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Episode 93: Ross Monaghan; Stuart McKenzie; Poetry on the Picket Line - (6/2/2017)

Transcript edited by David Turner – 6/2/2017

Part One:

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Host: Peter De Graft-Johnson – **PJ**

Guest: Ross Monaghan – **RM**

DT: Hello my name is David Turner this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Today's episode is in three parts. Coming up later is Lizzy Palmer talking to Stuart McKenzie and London based group, Poetry on the Picket Line.

As always, you can keep up to date with everything we're doing at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr, Soundcloud and iTunes or @Silent_Tongue on Twitter. I've drawn up some online audience feedback surveys, so if you'd like to do me a favour and fill one in, there's a link in the episode description. Along with a link to download a transcript of this episode. Transcripts made possible by funding from Arts Council England. If you like what we do, then tell your friends and share episodes on social media and I'll love you forever.

First up is Peter De Graft-Johnson talking to Ross Monaghan at his monthly spoken word night Poetry at the PAD. Links in the description. The pair chat about poetry as activism and Ross' interest in street art. Here's Peter and Ross.

PJ: Hello and welcome to Poetry at the PAD number eight, Lyrical/Political I am your, host The Repeat Beat Poet [Peter De Graft-Johnson]. Here on the stage with me we have the wonderful Ross Monaghan. Say hello Ross.

RM: Hey everybody.

PJ: Shout out to everyone listening at home and everyone listening here. Give us a cheer everyone listening in the room! I love a panto crowd. Brilliant. The subtitle for this event is Lyrical/Political and we're recording on the 29th of November [2016] after what has been a, fair to say turbulent few months of political events. Be it the rise of populism across the world both right and left which is a debate we can get onto. But obviously, the big ones are Brexit, Trump and the mad "Snooper's Charter" which you actually mention in your poetry.

RM: Scary, stupid stuff.

PJ: Scary stuff man, it's full access to your Internet history upon police request. For a year, they can just sweep your data, but anyway we'll get into that later. So, as a poet who I first met doing an Oxjam gig. Which is actually a form of activism in itself, raising some money for charity. Can you talk about how your activism interlinks with your poetry?

RM: Through some of the opportunities I've had over the last couple of years working with activist groups and sort of grassroots activists and communities. A lot of the stuff I write is observational, it's about what's going on around me. And I think through the chance to engage in some of the bigger issues, like the refugee crisis, like nuclear disarmament, like environmental issues, about youth management and about youth development, I think it's really important to share your views on that.

I think some of the traditional media doesn't really do that so, for me, poetry is a form of protest. It's an idea about getting your words out there and being able to share stuff. And I also think it's a lot more accessible rather than just going out on the streets and shouting and ranting at people and telling people they're wrong about thing, I think using creative means to actually engage people in conversation is kind of what I am into. It's where a lot of

my poetry comes from, it's just things I'm passionate about, things I observed. But also, trying to start conversations.

PJ: For shizzle. Yeah! Man, I dig that vibe a lot. [Please] speak about some of your other work you do as well, outside of just poetry. Because I know you get into a lot and I want to hear all about that stuff as well. I think you do youth work as well?

RM: Yeah, I'm a youth worker. I work with lots of different organisations. I'm a freelancer as a youth worker but there's been a lot of cuts to youth services over the last couple of years and there's also been some incredible programmes come out. Things like NCS which is National Citizen Service, in which they're trying to put school leavers through.

I was actually invited into their group, two years ago as sort of a creative activist, a creative youth leader and we use a lot of creative reflection; using art techniques, doing drawing, using poetry. So, my youth work is still arts based but it's about empowering young people, especially the sixteen to eighteen bracket. Who are coming out of school and really haven't been given any life skills and haven't really been told what to expect. Their whole life they have been told are going to be this and you're going to fail.

So, a lot of the work I do with young people is about, actually, just giving them the confidence and a little bit of a wider view of the world. Outside of that I'm a Chalktivist, it's a great movement, look it up.

PJ: Chalktivism? Tell us about Chalktivism, I'm guessing chalk [and] activism.

RM: You've got it! There was a lot of blank looking people for a second there. Have you got it? Chalk, activism. Chalktivism actually started back in the 1980s and there was this group that went out and they chalked all over the streets, all around the world and people joined in. Over the last two years I've been involved in a lot of protests.

There's a side of protest that can be quite angry and quite aggressive and when I was 18, 19, 20, 21 I was involved in that and I used to fight with the police. I woke up one day and went, well this isn't doing any good. People were actually scared of us and they didn't want to have these conversations. And I literally went out about two years ago to a big protest in London, took a load of chalk with me, sat down in the middle of the street right in this protest.

I just started writing slogans on the floor, drawing love hearts and stuff. Before I knew it, there was like fifty, sixty people joining in and everyone wanted to write something. Everyone wanted to leave their message behind. And the nice thing about it is leaving your mark behind on the street. It's about telling people your story but it's not vandalism, it's wash away, you know it's going to go away.

And then last year when the Syria vote came in... This is one of the big moments for Chalktivism for me. We as a country voted that it was okay to send our planes and our forces over to bomb Syria. I was really angry I was really upset. I actually wanted to come out on the streets of London, I wanted to join my old-school protestors and go and stand

outside Downing Street and cause trouble and get arrested. A lot of my friends went, "That's a really stupid idea. You're a youth worker". And they were right.

I thought, actually, what I was going to do was take a load of chalk out into Brighton and we did a huge mural that covered a whole road. We got an incredible reaction, we had loads of people stopped. And as part of that another thing I do is try to make lots of little films about activism and about sharing. So, little mobile phone films. So, we took a phone out and we made a film about chalking on the streets and next thing I know the CND which is Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament were contacting us and they were like, "You guys are crazy. Going out on the streets and drawing and people are actually talking [about the issues]."

It just started a movement. So, creative activism and it doesn't have to be chalking, it doesn't have to be poetry, it can be singing songs, it can be drawing art, it can be doing outdoor galleries. There's a lot of different aspects to what I do but I also really believe in some of the work a lot of the grass roots charities are doing with the refugees at the moment. There's a huge crisis in France and in England developing. You know, we're bringing young people over and we can't support them.

I do a lot of work with the Hummingbird Project and the Refugee Council and that's more about actually just bringing other artists together to put on events and raise funds and support young people and mentor young people.

PJ: A comprehensive round-up there of all the stuff you get into. Speaking as a poet that has protested. I've been in protests both physically and you know online protesting is a new kind of force as well reaching a different audience of people, affecting change in a different way. As a person who is less on the activist side of things, it's really inspiring having you down to the PAD to share that message. To share why you think it's important and to share why you do what you do specifically so thank you for coming down and sharing that as well. Chalktivism? I'm going to look that up because I'm pretty sure I would have seen people doing it and just not connected the dots as well.

RM: If you go on Vimeo there's a three-step guide to Chalktivism, it's pretty easy. Get some chalk, choose a pavement, write something, you know.

PJ: It does sound crackingly simple, I do enjoy that in protest. It's wonderful. Also, in the poems that you brought down you had a lot to say about street art and graffiti writing and personally it's one of the things that I absolutely love. For anybody who doesn't already know me or heard me proselytising about hip hop. Live hip hop all day, every day and graffiti writing is often, you know, not focussed on the art of rhyming, breakdancing or whatever it is. So, tell me how you got into being interested in street art. Because you shouted out a lot of interesting names, you shouted out Wild Style which is an incredible hip hop documentary that everyone should go and watch. You shouted out another couple of other things. So, talk to me about street art and your interest in that.

RM: I think, for me, street art was something that I've kind of been aware of growing up. When I was at school I was really lucky to have an art teacher that really encouraged us to look at street artists and graffiti. He gave us the history from hip hop and I was already

listening to people like the Beastie Boys [are] the classic but then you know Mos Def. God, so many other people.

PJ: Always shout out Mos Def.

RM: Always. Every time. Through that I started exploring that world a little bit more and I really got into the history of it. Then I watched Exit Through the Gift Shop and decided I hated Banksy.

PJ: Controversial.

RM: I know right. I'll explain that in a minute. But I could see what Banksy was doing and credit to him man, he was bringing messages back out onto the streets in really simple forms that people could connect with. People loved [them], people were seeking [them] out and he started a bit of a movement.

Like a bit of a youth movement, a lot of people re-engaged with street art. And street art isn't just one thing you know and graffiti isn't just one thing, there's a whole movement behind it. As I travelled around the world I saw amazing pieces and I was lucky enough to spend a bit of time in Berlin and Berlin being like this huge crazy city full of different graffiti crews... But one of the things I loved about Berlin was that they weren't just putting up their names. They were actually putting up these murals that were social commentary about immigration and about social development and about...

The poor districts had these amazing statements against capitalism and against the banks. And it really just engaged me and when I came back to the UK there were lots of people putting stuff out so I think it's been that process. Although, I decided I hated Banksy a while ago, I've got to give him some credit because I think he re-sparked that movement and the work he did in Palestine and his recent residency in New York was incredible. Really really thought provoking.

So, for me, that's where my interest comes in, the fact that we can use these canvases that other people don't really see. You know, a brick wall for most people is a brick wall but to be a real good writer or a graffiti artist or just artist in general, they look at that and they see it as a canvas space. They see it as a way to get a message across without being confrontational which I think is a really beautiful thing.

PJ: Yeah, for sure. The way that you do that through your spoken word as well, presenting an idea and using the vehicle of the poetry as a way to get a message out to the people. I think that's a really important thing and all the more important for how crazy the narrative has got in recent times media narratives, political narratives, the stories that were told to try and make sense of the world. It's very easy now for things to become muddled and for stories to become very unclear.

So, when you have the power of a direct art form like spoken word or like street art, where you see it on a train or you see it from the train wherever it is. It's a really immediate feeling, I think, that the power of not only poetry but obviously, the Art right now to convey

messages to people directly, immediately, where they feel it. I think it's going to become even more important as things get crazier and crazier. As I sadly predict they will.

RM: Yeah, I agree with you on that. I think this idea about media and the way we're fed our news is confusing, you know, we're fed one dimensional... This is what's happening and this is what everybody should think. I may be wrong or I may be right. But I think there's been a social buy into that where there's a large majority of the population who don't really consider the way they're fed their news or the way they process information. That kind of upsets me and I think it actually sparks difficult problems within society so, I think it's really important for artists to stand up and say there is a different way of looking at this, it isn't necessarily one dimensional.

PJ: True, I do agree with you but I also think it shows up a second part of that problem which is the echo chamber. Like, if we're here in our wonderful artistic space speaking to what is usually a fairly left-wing crowd, I can say that without too much worry. I feel that it's also the artist's responsibility to be able to speak outside of the echo chamber, to speak to people who may be... The classic example right now is, maybe voted leave [in E.U. referendum] or whatever...

What I'm really talking about here is being able to reach outside of the echo chamber and to take a message outside of [those] people who regularly hear it. Do you think that the artist has responsibility to do that specifically or pointedly? Or is it just to create whatever art he or she chooses?

RM: I think both to be honest. I know right!

PJ: Deep.

RM: Deep. Well, as an artist it's great to just create work and put it out there and we don't always necessarily think about what we're going to do with our art. It's more a response to a situation we're in and that's totally valuable and it's great to share that. But I also believe that with the way social media and technology and the access to technology is going artists do have a responsibility to put their message out there as well.

So, we have the capability to put it out there, we can go on Facebook, we can live-feed, we can make videos on our phones. It's simple to do now so as artists I think... Yeah let's create content all the time, things that we're passionate about but if nobody's seeing that... Like you say, we are living in these little creative bubbles and we go to gigs and we say things and people say, "Yeah I agree with you, because I already agree with you".

So, for me, part of the response to that is that I actually go out on the streets and do poetry. On quite a regular basis I will actually just go out and it's not busking, you know, I'm not asking for money it's more about sharing that. About a year and a half ago I started an organisation with another artist called The Bad Poets and we just literally go out into parks and we go onto the beach and we go out into spaces around cities and we do pop-up poetry events.

We get people to come up and speak and it's quite incredible the way that when you have an audience that comes to a poetry event, you know, they like poetry. But when you do a pop-up on the street and you're using the same poems and you're talking about politics people stop and listen and they're really kind of affected by it and influenced by it.

PJ: Yeah, it's a whole different crowd and it's a different way to reach people. There's a great tradition in London of like one off pop-up poetry events in totally mad places. Poetry on buses, poetry just in tube stations and all that kind of stuff. I think it's really important to make sure that you're not only speaking out through your work but you're also speaking out with your work and where you put it is a really specific attention to detail.

I like seeing poets engage with that side of the thought process because being a poet is not just about what you write and using the term is not just about accepting it and self-defining. Personally, I think it's more about attitude, actions speak louder than words. Kate Tempest said, "In these times life isn't lived it is demonstrated". Which I think is a really important quote and I'd like to know what you think about...

I've seen you in a few different situations, I've seen you feature here. I've seen you slam at Vocals and Verses and then also do a charity gig for Oxfam. What do you think about the way you put out your work? Do you think about where you gig or is it just any gig is a good gig? Do you think about how you put out your work online? Are you charging people for your work? Are you selling your art or are you just giving it out for free?

RM: Yes I do consider where I perform, I'd like to work with certain organisations and in terms of that I'd happily work with lots of charities. I won't charge them, it's more about actually just supporting what they're doing which is a big reason that I was at Oxjam. So, I think, working with charities is great, yeah do it for free. As an artist, it would be great if people paid me all the time.

PJ: It would be great if people paid us as artists all the time!

RM: But that's not the reality. So, I think you have to come to terms with that as an artist. That it's a balance between, as we just said, sharing your work and putting it out there and starting conversations and actually being able to afford to do it. Does that answer your question?

PJ: It's certainly food for thought to be honest, because I hadn't you know... It's another person's perspective that's what I love about these conversations. Being able to sit down with a poet whose work I've enjoyed and then get to understand the reasoning behind that as well. As a purely indulgent thing for me I quite enjoy it.

RM: To be honest that's another side of it for me is like... If I'm really honest it is quite a self-indulgent thing being a poet sometimes. It's quite nice to be on stage and perform and be able to share your words so that is also a motivation. If I get the opportunity I enjoy this. So, it's not just about making an impact and sending a message, you know, I actually really have fun with this. I think that's something that I also put across to my young people when I do poetry with them, is that it should be fun, you know.

PJ: Yeah of course man. If you're not having fun, then you're probably doing it wrong. In some ways, it's not obviously that simple but you understand. Just a lovely wave of chuckles from the room as I stumble through my words. So, I'd like to say again, thank you for coming down. Now we come to the final question, the kind of like wrap up question, the question that I ask each of our guests. Are you ready for the final question?

RM: I think so.

PJ: There was a tremble there. You know, it sounds fairly simple. How would you describe your creative process?

RM: Chaotic! Creative process? It really differs, sometimes I'll go out and someone will say something and it sparks an idea and it's right there and I'll write a poem or I create a piece of art or I create a video and it's done. Sometimes, something will go around my head for months and months and months and I'll be like, I need to use that but it doesn't happen. Then over the course of a period of time it'll happen.

Sometimes it's really considered, I think you know probably as a poet and some of the other people in the room you go to gigs and they're on theme or you go and do a slam and it's on theme so you end up actually really considering what you're writing. I did a poem tonight about childhood and father figures and again that's where that came from. That poem happened in like twenty-five minutes, it's probably one of the quickest poems I've ever written. But it also really was very like [INAUDIBLE] you know, like it was very emotional writing that poem.

So creative process, for me, is different every time but I think the one thing that binds the things that I perform; is they've got a bit of purpose, I really believe in what they're saying and it's something that I want other people to talk about. I think they're the three main factors for me in all of my work really.

PJ: Comprehensive, I like that. Thank you for...

RM: I'm a talker!

PJ: A speaker of words and indeed a wonderful poet. Ladies and gentlemen, another round of applause for our feature at Poetry at The PAD, number eight Lyrical/Political, Ross Monaghan.

RM: Thank you.

PJ: Thank you very much, my name is The Repeat Beat Poet, I've been your host for the evening. This has been Poetry at The PAD, we are hanging out at The PAD which is a creative workspace in Dagenham. You can find us online at The PAD TV that's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube the whole deal. Thank you everyone for coming down. Peace out.

Part Two (19:53):

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: Stuart McKenzie – **SM**

DT: Next up Lizzy Palmer talks to Stuart Mackenzie about the relationship between his poetry, lyric writing and work as an illustrator. This interview was recorded at the Royal Festival Hall and Lizzy and Stuart were constantly being mobbed by hordes of screaming kids. I've done my best to edit it out but it still might bug you a little bit. Here's Lizzy and Stuart.

SM:

Drawing Rosie Huntington-Whiteley's Lips

Your lips have become a signature
I could sign a cheque with – watch

its flimsy paper pout as it pays
for my lunch, plants one

on the cashier the disappears
to the ladies room to touch-up

I held bac from an early break
to work out the science of your

cupids bow, the logistics of being
left handed, its effect on my judgement.

Wrigged up a mechanism
in my mind that would slam

a door shut in my face
to get the pout effect but yours

are pure strawberry whatever that means
The line of your lips has become

indelible as I'm pushing together
two bits of swollen penne,

now covered in arrabiata on my plate
and they're talking to me, consoling

me – if I should ever shed a tear
over my impending deadline.

LP: Thanks Stuart. Hello, how are you?

SM: I'm good thank you.

LP: Good. it's nice to see you. So, I'd like to begin by asking you how you first got into writing poetry?

SM: I've always written. Ever since I was a kid and then throughout my 20s and 30s, intermittently, in my early 40s. But nothing too seriously and it was actually a friend that I used to work with got in touch me one day and said "Hey, I am of poetry workshop at the Irish Centre in Camden. Do you want to come?" I was like erm, no. And then I was like, "I write poetry, you know, I'm a bit like Patti Smith I shoot from the hip."

Then she rang me back the next day and she said "I really think you should come to this workshop". Because I was in a band writing lyrics and she had this idea that maybe it would help with that. Because she'd called me the second time up I thought, maybe, it might be an idea so I said okay. So, I went to the Irish Centre, it was [led by] a poet called Roisin Tierney and that was my revelation was... Oh my God this is amazing!

LP: Yeah.

SM: Roisin opening me up to so much poetry that hadn't read. I mean, really I hadn't read a great deal from... We read a tiny bit at school and anything from then was hardly anything really. I mean, I'd grown up listening to Patti Smith, John Cooper-Clarke, Jim Carroll, kind of, beat poetry you know. I'm ashamed to say but I haven't really read the classics or anything so, I was coming to it totally fresh and green which was great.

LP: Are you currently performing any of your poetry or are you still just writing at the moment?

SM: Writing. Generally, I write get poems published, I usually read at the launch. I was in Magma in 2015 as a featured poet so, I've read at Magma launches when I've been in there. Various open-mic nights, the Poetry Cafe I'm with a peer group at Torriano Meeting House. So, we do readings there.

LP: That's in Kentish Town isn't it.

SM: Yes. At the Poetry Cafe there's an event called The Shuffle where various poets curate an evening and they choose poets that they like. So, generally things happen... Someone might ask you if you want to go and read with such a body. You know, I've got nothing planned, I've got no gigging list of things I'm doing. You know, sometimes I'm reading here or reading there and then other times it's just somebody says do you want to come and read at something.

LP: Yeah. So, would you say that the performing doesn't really have that much bearing on the writing itself it's just something you do sort of as and when you get the opportunity?

SM: I've done collaborations with people where it's been a lot more performative, video pieces and things but generally I write for the page.

LP: Yeah yeah. I think I'm kind of similar to you like that. I mean, performing my poetry is something that I like to do and do a fair bit on and off. I think it does depend on what you've got, sometimes it'll be immediately obvious whether it's something that is given to performing but it's not necessarily something you want to happen. I don't know, would you say you like just for the work to be the important thing and then knowing you might find other potential in it?

SM: When you're working on pieces and you think, "Oh, I can imagine this like this" and then you put them to one side and I think that ultimately it always comes back to the page. [LP: Yeah.] You know I see the poems as just like these little worlds that I create. I really liked when I was going out to clubs and stuff, I'd maybe take a poem or a couple of poems and shove them in my pocket and try them out on people.

LP: Just in case?

SM: Yeah yeah, get a bit of a captive audience. It led to a lot of people asking me to, you know... I've been asked to curate such a thing in a magazine or have I got any poems based on this. It's been a nice way of getting my poems in magazines other than poetry magazines.

LP: That's a nice way of looking at it I think. I think I like the thought of your poems as being little worlds which could go in any direction.

SM: I'd just type them up, print them out now and then they'd be on a piece of paper so I'd just fold them up and stick them in my pocket and then I'd, kind of, get them out and look at them, read them and try them out on people. See how people were connecting with them, it is an exciting way to see what was working, what wasn't working.

LP: Yeah, perhaps it's more of an exercise for you to gauge how you feel about the quality of your work. I mean, I think perhaps that's why I share my work with people, just to see how they engage with it. I mean, I don't know if that is the reason why I write but I think it probably is a big part of it. Yeah, to try and make those connections with people, I think that's really important. You're in a band. [SM: Yeah.] Did you want to tell us a bit about that maybe as we're on the subject of performing?

SM: Yeah. One of the poems in the collection, the pamphlet with Laudanum was... On a Friday night, I'd go over to a friend of mine and we just used to jam in the living room. He was very technical so had keyboards and computers and stuff and I'd bring over my guitar and stuff and play.

It had always been this thing, like, in the 1980s I was messing about with keyboards and synthesizers with friends. In the 1990s I wanted it to be real music in the late 1990s it was back to sequencing. So, you know, I've been in and out of bands and then once I started writing poetry I'd... The last band I thought right that's it now. You know, the bass guitar I

had was under the bed gathering dust. And I just really took to writing poetry because I think with the poetry I'm in charge of the rhythm, the voice.

LP: Everything.

SM: Everything. So, I thought I quite like this. I'm in my own one-man band now and it's fine I don't have to, you know... I met the other guy I'm in the band with, James and we were just chatting. He had had an interest in playing the bass and said, have my bass. Before I knew it, another band had gotten together.

LP: The reason why I wanted to ask about that... I was wondering how far the different things you do influence each other? Do you write any of the song lyrics for the band? If so, how similar are they to your poetry?

SM: Lyrics are a collaboration. You know we write pieces, James writes pieces and we come together. Then really working quite spontaneously we might jam round at my flat, get bass line down, some guitars, some drums and then look at what we've got... Wherever we write, in our journals and scrapbooks and stuff and then see what we've got and put things together. You end up with, kind of, dialogues and narratives that you didn't expect that seems to again take on a life of their own.

LP: Yeah.

SM: I don't sit down and write a song formally. I love writing poetry, song writing I find quite hard to be honest. You've got a certain amount of time to say something and get audience engagement. [LP: Yeah.] You know, a few years ago the lyrics were really dense and not making much sense and I'd be like, "I don't know about this I want to write something simpler.

I'd have this struggle with... I'd have a line for a song and I think, that's more of a poem than a song. I don't know how I knew I just knew.

LP: I know what you mean.

SM: So, I'd shove these lines... That's over there, that's a song. I think sometimes the way I'm thinking about something... With the guy, I was in the previous band I was in before this one there was a lot of ad-libbing, improvising where you just get on a train of thought, looking around you in the room, where you are for prompts. Seeing things going on outside the window and that really led to something. And then you just get these great lines and you think, "Oh no that's a poem. That's not a song I don't want to waste that". So, I'd be forever going, "No that's a poem, that's a poem, that's a poem. This is for the song".

LP: It's funny isn't it how you feel that there are those distinctions there, it's interesting.

SM: Song writing is a real skill.

LP: I've tried it, it's not the same, is it. I can't do it at all, I don't know why.

SM: Even... I love classic pop songs and 60s doo-wop and girl groups you know. And everyone thinks that's easy but you know it's hard.

LP: Yeah, it would be an interesting subject for another podcast. I think. Perhaps here we can have a second reading.

SM:

All that jazz

Bob Fosse got a mention this evening
at your salmon supper I turned down
in place of a take out Veneziana.

Too much coffee – I was all jazz hands
bringing it back: jumping at the sound
of a black sports car's squawking alarm

and the high pitched squeals of punters
hanging out front of the local brasserie.
I love your West End flat and I'm sad

to see you fly off to Japan to teach and
I'm sad at the death of your neighbour too.
Two weeks – to think his body was there

all the time you kept knocking, peering in
through his letterbox. Now, what was it
we were saying about Bob Fosse again?

LP: Thank you. We probably should have mentioned this earlier you did briefly mention it just now. The book that you're reading from is published by laudanum.

SM: That's right.

LP: So, it's three of you, in the book and you've each written... Is it a set number of poems?

SM: Ten poems.

LP: You've each written ten poems. And your section in there is called, The Dead Weight of Beauty. [**SM:** Yeah.] Could you maybe tell us a little bit about how this publication came about?

SM: I was reading at the Magma launch and Tiffany the publisher, Tiffany Anne Tondut, I'd met her previously and she said that she'd really liked my reading. She was putting an

anthology together called, Asterism which was poetry based on punctuation. She'd asked me if I wanted to submit something so, I submitted a poem for that and then she said she was putting a chapbook anthology together and really liked my poems. That was it really.

LP: Yeah. So, this selection in the book was that put together especially for the book? You didn't already have that in mind?

SM: I had a larger selection and was thinking about working towards a pamphlet. I mean, these are poems that I've been working on since... Poems that I'd written since... Between 2009 and 2012, I think. So, those are a group of poems that I thought could be good. So, we put a selection together, had a look to see which would be suitable for the chapbook and these are the poems that I chose.

LP: Obviously, as always, we'll put a link to where that can be found, in the podcast description. Are you currently submitting to magazines? Have you got anything else in the pipeline for publication?

SM: It's been quiet over the last couple of months. Unfortunately, I had a brain haemorrhage in September [2016] and was in hospital for four days. The consultant in the hospital said no work for three months so, I did spend the last three months reading a lot. Which was great and I'm back to work next week. Luckily, everything's really good with the health and everything but it did give me a lot of downtime to look at things and assess things. It's been quite a nice or not nice but quiet three months and an enforced kind of sabbatical.

LP: Yeah, well it'll tend to put a stop to things, something like that.

SM: Yeah yeah yeah.

LP: Well, I'm glad we've got you here. I suppose it's probably quite an important thing to have a bit of time just to read and collect your thoughts together.

SM: Yeah, though, I was limited because I was told to keep my brain activity you know down, don't overdo it. There was a bit of selective reading, M Train by Patti Smith, which was great actually because I was basically getting up every day and going out and going for coffee and as I was reading M Train I was like, "This is pretty much what this is about". I also read The Big Midweek by Steve Hanley, the bass player with The Fall which is a great book.

I'm quite a slow reader, as well, hence that's why it took me a while to get through [the books]. I mean, all these different strings like the music, the poetry, the illustration... It's nice to have these different things to work with, while you're working on one thing you've got something that's kind of simmering over here and I like it that way.

LP: Yeah, I think it's good if you're struggling with one thing obviously, you've got something else you can keep your mind on and then... While you're writing music, as you were saying, you might get an idea for a poem and then you can keep it there. Obviously, we didn't talk about your illustration as another thing that you do but I mentioned the band.

I always find it interesting when people do have multiple pursuits. You know, it's interesting to know whether or not they influence each other or whether, like you, they're just kept as separate things to go between.

SM: They do all influence each other, obviously, Drawing Rosie Huntington-Whiteley's Lips is my experience as an illustrator. I had a job working for US Cosmo in New York but from a studio down in Blackfriars. I would be there and I'd have an illustration brief and the briefs are really really short deadlines... They might be, draw the perfect arched eyebrow or how to put the blusher on. And while I was working on the illustrations I was thinking of ways getting all this into a poem.

LP: I suppose that's the way it works in your mind perhaps. Yeah, maybe there's not a direct influence necessarily but they all kind of feed off each other perhaps?

SM: Yeah yeah. Some poems just come into being. They just come, poems just take you unaware, really.

LP: Yeah. I suppose it's how it would work for anybody writing. Things just pop up in your life elsewhere, don't they? Then it becomes a poem.

SM: They don't come up to you formally and introduce themselves, "Hello, I'm your new poem". They're usually tapping you on the shoulder, you look round and suddenly there's one on the go. I think that's why I like it, it's unexpected. If I knew what the result of poems were going to be I wouldn't do it but because it's always a pleasant surprise.

LP: It's much more fluid, isn't it?

SM: As with the band as well, I've always done things with just no expectations you know [LP: Yeah]. There's [only ever] been a small idea of where I'd like to go with it but it's always taken on a bit of a life of its own.

LP: I guess that's what I was leading onto next, whether you had any aims with any of this stuff. But I get the impression from everything you've said that you are quite spontaneous and you let things come and you just go with them.

SM: Yeah. As I said, you've got a vague idea of where you'd like to be with it and then it's just getting out there and I think the most important thing has being engaging with people. [LP: Yeah.] It has been speaking to people, connecting with people, letting people hear what you're doing. In that way, social media has been great.

LP: Would you say that's what it comes down to for you? Is that the most important core of it, communicating and engaging?

SM: Yeah, just getting out there really. Poems are meant to be heard, not putting a book on a shelf and walking away from it. You've just got to take your chances with it, sometimes you might whip a poem out and someone will say not right now. Also, there's an unexpected readership when you least expect it.

LP: Yeah. I should probably say this because it's going to make me laugh if I don't. Obviously, I told you just before we were meeting, we're in the [Royal] Festival Hall, in case you wondering why it's so noisy and just before we were meeting the voice came over the loudspeaker telling everyone to get out of the building immediately. And I text Stuart to tell him this had just happened and he said, "Oh. Obviously, they know poetry is about to happen". It's not always everyone's cup of tea, is it? But if you can find the spaces and the right time to let it out and give it to the people who you want to engage with...

SM: It was amazing to be here at the T.S. Eliot Awards last weekend and it was amazing to see an auditorium packed full of people, all there for poetry. When people say, "Do people still write poetry?" Yeah, here.

LP: I think it depends where you go doesn't it?

SM: These are the authors and these are the readers.

LP: There's plenty going on, there's plenty of audience for it but there's still definitely... I mean it's something that comes up a lot in the podcast, there's still definitely a stigma isn't there. I don't know if you find this too.

SM: I think the usual response to that is, people have had bad experiences at school with poetry.

LP: That's usually what it is!

SM: And it's kind of turned them off. But once they start reading poetry and realise that there's a variety of poets out there with a variety of voices... You know years ago when I was really going through a lot of poets I was, "I don't know who I like. What will I like?" Then suddenly all these poets popped up so then I was like, "Oh, they're amazing.

I use a used book Oxfam shop in Marylebone... So, I'm a freelance lecturer... I was just going in there and they had quite a lot of second-hand poetry books. I was, kind of, using that as my own... Whatever was in there I was just, "Okay let's take this". I think one of the first volumes I got was American poetry up until 1952. [LP: Yeah.] In that I discovered a lot of poets that I really loved. And then people pass things on for you to check out this poet or check out that poet. So, it's very organic you know.

LP: I think it's been the same for me. It's been something I've done for most of my life since I was a kid, reading and writing poetry. There have been times where I've not done any and felt like maybe I'm going to give it up. Then there's always been something new that I'd never imagined would come along that's kick-started me again to do it. So, it's a really beautiful thing that that happens. Perhaps on that note we'll have your third and final poem?

SM:

A speck of glitter

I'm your disco-damaged-darling
distant relative of crushed beetle shell –
a flasher at a beauty spot:
come pitch up a picnic and party.

Not as lavish as malachite,
I'll cling to eyebrows

hitch a lift on cheekbones.
I could never do a day job

or tone it down a notch,
stupidity flickers in me like a light.

I'm two faced – iridescent:
can't trust me to keep my mouth shut.

LP: Thanks very much. It's been lovely chatting to you Stuart.

SM: You too Lizzy.

LP: Thanks very much. Bye everybody.

Part Three (42:25):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Grim Chip – **GC**

DT: For the final section of today's episode I was over in Hackney on February 11th [2016] to chat with the folk that form the core of Poetry on the Picket Line. First up, poet Grim Chip explains what the group does and why and then we've got some poems read live on the picket, over a very dodgy P.A. by Chip himself Tim Wells, Mark Coverdale, Nadia Drews and Janine Booth.

DT: Hello. I am absolutely freezing and I am...

GC: It is 'taters isn't it mate?

DT: I am currently on what can only be described as the wrong side of the river [Thames] but for a very good cause with Mr Chip Grim. How are you doing Chip?

GC: Yes I'm good, I'm good. I'm very cold, it's brass monkeys out here.

DT: So, we're standing outside the Picturehouse cinema on Mare Street, Hackney Central.

GC: Opposite Hackney Town Hall.

DT: I'm going to let you explain exactly why we're here and why I'm freezing.

GC: This is a Poetry on the Picket Line action. Poetry on the Picket Line is something that started a couple of years ago during the National Gallery dispute which went on for about a year. I was involved with that in one way or another doing some trade union organising and one or two other people I know... It's kind of quite an arty trade union branch that one, there are one or two artists and writers involved in it.

We'd made speeches and said our piece a thousand times and generally there was people walking past who would be interested on that on those picket lines. And it suddenly came to us that actually it wouldn't be a bad idea to do something else. As there were one or two poets involved who didn't mind standing up and shouting the odds we had a little impromptu poetry reading, every now and again. That turned into something where we actually organised an evening on a Friday night strike action piece of work.

We had a picket line and we invited half a dozen poets to turn up. You were there David I think, one or two others Tim Wells, Janine Booth, people like that and it was excellent. It went down really well with the pickets and people stopped who were going past, threw money in the bucket for the collection for the strike fund.

As it happened that was the day the strike ended so we, kind of, spun it that after one hundred and eleven days of strike action, getting all kinds of celebrities involved, going to parliament all that sort of stuff. The management still hadn't moved but it only took one reading from a bunch of poets and they caved in.

DT: Poetry is inevitably the end game, isn't it Chip?

GC: Absolutely. Obviously, it didn't quite play out like that but that was our spin on it. Anyway, people heard about it, other trade union branches that are involved in actions started to invite us down. We did the Junior Doctors, we did the Transport Museum Cleaners [dispute], we've done one or two others. We've done the Hackney Picturehouse before and they really liked having us and they invited us back. They're not going to give up and neither are we, we're going to keep doing it. The idea is to get the voice of poetry on to picket lines and the voice of picket lines into poetry and neither can be a bad thing.

DT: Has it been easy to convince the different organisations to let you come down and read? Have they always understood completely what you want to do?

GC: Communication in this day and age is still a thing. Whilst we have just turned up unannounced, it can be a bit surprise to people, particularly if they're a bit new to the game... Organising a picket line and they suddenly find they've got a bunch of poets who want to speak. What we try and do is we try and make contact with people in advance and to be fair, some union branches have contacted us.

We're certainly going to try and get involved at the Equality and Human Rights Commission where there's all kinds of stuff going off. I understand that some of the people involved in industrial action were dismissed out of hand yesterday. I was working with some people who went down to that picket line, I'm hoping to get in touch with them and be involved with their further work. It would be nice to bring out a whole crew of people down there.

What I would say, you know, what is quite interesting is that totally inspired by us I think but not organised by us, is a South Wales chapter of Poetry on the Picket Line and they do exactly the same kind of thing. Obviously, in South Wales. The idea is, if you are a poet or you aspire to be any kind of a writer and you walk past a picket line then why not ask them for five minutes to say your piece? You get a sample of your work across, they get entertained, you show solidarity and they feel that solidarity, some of the passers-by stop and maybe put a pound in the bucket. It's all good, everybody wins. It's all good.

DT: Obviously, you, Tim and Janine who you mentioned before are old heads at this, you've been around for a while. I was going to say unfortunately because this is a big second wave for you. Is it easy to get younger poets along and involved?

GC: I think it's quite interesting, it's been... When people have heard about it, people have you know... There's been an awful lot of people say, "Oh yeah that's really good stuff". But quite a small percentage of people have come along to support it. I'd like to see more people. it's certainly not exclusive. I'm not going to knock anybody for not doing it because standing outside in the cold and hollering is not everybody's cup of tea.

And there have been times, you will recall, where we were outside St. Thomas' [Hospital] for the Junior Doctors [dispute] and there was no P.A. There was a lot of traffic going but there was a whole wedge of really good engaged people... Well, you know me, I'm the mouth of the Thames, I can holler for England. So, I'm just going to shout my poetry, other people can find it a little bit more difficult and their poems are not the kind of thing that go over quite so well in the open air.

I absolutely appreciate that, everybody's got to do what they can do. But if anybody does feel the urge to show support in that way then please do get in touch, it's certainly not exclusive.

DT: Is the best way to do that on Facebook?

GC: There's a Poetry on the Picket Line, Facebook page and that's the easiest way. Or you could find me on Facebook, Grim Chip Poet is probably the best and an easy way to get in touch. It's certainly not supposed to be exclusive and don't think that just because you don't

write political poetry, whatever that is, that you're not welcome. Personally, I think that a little bit more engagement with the everyday world might be a good thing but that's just me. I tend to write poetry of the street but.

DT: Solidarity is the important thing isn't it. I definitely saw that with the Junior Doctors, particularly, you had a lot of young people from mainly... It's a bit of a stereotype but mainly pretty well-off backgrounds and they were really pleasantly surprised that a load of working-class herberts were coming out and supporting them, weren't they.

GC: Absolutely. I would say that everybody's welcome. You know, certainly all the poets [that have been involved] they write in a variety of styles, all of them take their work very seriously. I'd love to see all kinds of other poets down here. You know, feel free to start your own thing.

DT: And on that note, get in touch with Poetry on the Picket Line. My hand's about to fall off because it's so cold.

GC: I think we need to go for a pint or a hot toddy mate.

DT: Alright, cheers Chip.

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End of transcript.