

LINTON KWESI JOHNSON:
POETRY DOWN A REGGAE WIRE

by

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Linton Kwesi Johnson had been writing seriously for about four years when his first published poem appeared in 1973. There had been nothing particularly propitious in his experience up to then to indicate that within a relatively short period of time he would become an internationally recognized writer and performer. Now, at thirty-nine years of age, he has published four books of poetry, has recorded seven collections of his poems set to music, and has appeared in public readings and performances of his work in at least twenty-one countries outside of England. He has also pursued a parallel career as a political activist and journalist.

Johnson was born in Chapelton in the parish of Clarendon on the island of Jamaica in August 1952. His parents had moved down from the mountains to try for a financially better life in the town. They moved to Kingston when Johnson was about seven years old, leaving him with his grandmother at Sandy River, at the foot of the Bull Head Mountains. He was moved from Chapelton All-Age School to Staceyville All-Age, near Sandy River. His mother soon left Kingston for England, and in 1963, at the age of eleven, Linton emigrated to join her on Acre Lane in Brixton, South London.¹

The images of black and white Britain immediately impressed young Johnson. On one hand, the Caribbean spirit of Brixton market, the sounds of his own Jamaican nation language, and the similar experiences of his young black schoolmates, also recent immigrants, provided something of a welcoming milieu. Simultaneously, he was jolted by the ugliness of the urban chimney-scapes, by the vision of white men sweeping the streets, and, crucially, by the racism exuded by white students and teachers at the Tulse Hill Comprehensive School in London.²

Johnson could have become the type of rebel youth that he was later to write about with such insight - striking out against the most immediate and visible aspects of racial oppression, with little political consciousness beyond the unreflective expression of a diffuse rage, ultimately self-destructive. In his final year of secondary school, however, he was deflected from this course when he became aware of, and joined, the youth section of the Black Panther Party of England. Initially, the comradeship, discipline, and ideological training he acquired in the Panthers all provided a political

channeling of his energies which he perhaps could not have achieved on his own. More important for his mind and spirit was his discovery in the Panther library of a book which he has cited frequently as the catalyst for his awakening consciousness. W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* served to focus the inchoate thoughts and feelings that had been accumulating in him as a young colonial born black in the British metropole. Soon after, his reading of Frantz Fanon did the same for his rage.

Through the shared knowledge provided by his comrades in the Panthers, and on his own initiative, he learned more of the black literary tradition to which his reading of DuBois had awakened him. After DuBois and Fanon, he familiarized himself with the writings of the black power movement in the United States. More important for his own genesis as a writer was his discovery of a West Indian literary heritage. He was particularly excited by the protest tradition in West Indian writing, represented by the poems of Martin Carter of Guyana and George Campbell of Jamaica.³ Grounded in the events of anti-colonial struggle in the Caribbean, Carter and Campbell's poems prompted Johnson to see the possibilities of the genre in the context of the internal colonialism of Britain. He learned also of the poets emerging from the mid-twentieth century resurgence of African culture, and was impressed especially by the work of Tchicaya U Tam'si of the Congo and of Christopher Okigbo, the Ibo poet killed during the Nigerian civil war.

Johnson left Tulse Hill with five 'O' levels, and studied for 'A' levels at home while making a living as a civil servant, first as a clerk in the Treasury and then at the Greater London Council. He also married and started a family. Busy as he was, he nevertheless found time to read widely and to write. His writing in 1970-72 - poems and several prose-poetic pieces - was derivative and probative. The influence of the various writers he was reading can be detected in the manuscripts he produced, most of which remain unpublished.

Over the next several years, he experimented with diction, theme, and style, searching for his own voice. He wrote mostly in standard English. In his prose pieces especially, the tone tended to be stilted and the vocabulary overwrought. His themes were introspective explorations of identity and blackness. Images of night and womb merged into a pervasive darkness juxtaposed with metaphors of oppressive light and whiteness.

Inspired by the luxuriant imaginations of Okigbo and U Tam'si, he experimented with a surrealism that appeared to follow Okigbo's rubric of the organic relationship of outer and inner worlds, of the phenomenal and the imaginative, or U Tam'si's structure of

expanding patterns of imagery.⁴ He also found a resonance of his immigrant experience in one of U Tam'si's dominating themes, that of the tension between childhood memories of a colonial homeland and mundane daily experience in an alien capital.⁵ (U Tam'si lived in Paris for long periods of his adult life.)

Johnson adopted the pattern of writing sequences of poems under a general theme and title, intended as organic wholes, and experimented with the call and response or crier and chorus structure that was employed by Okigbo, who had adapted the method from the ancient oral tradition of African verse and story telling. The call and response form would not have been exotic for Johnson, as it was also typical of Jamaican Rastafarian psalmody, and, indeed, of a long Afro-Jamaican tradition of worksongs and spirituals. Out of this energetic experimentation in the early 1970s came the title poem (and longest section) of Johnson's first book, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*, and the manuscript sequence, originally entitled "Notes on Brixton," that was the genesis of his second book, *Dread Beat and Blood*.

"Voices of the Living and the Dead" was made public first as a dramatic presentation of the Keskidee Community Theatre Workshop, at the Keskidee Centre in London, in June 1973. The book of the same title, which also included two shorter poems, was published in London in 1974. In this long dramatic poem, the caller and chorus parts of African and West Indian tradition are divided in four distinct voices - Narrator, Dead, Living, and Echo. The outpouring of words in "Voices" constitutes a libation for the ancestors of black history and struggle -

A harvest of the bodies of all
who are dead, we who are alive will make.⁶

The poem is also a homage to the living elders of the literary tradition in which Johnson would soon take his place; its opening epigraph, significantly, are these lines from Martin Carter:

Now from the mourning vanguard,
moving,
dear Comrade,
I salute you,
and I say death will not find us thinking that we die.

"Voices" conveys, in a more disciplined form, some of the imagistic ebullience of Johnson's experimental writing up to then. It represents the end of that phase of his writing, however; its apocalyptic tone and surreal imagery would not be seen or heard again in his poems, except briefly and mutedly in the five poems constituting the "Time to Explode" section of *Dread Beat and Blood*. In "Voices" the Echo proclaims,

From extension of other voices
We became voices of our own.⁷

Linton Kwesi Johnson was already finding his voice, but it was heard more in the final poem of the book *Voices* than in the title poem:

night number one was in BRIXTON:
SOFRANO B sound system
was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
coming down his reggae reggae wire.

Those lines, from the poem "Five Nights of Bleeding," represent the voice that would become most familiar to his worldwide audience.

The reggae that had been produced in Britain up to the early 1970s was a thin distillation of the heavy molasses of the music as it was being played and recorded on the island of Jamaica, where ska had become rock steady which had become reggae. The lyrics of the Wailers and other groups reported and protested the social conditions that produced the brutalizing poverty of the Kingston ghettos. Rastafari inspired tunes such as Niney's "Blood and Fire" called down judgement on the Babylonian captivity that produced such conditions. Disc Jockeys who carried their increasingly elaborate sound systems to yard parties and street dances added their improvisatory versifying to the dub tracks of popular tunes. Stripped down to the basics of percussion and bass guitar, with added electronic effects of echo and reverb, the dub form was developed by ranking disc jockeys such as Hugh Roy and Big Youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s into a new popular art form that Johnson was to call "dub poetry."⁸ West Indians in Britain were kept informed of these musical developments in Jamaica by record imports, played by black Britain's own growing number of disc jockeys and sound systems, in clubs and "blues dances." Johnson himself had his own sound system for a while. He listened to the music not only with a love for its island roots but also with an analytical appreciation

that its lyrics and rhythmic changes signaled social, cultural, and political developments in Jamaican culture.

His own thinking about the music was supported by an important critical document from the West Indies that appeared in 1972. Gordon Rohlehr, in the department of English of the University of the West Indies at the St. Augustine campus in Trinidad, published a two part article in the Barbadian journal *Bim* (14.54 & 55). In that article, and in one called "Afterthoughts" in *Bim* in 1973 (14.56), Rohlehr analyzed the social and cultural significance of the latest developments in Jamaican music in terms similar to those in which Johnson had been thinking.⁹ Included in Rohlehr's discussion were the ska trombonist Don Drummond, the Rastafari group the Abyssinians, the sound system disc jockeys, and the rebel lyrics of Bob Marley. He linked them all with the Rastafari attitude and concept of "dread" - "the impending doom and silence of the brooding locksman;" a "mythical sense of Apocalypse;" a "fierce energy, resolve and an underlying sense of the tragic;" the "historic tension between slaver and slave;" an "introspective menace."¹⁰

Rohlehr's article was not mainly about musical developments, however. It was primarily a review, and a review of a review, of a watershed anthology of new writing, published in Jamaica in 1971 as a special issue of *Savacou* (no. 3/4), the journal of the Caribbean Artists Movement. Edited by Edward Brathwaite, Kenneth Ramchand, and Andrew Salkey, the anthology contained the prose and poetry of some writers who had already established a critically accepted place for themselves in Caribbean literature, such as John Hearne, Derek Walcott, and Martin Carter. The editors chose, however, not only writing already accepted for its excellence, but "as broad a cross-section of what is actually being written, good or bad, so as to indicate as many trends as are current in the feeling, sensibility and creative effort of the period," as Rohlehr put it.¹¹

The shock of the new in *Savacou* 3/4 that resulted from this editorial decision had two effects. The first was a derisive critical response from those Caribbean writers who were seeking to establish their legitimacy in what they perceived as the tradition of a British or European aesthetic. A major section of Rohlehr's article is a response to one negative review of the anthology by the poet Eric Roach in the *Trinidad Guardian* of 14 July, 1971. The other effect was that of a literary liberation for young writers who had been stifled by the difficulties involved in seeking to express Caribbean experiences and sensibilities in the standard English forms and the stilted or archaic diction which they had been taught in the schools as proper poetry. Several of the poets in the anthology broke the vessels of standard form, as it were, discarded the alien diction, and

experimented with poetry consciously based in Caribbean imagery, language, and rhythms. The most dramatic example of this breakthrough in *Savacou 3/4* was four poems by the Rastafari poet Bongo Jerry (Jerry Small), especially his "Mabrak." "SILENCE BABEL TONGUES," wrote Bongo Jerry in upper case, "recall and recollect BLACK SPEECH."¹²

Johnson read Rohlehr's article with great interest. It came to him not so much as a revelation but as a vindication of his own thinking on the social significance of Jamaican music and of the style of poetry he had already begun to write. Rohlehr's encouragement of the experiments of the younger writers strengthened Johnson's confidence in his own efforts. His reggae-based poetry would give an answer to Rohlehr's anticipation: "I cannot but wonder what forms will grow from these roots [the sensibilities which produce reggae in Jamaica and kaiso in Trinidad], and welcome every sincere struggle to make abstracts of the language and rhythms which constitute the thews and sinews, the inner ground of our sensibility."¹³ Johnson had also been reading *Savacou 3/4* and the new poetry in the anthology had both encouraged him and provided the solace that he was not writing in metropolitan isolation.

Johnson's first published poem was "Five Nights of Bleeding" (*Race Today* 5.6, 1973: 170), which was later included in *Voices of the Living and the Dead* and in his second book, *Dread Beat and Blood*. It was written for Leroy Harris, a black youth stabbed at a party in South London. The poem was transitional. Its focus on the local, on the particulars of black life and struggle in London, would become typical of the poetry that his audience would read and hear in his books, performances, and recordings. And the rhythm is strongly that of the sound-system reggae that is the imaginative sound track for the events that occur in the poem's narrative, much in the way that the actual music would become integral with Johnson's performances. Yet the carefully chosen diction in the poem and the straightforward syntax were those of standard English, and there was no attempt at the Jamaican orthography which, as Mervyn Morris has noted, became fairly consistent in Johnson's later work.¹⁴ "Five Nights" clearly exhibits what Johnson himself described as "the tension between Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English and between those and English English,"¹⁵ and in some lines of the poem the creole strains to emerge:

SOFRANO B sound system
 was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
 coming down his reggae reggae wire . . .

and the rebels them start a fighting
the youth them just turn wild.

This linguistic tension posed a choice for Johnson, and in 1973, in addition to standard English, he began using a creole phonemic system of his own devising. "Yout Scene," the opening poem of his "Notes on Brixton" sequence, and his first to be written entirely in creole, provides a clear example. A comparison of the first stanza of the poem in manuscript with the revised published version illustrates Johnson's concern to find a satisfactory rendering of the sound of the creole:

Last Satdey
ha neva dey pon no form
so I decide fe tek a walk
dung a Brixton
an see wha' gwan. (manuscript)

last satdey
I neva dey pan no faam,
so I decide fe tek a walk
doun a BRIXTON,
an see wha gwane. (published)

Of the six poems in "Notes on Brixton," four were completely creole in syntax and orthography, anticipating the choice which Johnson made by 1974. From that year, almost all of his poetry is clearly and confidently creole.

The tension in Johnson's craft was related to the tension in his daily life, a consequence, as he put it, "of having been brought up in a colonial society and then coming over here to live and go to school in England. . ." ¹⁶ He responded to this tension with a political consciousness that was first nurtured in the Panthers. The literary ferment that grew among some of the young Panthers was not encouraged by the leadership, however, and Johnson needed more freedom to develop his talents. ¹⁷ He left the Panthers in 1973. Soon after, the leadership itself began to succumb to state harassment or co-optation, and the movement dissipated. ¹⁸

The Panther experience proved salutary for Johnson nevertheless, steeling him for a realistic response to oppressive police activities in black communities such as Brixton.

He was not simply an interested observer. He himself was brutalized by the police in an incident in the Brixton market in January 1973. Several plain clothes constables of the Special Patrol, invoking the notorious "sus" law, which allowed conviction merely for loitering with intent to steal and arrest for being suspected of such, attempted to arrest two youths. Other youths intervened to prevent the arrest. Johnson, witnessing the confrontation, attempted to get the name and address of one of the apprehended youths, and the number of some uniformed officers who had arrived to support the plain clothes constables. Johnson was seized, told he was being arrested for assaulting a police officer, and was forced to lie prone in the police van, where he was kicked in the hip and the leg. Although he was cleared of the assault charge, the encounter gave Johnson a first hand experience of police methods that ensured that similar experiences depicted in his writings were not just vicariously imagined.

In 1973, having completed his 'A' level examinations, he began reading for a degree in sociology at Goldsmith's College, University of London. His primary research was the sociology of Jamaican popular music, allowing him to refine and fortify the ideas he had previously developed. An edited and condensed version of his thesis was published as "Jamaican Rebel Music" in the journal *Race and Class* (XVII.4) in 1976, the year of his graduation from Goldsmith's. Several of his articles on music were published in *Race Today*, and in 1976-77 he was a regular reviewer for *Melody Maker* magazine. *The Melody Maker* articles were interesting not only for what they said but how they said it. Johnson used a prose style that was spare, crisp, and unselfconscious, just right for the task - very different from the verbosity of his original unpublished prose pieces. The precise standard English of these articles became typical of his journalistic style, and contrasted with the rich creole of his poetry. The difference indicates his maturing as a linguistic craftsman, carefully choosing his style, tone, and voice according to the form.

Also in 1973, previous to his registering at Goldsmith's, he formed a group called Rasta Love - three drummers, Charli, Baili, and Fari; a bassist, Stani; and a flutist, Nevi. They backed him in his increasingly frequent recitals in London, and, by mid-1974, in other major cities in England. Simultaneously, his studies at Goldsmith's, and his job as an assembly worker in Croydon and later as a copy writer at Virgin records, consumed a great deal of his time, preventing him from writing as much poetry as he wished: "What man would really like to do is jus satta an' write."¹⁹ It was, nevertheless, a creative period in his life, and by the end of 1974 he had enough poetry from which to select the contents of his second book.

Dread Beat and Blood, a collection of twenty-seven poems, was published in

1975. Although no protagonist is named, the voice of the poet emerges as that of a persona whose path and conflicts can be clearly discerned through five sections that constitute something of a narrative structure. In the first section, "Doun de Road," which developed out of Johnson's original "Notes on Brixton" manuscript, the poet critically comments on the activities of black youth who merely "scank" resistance against "de wicked" (the police), and direct their violence among themselves. "Five Nights of Bleeding," republished here, points dramatically to the problem:

rebellion rushing down the wrong road,
storm blowing down the wrong tree.

The poet conveys an ambivalence toward the music in which his rhythm is based. On the one hand, the dread throbbing of the dub-style reggae is not cathartic but compounds the inner rage of marginalized and alienated youth. On the other, the music is seen as an actual and metaphorical source of vindication and identity - renewing, enabling, and strengthening, as in "Street 66:"

outta dis rock
shall come
a greena riddim
even more dread
dan what
de breeze of glory bread.
vibratin violence
is how wi move
rockin wid green riddim
de drout
and dry root out.

The poem "Yout Rebels" gives narrative movement to the section. A submerged political consciousness begins to appear among youth who decide to abandon the scanking and to reject the cautionary wisdom of their accommodationist elders, the "shallow councilin / of the soot-brained / sage in chain; / wreckin thin-shelled words. . . ." And the final three poems of the section point a way out from the self-destructive responses revealed in the opening ones. "Fratricide is only / the first phase," announces the poet in

"Doun de Road." And while the fratricidal violence "is a room full of fact you cant walk out," the nature of the conflict begins to be clarified as Enoch Powell, the fascist National Front, and the fire-bombing of immigrant residences and businesses capture headlines and galvanize the defensive militancy of Black Britain.

In the second section, "Time to Explode," the poet turns temporarily into himself to meditate on the subterranean pain and rage that need to be confronted for identity and authenticity to be achieved. In "Two Sides of Silence," he poignantly counterposes the desire for the silence of tranquility with the outer silence of public indifference to the turmoil that makes individual and domestic tranquility elusive. Ending with the poem "Time to Explode," the second section erupts into the third, "Song of Blood."

The first piece in the "Song of Blood" section is "John de Crow," a prose poem narrative of colonial rebellion, in which the Jamaican johncrow, the despised but necessary carrion bird, becomes a symbol of the slave labourer who overthrows the corrupting master/slave relationship by killing the plantation master and his family. After the poet's reminder of that bitter history, the following three poems, "Come Wi Goh Dung Deh," "Problems," and "Song of Blood," focus on the contemporary neo-colony of Jamaica, although neither Jamaica nor any other West Indian island is identified, which allows application to any island of similar historical experience, or even to the colonial experience in the metropole itself. The colonial black finds no solace, neither in the return home nor in exile.

The fourth section, "Bass Culture," comprises the strongest tribute in the book to the reggae music that provides the subsistent rhythm throughout. Two of the poems are dedicated to the reggae performers and recording artists, Big Youth and the Upsetters. The poem "Reggae Sounds" is one of the purest examples of Johnson's reggae poetry, and, together with "Bass Culture," provide an apt poetic illustration of his theory of socio-political realities affecting and being affected by the shifts in Jamaican music:

foot-drop find drum, blood story,
bass history is a moving
is a hurting black story.

"Song of Rising" raises the vision of a condition or an era of peace and love that will succeed the conflicts explored to that point, and in so doing leads to the final section.

"One Love" consists of four poems in Rastafari style. The first, "Peace an Love," is

patterned on the prayer chant of a Rasta meeting, or groundation. The second, "Wi A Warriyah," is similarly patterned, and is dedicated to the group of drummers and musicians who accompanied Johnson in his 1973-74 recitals, Rasta Love. The third, "To Show It So," is typical Rasta psalmody. The final poem, "One Love," is a positive call for such. Yet its final stanza contains lines that signal a movement in Johnson's consciousness toward a new phase that would include a rejection of Rastafarian culturalism:

but love is jus a word;
give it MEANIN
thru HACKSHAN . . .

In 1973-74, Johnson cultivated a personal and public style that was thoroughly Rastafarian except for one important element. The stumbling block was the Rasta belief in the divinity of Haile Selassie, which Johnson could not accept. He also began to realize that he was among a growing number of youth who affected Africanisms and feigned Rasta belief but whose convictions were shallow:

There is a whole heap a dread-locks man on yah. From London to Manchester.
Everybody jus natty, yu kno. But nuff a de man dem naw difen nottin. Dem is
jus culturally dread. Dem noh have no concept, noh doctrine and more impor-
tant, dem noh have noh love deep wid-in dem fe one another, each or all. Dat is
bittah.²⁰

A subsequent poem, "Reality Poem," which would be included in his third book, sums up the new phase in his political consciousness that was already taking shape by the time *Dread Beat and Blood* was published:

dis is di age of decishan
soh mek we leggo relijan . . .

dis is di age af reality
soh mek wi leggo mitalagy

The shift in Johnson's outlook had been aided by his association, since 1973, with

Race Today, which he officially joined in 1976. The journal *Race Today* was originally "a race relations rag of the Institute of Race Relations, set up by business interests and academic interests to study the natives," as Johnson put it in an interview in 1982.²¹ In 1973, the editorship was offered to Darcus Howe, who had been a comrade of Johnson in the Panthers. With the assistance of John LaRose, the Trinidadian activist, writer, and publisher of New Beacon books in London, and one of the original members of the Caribbean Artists Movement, Howe seized the entire operation, moved it to Brixton, and began building a political organization with the journal as its core. The Race Today Collective, as the organization came to be called, directed the journal toward blacks and Asians in Britain, and to "those who would support first their independent thought and then their independent activation," as Farrukh Dhondy, a member of the Collective, described its purpose.²² The Collective set out to encourage and coordinate the activities of progressive mass-based organizations. While the emphasis was on black initiatives, it attempted to reach out from a position of strength to workers and immigrants across ethnic and cultural lines, thereby confronting not only state power but the enmity of black nationalists and middle class blacks. Moreover, the movement rejected the claims of existing left-wing parties to speak out and act for Asian, African, and West Indian workers in Britain apart from the independent initiatives of these workers themselves. Johnson's poem "Independent Intavenshan" proclaimed this rejection:

di SWP [Socialist Workers Party] can't set wi free
 di IMG [International Marxist Group] can't dhu it fi wi
 di Communist Pawty, cho, dem too awty-fawty
 an' di laybahrites dem naw goh fite fi wi rites

The intellectual mentor of the Race Today was the Trinidadian historian, philosopher, and Pan-Africanist, C. L. R. James, who, in his final years, was cared for by members of the Collective. James had introduced issues of colonialism, race, and culture into the debates of the international socialist movement, and had emphasized the necessity for autonomous action by black people independent of the directives of the central committees of European socialist parties.²³

Johnson's third book, *Inglan is a bitch*, was published by Race Today Publications in 1980. The twelve poems in the book are more overtly and consistently political and reportorial than were those in his earlier books. "Independent Intavenshan" and "Reality Poem" convey his appropriation of the Jamesian philosophy of Race Today. The other

poems chronicle persons, places, and events in the conflicts between Black Britain and state power in the 1970s which the established media either ignored or misrepresented. The only anomaly in the book is "Jamaica Lullaby." It is in standard English; the others are entirely in the creole based nation language of Jamaicans in Britain. It is also lyrical and introspective in a way that the others are not. Although dedicated to Olive Morris, an activist and community worker who died in London in 1979, the poem was actually written years before the others in the book, in 1972, and was originally entitled "Moon and Tears." While consistent with some of Johnson's other writings in the early 1970s, it is of a style which became unrepresentative of his published writing after 1973.

The title of the book raises the question of Johnson's attitude toward and relationship with the England that is the place of the struggles which he chronicles. The persona of the title poem is that of an aging immigrant labourer who has lived a life of hard work in England, but who is facing redundancy, pauperization, and the dole. For this black labourer, exploited and marginalized, England is certainly "a bitch." The poem ends with the rhetorical question, "Is wehy wi a goh dhu 'bout it?" The intended answer is not that black people should flee from their struggles in England to the tropical land of birth.

It had taken Johnson some years to arrive at that viewpoint. His first return to Jamaica after migrating in 1963 was in the summer of 1974. There he was interviewed and recited some of his poems on Jeremy Verity's "Poetry Now" programme on Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation radio. Young Jamaican poets who heard him, such as Michael Smith and Orlando Wong (Oku Onuora), were encouraged by his voice to continue to develop the creole performance poetry they had begun to fashion. More important for Johnson than promoting his work at the time was the opportunity to bask in the music of the island and to soak up the latest linguistic innovations that were absorbed into the lyrics from the streets of Kingston. Even more important than this was Johnson's personal quest to reunite with his large extended family, especially with his father in Kingston. His experience of their hardships, as well as the general island-wide poverty, triggered the poem "Come Wi Goh Dung Deh," published in *Dread Beat and Blood*.

Back in London in late summer, 1974, Johnson decided that he would return to live in Jamaica in about four years. In September he wrote:

Well the four years are a long way off but I am sure my time will come soon.
I am more sure than ever that I have something to contribute towards the liberation of my people. If it has to be my life then it will be my life. I only hope

it won't be too difficult to find work when I get there. But work or no work I will return in due time. My father needs me, my brothers and sisters need me, all of my relatives need me.²⁴

To the end of 1977, he continued to express his longing to return to Jamaica. But with a wife and, by then, three children in England to support, the four year period he had given himself in which to do so had eroded.

Early in 1978, Johnson decided firmly against any possibility of his returning to live in Jamaica. He noted that blacks in Britain were digging in for a very crucial struggle in their history - that of resistance to recolonization in the metropole. They were not running away nor did they consider themselves defensively against a wall. His return to Jamaica would be an abdication of responsibility, "a retrograde step," in the struggle "of which I am a part. . . ."²⁵ Moreover, he was beginning to be repelled by the narrowness of Jamaican society and the violence that permeated it²⁶ - a revulsion that was unfortunately later confirmed by the murder by political thugs in Jamaica in 1983 of the poet Michael Smith, whose work Johnson had promoted.

The title *Inglan is a bitch*, then, suggests not a retreat from an unpleasant experience but a determination to engage the "bitch" in a struggle for a full exercise of civil and political rights and for the reversal of working class alienation. The poems in the book grew out of that engagement.

In 1977, utilizing his contacts at Virgin records, Johnson made his first recording of his poems set to music. *Poet and the Roots*, as it was called, contained two of his best poems, "All Wi Doin Is Defending" and "Five Nights of Bleeding," with music composed by Johnson himself in collaboration with a group of reggae musicians. It was a tentative and uncertain beginning. The strong rhythms of the poems were forced out of their aural shape to conform to the music, when the music should have been composed and played more to serve the poems. The full power of the poems was consequently lost.

Dread Beat an' Blood (Virgin 1978) was his first complete album. The quality of the music and the technical competence of the recording was a great improvement on the initial effort of 1977. The influence of the arranging and mixing talents of his band leader and musical collaborator, Dennis 'Blackbeard' Bovell, was obvious. Johnson's voice was more confident, projecting more clearly the power of the poems. But the poems and the music were still not sufficiently consonant, both seeming to battle for domination. For those who had not yet taken the opportunity to read his poems, however, or to hear him read them publicly in London and other British cities, *Dread Beat an'*

Blood was a suitable introduction to the unique synthesis of personal and political experience in Johnson's art, as well as to what would become the most consistent of his themes: confronting reality, social and political reality, in Britain and in Jamaica.

A year later, the second album, ***Forces of Victory*** (Island 1979) appeared. For the first time it was stated on the record sleeve that all the words and the music were composed by Johnson. It was an appropriate acknowledgement, for on this LP the music more obviously served the poems, rather than the poems subserving the music. Consequently, Johnson's voice was now calmer but surer; calmer but dreader. He had put aside some of the self-conscious emoting of the first recordings, allowing the clearer emergence of the artistry and the vision that went into his poems before he ever got near a recording studio. This is most obvious on the remarkable "Independant Intavenshan" and "Want fi Goh Rave." Bovell continued to be very much a crucial part of the effort, and ***Forces of Victory*** was blessed by the trombone of Rico Rodriguez. Music and poems had almost reached the level of artistic symbiosis that Johnson and his musicians had been striving for from the first.

Bass Culture (Mango/Island 1980), the third album, confirmed the impression and promise given by the three previous recordings that each of Johnson's poetic/musical efforts would be better than the last. Music and voice were now nearly perfectly together - with "Street 66" as the dread apogee of the Johnson/Bovell collaboration. Johnson was, by this time, so confident in his work that he could allow himself a relatively frivolous piece like the lyrical-satirical "Lorraine." It was not totally frivolous - none of Johnson's written and performed wordworks ever are; and "Lorraine" warrants careful listening for its understanding of the complexities as well as some of the nonsense in man/woman courtship.

His audience had to wait four years for the next album, ***Making History*** (Mango/Island 1984). A major reason for the wait was Johnson's sense of artistic integrity. As explained in the album's sleeve notes, he refused to succumb to the commercial pressure to churn out new material yearly. It was a wise decision. Musically and poetically, ***Making History*** maintains and extends the levels of artistry, insight, and vision that ***Forces of Victory*** and ***Bass Culture*** carefully achieved. The jazz strain in Johnson's music, somewhat muted before, emerges on ***Making History***, and the jazz-reggae fusion of the music of "What About di Workin' Class" works well with the poem.

The title of the album refers to events, movements, heroes, and martyrs in Britain and the Caribbean. The poems deal with the specifics of oppression and resistance in

England and elsewhere: government corruption, racist politics, the obscurantism of the press, and the backwardness of the ruling classes in the West and the East ("di Soviet system naw progress"); the solidarity of minorities and workers within Britain and Europe, and urban insurrections of black youth in England.

What was new about *Making History* was that all of the seven poems were written after the previous album, which was not true of the earlier recordings, each of which included a mix of older and recent poems. Moreover, it was the first recorded collection of poems that had not been published in any of his three books, although some of them had been published singly. Four of the new poems especially stood as examples of his continuing poetic strength. "Di Great Insohreckshan" is notable for its gleeful and ironic view of certain hard realities - specifically, the youth uprising in Brixton in April 1981 - in the tradition of the political commentary of the calypsonians and the best of the Jamaican disc jockeys. Both "New Craas Massahkah" and "Reggae fi Radni" (Walter Rodney) confirm that Johnson puts his best art into what he feels most deeply.

The real hero of *Making History*, both as a poem and a person, is Dada, Johnson's father. "Reggae fi Dada" was written after his trip to Jamaica in 1982 to bury his father in a "Stranger's Burying Groun / near to mhum an cousin Daris / nat far fram di quarry / doun a August Town." This poem is Linton Kwesi Johnson at his political and human best: the insight that through this one ordinary poor life, and more than ordinarily painful death, the bitter social and economic realities of post-slave Jamaica, "where di present is haunted by di paas," are exemplified. Moreso than the earlier poem "Come Wi Goh Dung Dey," written after Johnson's first return to Jamaica in 1974, "Reggae fi Dada" is Johnson's true homecoming poem: "a deh soh mi bawn / get fi know bout staam / learn fi cling to di dawn . . ." It is full of love and knowledge, and is the major accomplishment on the LP - a moving gift from Johnson to the memory of his father.

The release of Johnson's recordings outside of England helped to create an international audience which his published poems alone might not have reached. Although the recordings rode a wave of increasing world-wide enthusiasm for reggae, the originality of the Johnson/Bovell music and Johnson's oral interpretations appealed to a cross-section of listeners that was wider than the reggae audience. Responding to demand, he spent much of his time and energy in 1982-85 touring and performing internationally with Dennis Bovell's Dub Band. By the end of 1985, the arduous touring was taking a toll. He was hard-pressed to find the time and silence he wanted to resume his writing. In December of that year he gave what he called his farewell concert in

London. The recording of that concert became his fifth album, *Linton Kwesi Johnson in Concert with the Dub Band* (Rough Trade 1986).

It is difficult to assess the value of the work of a man whose career is in no way near an end. Besides his books, his poems have been included in numerous anthologies in Britain and the West Indies. German and Italian translations of his books have been published in Europe. He has recited and performed in fourteen European countries, in the Caribbean islands of Antigua, Barbados, Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Cuba, in several cities of the U.S.A. and Canada, and in Japan. He has appeared in televised interviews, readings, and performances in the U.S.A., Britain, France, West Germany, and Switzerland. In 1978 a filmed documentary of his career up to then was produced by the Arts Council of Great Britain. In 1987 his *LKJ in Concert* LP was nominated for a Grammy award by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in the U.S.A. In addition to a 1977 award of the prestigious C. Day Lewis Fellowship for Poetry, he has been chosen as an Associate Fellow of the Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick and an Honorary Fellow of Wolverhampton Polytechnic. In 1990 he received an award from the city of Pisa, Italy at the XIII Premio Internazionale Ultimo Novecento for his contributions to poetry and popular music.

Unknown to much of his audience outside of Britain, he has made important contributions as a journalist, editor, and producer/director/writer of documentaries independently and for BBC radio and television. His already vast knowledge of Jamaican music culminated in a period of intense research in Jamaica in 1982 which led to a masterful twelve hour BBC radio documentary history of Jamaican music, "From Mento to Lovers Rock," first broadcast in 1983. One of his most important contributions as a member of Race Today was as the editor, from 1983 to 1988, of the *Race Today Review*, an annual journal of the arts and literature. He consistently published new fiction and poetry not only from within Britain but also from the West Indies, North America, Africa, and Asia. In 1978, he initiated Creation for Liberation in conjunction with Race Today, through which he mobilized fellow artists and writers to link them with the local and international struggles with which Race Today involved itself. He was instrumental in bringing to British and international exposure the Jamaican reggae poets Oku Onuora and Michael Smith in the early 1980s, and, more recently, Jean Binta Breeze.

The poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite included an assessment of Johnson's poetry in the development of his thesis on Caribbean nation language in his book *History of the Voice*.²⁷ McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil's *The Story of English*, the published

version of the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service's television series of the same name, refers to Johnson's contribution to the development of varieties of the language.²⁸ Much of his poetry promises to endure in printed form, regardless of whether or not they continue to be performed. In a review article in New York City's *Village Voice* in 1980, Thulani Davis missed the mark in stating, "These are not poems that should be read - they are to be heard and understood quickly."²⁹ Her intent was to praise the poems' orality. But it needs to be remembered that Johnson is first a writer; he has not simply scripted performances, as did, for example, Michael Smith, whose poems were originally spoken and dramatized and later labouriously written with the careful assistance of the poet Mervyn Morris.³⁰ Johnson's poems reward re-reading and study for creole usage and innovation, rhythmic structure, patterns of imagery - and as a cumulative chronicle of the struggles of Black Britain in the 1970s and 80s.

Johnson has never been an absolutist, and his commitments have always been tempered with a degree of pragmatism. After he announced his farewell concert in 1985 he left open the possibility that future circumstances might prompt him to resume his touring and performing with the Dub Band. The first two months of 1990 found him doing just that. More important, he resumed writing in 1989 after a lengthy post-1985 dry period. On the same day on which C. L. R. James died, 31 May, 1989, Johnson completed a poem called "Di Good Life." That same week, he read it on a BBC television tribute to James. The first line of the poem is one word, "sowshallism" (socialism). Few poets could begin thus and follow with something that is no more than a political treatise in verse. It a measure of Johnson's ability and sensibility that he succeeds in writing a poem that humanizes "sowshallism" in the extended metaphor of an old shepherd, whose description mirrors the image of the elderly C. L. R. James:

look ow im stretch out pan im back
 pan di brown grass
 di white hair pan im branze head
 like a kushan gense di weepin willow tree

In the following months, he completed his "Tings an Times" sequence of poems, organically interrelated in the same way that his 1972 "Notes on Brixton" had been composed. In a gentle and mature voice, the poet recollects, takes stock, and ponders years of black struggle in Britain, and his place in that struggle. He shuns any tendency that might exist to make him a prophet or guru: "mi naw preach / mi naw teach / mi jus

a show yu ow mi seit." Without forsaking the militancy that is conveyed in his *Making History* poems, he places the particular conflicts in which he has participated and about which he has written in the perspective of a larger and humbling process: "histri biggah dan mi ar yu yu know." Moreover, the innocent idealist has been sobered by his experience of human treachery and intrigue; "dizzied / doped / traumatized," he lies "ship-wreck gense di sans af di tides a di times." Yet the tone ultimately is not defeatist,

an him hear a nex vice like di sea seh
 sometimes di pungent owedah af decay
 signal seh bran new life deh pan di way

Johnson tested the new poems in 1990 in performances and readings in Europe and North America. His international audience, which had waited fallow for several years, received them enthusiastically. In 1991 the poems were included on Johnson's first recorded LP in six years, and soon after in his fourth book. Both the LP and the book are entitled *Tings an Times*, but other than containing the new poems, the recording and the book differ in their significance. The recording (Shanachie 1991) gives us Johnson's voice backed by new Johnson/Bovell music that continues the innovations and reggae fusions begun in the earlier recordings. To drum, bass, lead guitar, keyboard, and horns have been added flute, violin, and accordion. Reviewers have variously noticed not only the jazz infusion but have also heard influences from South Africa, Algeria, Hungary, New Orleans zydeco, Tex-Mex, and Cuban funk. While the listener and reader can agree or disagree with the choice of a particular rhythm, tempo, or tune for an individual poem, one has to accept that Johnson's musical decisions are an extension of his prosodic craft. Moreover, the diverse musical influences heard on the recording are integral with his internationalist vision. Johnson has worked through the geographic particulars of his life - from the hills of Clarendon to the streets of London - to arrive at the ports of world culture: "I believe in humanity, that all races have more in common than they do different. If you're not thinking in international terms in the 20th century you're backward."³¹

The book (Newcastle upon Tyne and London: Bloodaxe Books and LKJ Music Publishers, 1991) constitutes a literary itinerary of Johnson's political/poetic voyage from 1972. The new poems are preceded by seventeen earlier ones that were published in his preceding books or in *Race Today*, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* (1986), and E. A. Markham's *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and*

Britain (1989), or were first heard on the LP *Making History*. The book confirms that Johnson's writing has developed spirally: as his sensibilities and technique have matured, he nevertheless constantly returns to retrieve and revise characteristic qualities of his earlier voice and style.

One of the new poems, "Beacon of Hope," a meditation on the "peeni waali" (fire fly), and dedicated to John LaRose, is a refinement of an even younger Johnson. It is in standard English, a reminder that he has never been bound to 'patwa' but that language along the entire creole to standard continuum has always been an available choice for him. The tone of the poem is reflective and unashamedly tender - not a surprise to those who were involved with Johnson in his early writing years, but perhaps a shock for those who may have heard his voice only as stridently political. What is different about the poem in comparison with early work is the absence in it of the necessary self-centredness of first writing. The well-earned humility, openness, and universalism that characterize the "Tings an Times" poems are warmly evident in the final lines of "Beacon of Hope:"

tomorrow a stranger will enter
my hut my cave my cool cavern of gloom
I will give him bread
he will bring good news from afar
I will give him water
he will bring a gift of light

NOTES

¹ Linton Kwesi Johnson interviewed by Mervyn Morris, *Jamaica Journal* 20.1 (1987): 17. Extract of interview reprinted in E. A. Markham, *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies & Britain* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Bloodaxe Books, 1989) 250-61.

² LKJ interviewed, *Jamaica Journal* 20.1: 18.

³ See Samuel O. Asein, "The 'Protest' Tradition in West Indian Poetry," *Jamaica Journal* 6.2 (1972): 40-45.

⁴ Christopher Okigbo, introduction by Okigbo, *Labyrinths*, African Writers Series 62 (London: Heinemann, 1971) xi. Gerald Moore, introduction, *Selected Poems*, by Tchicaya U Tam'si, trans. Gerald Moore, African Writers Series 72 (London: Heinemann, 1972) xiii.

⁵ Moore, intro., U Tam'si, *Selected Poems* vii.

⁶ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (London: TRJ Publications, 1974) 23.

⁷ Johnson, *Voices* 23.

⁸ LKJ interviewed, *Jamaica Journal* 20.1: 22.

⁹ Linton Kwesi Johnson, correspondence of 23 Oct. 1973.

¹⁰ F. G. Rohlehr, "West Indian Poetry: Some Problems of Assessment" Part Two, *Bim* 14.55 (July - Dec. 1972): 134 & 139.

¹¹ Rohlehr, "West Indian Poetry," *Bim* 14.54: 81.

¹² Bongo Jerry, "Mabrak," *Savacou* 3/4 (Dec. 1970/March 1971): 15.

¹³ Rohlehr, "West Indian Poetry," *Bim* 14.54: 83.

¹⁴ Mervyn Morris, "Printing the Performance," *Jamaica Journal* 23.1 (1990): 22.

¹⁵ Linton Kwesi Johnson, quoted in introduction by Andrew Salkey, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975) 8.

¹⁶ LKJ quoted in intro. by Salkey, *Dread Beat* 8

¹⁷ Farrukh Dhondy, "The Black Writer in Britain," *Race Today* 11.3 (May/June 1979): 67-68.

¹⁸ LKJ interviewed, *Jamaica Journal* 20.1: 19.

¹⁹ LKJ, correspondence, undated, late summer or autumn 1974.

- ²⁰ LKJ, correspondence, undated, late summer or autumn 1974.
- ²¹ LKJ interviewed, *Jamaica Journal* 20.1: 19.
- ²² Dhondy, "The Black Writer," *Race Today* 11.3: 68.
- ²³ See Michael Thelwell, "C. L. R. James: A Life of Meaning, and the Meaning of a Life," *African Commentary* 1.1 (Oct. 1989): 25-26.
- ²⁴ LKJ, correspondence of 2 Sept. 1974.
- ²⁵ LKJ, correspondence of 29 April 1978.
- ²⁶ LKJ, correspondence of 29 April 1978.
- ²⁷ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984) 34-35.
- ²⁸ Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books/Viking, 1986) 310-311.
- ²⁹ Thulani Davis, "LKJ: Politics in the Groove," *Village Voice* April 21, 1980: 66. Davis' observation seems to me to be countered by the fact that in every performance with the Dub Band, Johnson insists on reciting some of his poems without accompaniment, usually at the beginning of the performance, in order to focus the audience's concentration on the importance of the word.
- ³⁰ Morris, "Printing the Performance" 24. See also Morris, intro. to Michael Smith, *It A Come* (London: Race Today Publications, 1986) 10
- ³¹ Robert Christgau, "Revalueshanary Fren," *Village Voice* April 23 1991: 80.

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