

Poetry Performance MCs

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TRANSCRIPT



Extract: *Jawdance* by Apples and Snakes in January 2014 of MC Joelle Taylor

Hello and welcome to Poetry off the Page. This is the podcast of the research project, 'Poetry off the Page: Literary History and the Spoken Word, 1965-2020'. We explore recent developments in British and Irish poetry performance. Find out more about us on www.poetryoffthepage.net.

I'm Helen Thomas and I am part of the Poetry off the Page team. In this podcast, I will be looking at the role of MCs - in other words, master(s) of ceremonies whose job it is to introduce artists and keep an audience engaged during a performance. I will be focusing on a selection of poetry performance events that took place in the UK from the 1980s to the present day. In the clip you've just heard, Joelle Taylor introduces headliner poet, Janine Booth as the first poet performer at the Apples and Snakes, JAWDANCE at Rich Mix, London in 2014.¹

I was initially drawn to this area of research when I remembered being part of an audience at a young writer's poetry event at the Barbican Theatre, Plymouth which took place several years ago, in which the late dub poet, musician and writer, Benjamin Zephaniah was the Master of Ceremonies. At that event, Zephaniah, with his vibrant and contagious enthusiasm and spirited generosity transformed the atmosphere of the venue as he encouraged a group of young - school age - writers and poets to feel proud of themselves and their achievements and to share their work with confidence and shine as much as he did.

Since that event, I've become more and more interested in the role of event hosts – and in particular, in the role of MCs at poetry performances. Although they play an essential

¹ Jawdance, Rich Mix, 22 January 2014

role in creating and maintaining the energy of a live event, they also constitute one of the forgotten/invisible presences of documented live events. In a sense, their input is rarely acknowledged, discussed or historicised.

In this podcast, I'd like to share my initial findings about the visibility and role of MCs at a selection of poetry events that took place during the 1980s and 1990s, and to consider their different styles and strategies. In particular, I will be focusing upon the resources held in the Apples and Snakes' Spoken Word Archive in London, one of the most important archives to document British spoken word history. This is, of course, just a brief overview – but hopefully, this podcast will prove both interesting and useful in documenting the input of MCs in British Poetry Performance, and in terms of opening up the topic for future research.

For the purpose of this podcast, my key research questions were:

- 1. How have MCs been documented in the Spoken Word Archive?**
- 2. What strategies of engagement are used by MCs at spoken word events?**

So, in order to examine the ways in which MCs have been documented, I began researching the term, MC, and finding out a bit about its origins.

The term MC, or Master of Ceremonies, has a long history. The role of official host occurred in many state, chivalric, royal and religious ceremonies. According to Edward McNamara, Professor of Liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum University in Rome, one of the earliest documented references to the role of 'Master of Ceremonies' dates back to the 5th century. As an official of the Catholic Church, the MC's responsibilities in this context were to ensure that services and celebrations were carried out with grace, simplicity and order, whilst in C20th, the term was used more generally to refer to a host at a formal or entertaining event.² In 1970s African-American, inner city communities, the title 'MC' became specifically associated with the vocalist who would rhyme over a DJ's sampling, scratching and mixing within hip-hop culture.³ These MCs drew on a variety of

² McNamara 1989

³ La Rotta 2023; I am grateful to Rachel Bolle-Debessay for pointing these origins out to me.

influences, including Jamaican ‘toasting’ (the act of talking over a rhythm or beat), the musical genres of funk and soul, and rap, poetry recited in rhythm and rhyme over pre-recorded tracks. Some of the first MCs to emerge were Coke La Rock, DJ Kool Herc, DJ Hollywood, and Kurtis Blow, artists who would ‘talk-over’, the DJ with the intention of encouraging people to dance and raise the energy levels of a crowd.⁴

In order to begin this research, I decided to use a mixture of two different types of resources: firstly, the Apples and Snakes’ Spoken Word Archive which contains over 40 years’ worth of live film and cassette recordings, posters and information relating to Spoken Word and Performance from events across the UK; and secondly, interviews with organisers of poetry performance events. In June 2024, during a face to face interview, I asked Russell Thompson, who worked as a programmer for Apples and Snakes for over 11 years and is currently an archivist of the incredible Apples and Snakes collection of recordings and material, what he thought made a good MC.⁵ The job of an MC, suggests Russell, is to act as a go-between, a kind of front of house between the audience and the poets, keeping the mood appropriate and not creating too many highs and lows.

Russell also shared some of his pet hates about compering – or rather what he thinks MCs should and shouldn’t do. Firstly, he believes that MCs should know the poet and their work (for example, the title of their latest work) and that they should speak freely, without using notes. ‘I want to believe that the MC is very well acquainted with the poet,’ he states. He also feels that it’s not always appropriate for a MC to perform a poem of their own at an event. The job of the MC requires skill, he suggests, and full attention. The audience and the poets need the MC to set the pace and momentum of the evening and to keep that momentum going, even if it means salvaging the atmosphere after a performance that doesn’t go as well as expected, or hits a bad note: ‘A wrong poem at the wrong time can kill things’, notes Russell, so in a sense, an MC is as much a trouble shooter as a host. An MC has to remain attentive and be on standby at all time. Russell recalls what he refers to as ‘an awful moment’ during the Apples and Snakes ‘Temptation

⁴ Price-Styles 2015

⁵ Thomas interview with Russell Thompson 2024

Tour', when the local poetry MC went off to the bar after introducing the first act and was never seen again!

Some of Russell's favourite MCs correlate with my own list – Benjamin Zephaniah for whipping up an atmosphere and making everyone – on the stage and in the audience – feel the love and the preciousness of the moment; Joelle Taylor, Kat François, Kae Tempest, Yomi Sode for engaging their audiences and welcoming performers. Many of these are what Russell refers to as 'tried and tested' MCs who achieve meaningful and enjoyable relationships with their audiences, promoting poets' book sales during the interval, acting as fair but efficient time-keepers in the context of slam competitions and open mic events, and sincerely thanking the [audience] and headliners who bring 'the show to a wonderful end'.⁶

Although the Apples and Snakes Spoken Word Archive is one of the most important archives to document British Spoken Word history, at present, it doesn't allow for a target search of MCs. So the only way for me to find out about MCs was to dive into the archive and listen to cassette recordings and watch audio visual materials, sampling from the 1980s onwards in order to establish a general understanding of MCs in British spoken word and poetry performance culture.

The first ever Apples and Snakes show took place on Sat 2 Oct 1982 at the Adam Arms, Camden, London. However, there are no archival recordings for the period, 1982-1986.

The earliest 'voice presence' of an MC in the A&S archive appears to be from the 'Miner Poets' event in the Purcell Room that formed part of the 'South Bank Alternative' Season funded by the GLC on 1 August 1984. In the film recording, after the applause, an unidentified female MC, introduces the event.

Extract: *Miner Poets* by Apples and Snakes in 1984

Details from posters and flyers offer tantalizing glimpses of possible MCs during this period, but the information is fleeting. The MCs drift like ghosts within the archive.

⁶ Cf. Julia Lajta-Novak's use of the term 'paratext' in Novak 2011: 138ff.

The earliest 'voice presence' of an MC in the A&S archive appears to be that of 7th Nov 1987 at the Eagle but it is not clear who the MC was at that event. However, listening to the recording suggests that she was female and that her job was to generate excitement and enthusiasm in the audience.⁷ In order to try and identify this MC, I compared her voice to that of other poetry recordings in the archive and emailed Apples and Snake's Russell Thompson for a second opinion.

Thompson agreed that the voice of the MC appeared to belong to the late, female British comedian, Linda Smith. In the recording, we hear Smith encouraging the crowd to welcome the performing poets Bob Young and Michael Parker.

Extract: MC Linda Smith

However, the recording is stopped immediately after the last act, so we do not hear her closing remarks.

Other female MCs haunt the archive, leaving faint traces of their existence. For example, although no recording was captured, posters and flyers indicate that MC Bridgit Bard hosted the A&S Cabaret at CGCC on 7th April 1989; likewise, Ann Zeity is listed as the MC for the performances that took place on 21 April 1989 and 13 October 1989, but her words are not included in the archived recordings of those events. Examples such as these demonstrate that, on the whole, the identities and contributions of male and female MCs are fairly under-documented in the Spoken Word archive. But it was interesting to discover that Apples and Snakes recruited both male and female MCs for their events, thus highlighting the organisation's gender equity working at this time.

My second research question focused upon the strategies of engagement used by MCs at spoken word events. As spoken word scholar Julia Lajta Novak suggests, MCs are crucial participants in live events – functioning to structure the events, guide poet performers and audiences, provide introductions and information, frame the poet's

⁷ The Apples and Snakes *Miner Poets* event, 1 August 1984 at the Southbank Centre, does not list an MC.

performance, influence the atmosphere and interaction of the audience, and – as in slams – communicate with competition judges.⁸

How do the poetry performance archives reveal MCs' efforts to influence audiences and establish certain atmospheres at events? Apart from introducing performers, advising about procedures, thanking audiences, sponsors, and interpreters, keeping time, providing warnings about triggering content, and advertising books on sale, one important function of MC-ing appears to be engage and 'unite' an audience. Researching the archive reveals that one strategy frequently used by MCs involves making their audience laugh – either by making fun of the audience, or the content that will follow, or themselves. So the use of humour. seems to be a popular ingredient of hosting.

Extract: *Jawdance by Apples and Snakes in April 2011 of MC Paul Lyalls*

The British-Pakistani poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Kahn identifies MCs' use of humour as an equaliser. She cites Matt Abbott's use of 'friendly' fake news to introduce a poet – e.g. by suggesting that they are National Champions of Flower Growing, rather than poetry!

I also interviewed 'Poetry off the Page' researchers, Claire Palzer and Shefali Banerji, who are based at the University of Vienna, and asked them to comment on MCs they'd enjoyed listening to and the strategies they use when working MCs at poetry events themselves:

Claire Palzer: The MC who comes to mind immediately, his name is Kalle Ryan. He is an Irish poet and organiser. He ran a regular poetry night called the Brownbread Mixtape that ran in Dublin for about 10 years. He did almost all of the hosting for that, for its entire run. It was once a month, and he just has such a presence. He's very funny on stage, creates a great atmosphere that manages to be casual and very at eye level while also making clear the rules of the game. He manages to curtail folks who are getting too loud in between performances. Has a very kind of casual rapport with the musical guests that he would invite.

⁸ Novak 2011: 200ff

You can really tell that he knows the people, not only his audience, but knows the performers and that just creates a really familial atmosphere.

Shefali Banerji: One of the things that is the most important for me is to create an environment which feels like a safe space for everyone, to create that ease for everyone, both the poets as well as the audiences involved. Because I think as an MC, as a host, that is your duty to set the tone of the event.

One strategy that I discovered when researching the archives that was less expected, was MCs using their role to 'speak politics'. Two examples illustrate this finding that MCs sometimes make political references or employ political frameworks when introducing themselves.

The first example comes from the black American, lesbian jazz poet, Linda King who performed the role of MC at the 'Woman of the Word' Tour that began in Peckham on 17 October 1988 and starred the poets, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Munirah and Ntozake Shange, and the jazz musician, John Raymond Purcell. However, the flyer clearly cites her as the 'Mz' of Ceremony) thereby indicating her refusal to be called 'master'. By revising the term 'MC' to MZ, King demonstrated her feminist political stance by insisting upon a form of address for women that did not denote marital status.⁹

The second example comes from the recording of the Apples and Snakes Cabaret on 27 January 1989. Although not mentioned on the flyer but captured by the recording, the Nigerian poet, linguist and literary critic, Niyi Osundare, was the MC for this poetry performance event at Convent Garden Community Centre.¹⁰ Niyi's confidence at public speaking and developing a rapport between the audience is clear from the start. He says 'hello' several times (quite an African custom), explains that he's here to warm them up for a 'heavy, heavy night' and celebrates enthusiastic supporters with words such as 'respect'. Before welcoming the first artist on stage, Niyi performs a poem responding to what he calls 'the extraordinary phenomenon called 'Thatcherism''. With this remark, Niyi

⁹ Apples and Snakes, 'Woman of the Word Tour, Peckham, London, 17 October 1988, MC Linda King.

¹⁰ The artists at this event on 27 January 1989 included Maggie Nicols, Pinise Saul & Lol Coxhill, Mervyn Africa & Pitika Ntuli, Mahmood Jamal, Keith Waithe & Keshav Sathe.

identifies the political agenda for the evening – that is, its support for and celebration of global artists despite the conservative government’s efforts (under Margaret Thatcher) to sever European ties, and stifle community arts practices and cultural democracy objectives; or what Michael Billington termed, ‘the shift away from public subsidy to corporate sponsorship’ and the transformation of instrument funding bodies to ‘instrument[s] of government’.¹¹

After the interval, and before introducing the artists, Mervyn Africa & Pitika Ntuli, Niyi continues his political framing by explaining that he has been reading the work of the postcolonial critic, Frantz Fanon. He then gives the audience a mini-lecture on some of Fanon’s ideas on racialised colonial oppression and euro-centrism, in particular, the correlation between the third world and Europe’s working class as the ‘social engine of change’ whom Fanon called, ‘Sleeping Beauties’. He then performs his own poem, ‘Sleeping Beauty’ which he directs to the audience, encouraging it to take action.

Excerpt: Niyi Osundare in 1989

As these examples suggest, MCs employ humour to galvanise and relax their audiences, but they can also frame events with clear political approaches.

So what conclusions can be made from these examples?

Firstly, judging from my explorations of the archives, I would say that even though MCs have played an important role in British spoken word culture, the archiving and history of MC agency and interaction has been quite limited and haphazard. In terms of documentation, the role of the MC has been neglected, which makes it both a challenging but valuable topic of research. In fact, accessible digital technologies should make these processes easier to conduct in the future.

Secondly, my research revealed an interesting number of women acting as MCs during the 80s and 90s and I would suggest that these findings merit further investigation.

¹¹ Billington 2013

Thirdly, listening to the material held within the archives indicates that MCing is a multi-faceted role, and that different MCs perform it differently.

Finally, the recordings suggest that MCing is essentially about engaging with audiences and poet performers, and establishing atmospheres of trust – sometimes by using humour and/or by employing political frameworks.

You've been listening to Helen Thomas, at Poetry off the Page Project. Thank you. Stay tuned for our next episode, in which Rachel Bolle will talk about dub poetry, low frequencies and politics.

The "Poetry Off the Page" project is based at the University of Vienna. It is conducted in collaboration with the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes; and supported by the European Research Council and the Austrian Science Fund. You can find out more about the project and all our partners on www.poetryoffthepage.net. Our podcast page there includes a list of references and the transcript of this episode.

My particular thanks go to Russell Thompson who granted me precious time in personal interviews. And finally, don't forget to follow us on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and Spotify.