

10. Punk Poetry late 1970s & 1980s

Though the influence of hip hop on spoken word is well known, the musical movement that came before it is often forgotten. 'A lot of what is attributed to hip hop in our scene *isn't* hip hop. It's punk', remembers Joelle Taylor.¹¹⁴ In the seventies and eighties punk was *the* street culture in the UK and poetry was part of its articulation. Like hip hop, it wasn't just a music trend, but a philosophy and a way of life, drawing heavily on anarcho-syndicalist values of DIY, squatting, and riotous joy. Punk said *fuck you* to the canon; if you had something to say and wanted to say it, that was enough.

The godfather of British punk poetry, John Cooper Clarke, hybridised poetry with the dry, sardonic wit of punk bravado and his own gritty Northern realism: 'the fucking scene is fucking sad / the fucking news is fucking bad / the fucking weed is fucking turf / the fucking speed is fucking surf', he writes in 'Evidently Chicken Town'.¹¹⁵

Another key figure, Attila the Stockbroker, has done over three thousand gigs since the early eighties. In the first years, his shows often involved fist fights with fascists in the back rooms of pubs. As Attila and fellow ranter Seething Wells would say, 'If we mention cherry blossom in our poetry, we're talking about boot polish'. Attila has since taken his fighting talk to campaigns such as Rock Against Racism, Anti Nazi League, the Miners' Strike, the Poll Tax demos, and protests against a string of Middle Eastern wars.

Punk poetry evolved in a soundscape of distorted guitars and pounded snare drums. Kinetic, raw, and interactive, it dealt with boisterous audiences the same way it dealt with Tory politics—with fist-shaking defiance and a sardonic sense of humour. Often taking the mic on band changeovers, punk poets did not have the luxury of silent audiences or even audiences with an interest in poetry. If they didn't grab the crowd's attention (and keep it), they risked having a bottle launched at them. In this way, says Taylor, 'form dictated content'.¹¹⁶ This was the era of the *rant*, wielding poems that were, as Andrew Darlington recalls, 'lethal devices with short fuses'.¹¹⁷ Punk poet (turned novelist) Joolz Denby remembers the risks poets took to get their poetry out there:

I had no fear, which in those days, especially as a woman, you needed to have no fear ... They would throw lighted cigarettes at you, they'd throw full cans of beer, they'd spit at you, throw glasses at you. I remember standing up at Bogies in Cardiff and it was so bad the bouncers had to come on the stage behind me... I remember standing up in Scotland and literally looking at a hail of glass coming towards me. You could see it glinting and it was smashing and exploding on the floor around my feet. One glass hit me in the face... and I thought 'this is gonna be a tough gig' [laughs].¹¹⁸

Though they are not considered punk poets, John Hegley and Joelle Taylor also started their poetic lives climbing on stage between punk bands. Though not the phenomenon it was, punk still informs spoken word's DIY method of organising and 'having a go'. Many poets today, such as Henry Raby, Bridget Hart, Furious George, and Paul 'Captain of the Rant' Case proudly bear the punk philosophy.

11. UK Alternative Cabaret 1980s & 1990s

Throughout the eighties, punk and dub poets found a common home in the bawdy alternative cabaret scene, where poetry and radical politics mixed with variety performance.

As with spoken word today, this scene grew in response to Tory 'austerity', as this 1984 article from *Marxism Today* reports:

The public role of the new generation of radical poets is, oddly enough, aided by the current recession. As theatre companies close for lack of funds and grants, so the actors involved have re-formed into variety acts performing at the many cabarets which have sprung up across London.¹¹⁹