, another facet of his poetic persona. Here he presents a dream landscape severed from known cartography and consigned to description understood as the imagination clearing space for itself and emotion expressed as fantasy. A string of images lines up for the reader and listener and represents the artistic persona doomed to loneliness and isolation because of a need for a contemplative space not always tied to social responsibility though always measured by it.

Over the more than twenty-five years of his publishing and recording there has been a deepening complexity of thought and a broadening range of output. The music has kept pace with this philosophical and aesthetic maturing. Reggae rhythms, sophisticated by melody, regularly play with calypso, ska and dub variations. Frequently it includes beautiful horn and string arrangements.

Politics, so often the nemesis of poetry, becomes in LKJ a muse, an organizing principle, an ethical foundation and vibe for his sound. LKJ's socialism, indebted to his urban London experience and the community-based politics of radical black groups of the day, also took on an international dimension. As he involved himself in local struggles, mostly against police brutality and extreme right-wing thugs, he read widely on the struggles of blacks in the USA and the Caribbean and of the African independence movements. The poetry often displays this domestic and international nexus.

He achieves a double mission in his poetry, as a defender of Britain's black working class and as the foremost critic of recalcitrant elements in some aspects of youth behaviour. His poems are the conscience of the country, since he tests the civility of the nation by its capacity to co-exist with the other: those who are in it but thought to be not of it. His call is universal in that he assembles a community of writers drawn from all corners of the globe under the equalizing rubric of equality and justice for all. These ideals, which were true during the French and American revolutions and in a radical lineage