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Episode 80: Suzi Gray; Repeat Beat Poet; Marthe Ramm Fortun – (18/09/2017)

Transcript by David Turner – (19/07/2017)

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Introduction:

DT: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I'm David Turner. Today's episode is made up of three parts like, later on you're going to be hearing from Peter DeGraft-Johnson, The Repeat Beat Poet and Norwegian poet Marte Ramm-Fortun. But before those two we've got Lizzy Palmer in south London talking to Susan Gray. Susan is a London-based spoken word artist and playwright taking inspiration from sci-fi and other related topics that I know little or nothing about.

DT: If you want to find out more about the Susan's fantastic poetry you can go to www.suziegeeforce.co.uk or find her on Twitter @Suzie_Gee. Hyperlinks with correct spellings to those will be in the description to the audio on Soundcloud as always.

DT: Here are Lizzy and Susan.

Part one (00:00:58):

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: Suzie Gray – **SG**

LP: Hello, my name is Lizzy Palmer and today I am joined by the lovely poet Suzie Gray. Hello Suzie, how are you?

SG: Good thanks.

LP: We are in the middle of a heat wave so I have to apologise to Suzie for having shut all the windows to keep the noise out. You'll probably hear us getting baked alive in the name of poetry. If it's okay with you Suzie we'll start with your first poem please.

SG: Sure. So, this poem is called Robot factory.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:04:47]

LP: Lovely, thanks so much. I'd like to start by asking you when you began writing poetry and maybe some of the reasons around why and how that happened.

SG: Ah okay well I can't remember a time when I wasn't writing, I wanted to be a writer since I was about 6 years old. I used to write these little stories for school and after school writing clubs. I think the first time I probably wrote poetry that wasn't in school was when I was around 11 or 12. I would write fantasy and science-fiction stories and actually use poetry as a way of understanding the character. I'd about the character in the voice of the poem. That's when I was doing a lot of online stuff. Do you know 'writing.com'? [**LP:** No.] I think it was even before Myspace.

LP: That's the same as me actually, I can't remember not ever doing it and enjoying it at school as well as a kid. That's probably always my favourite question on these interviews because it always gets a different answer. Either people have always done it or there's a particular life event that's happened that's inspired them to do it. I always find it really fascinating how people have come to be doing this with their time.

Could you maybe tell us a bit about the influences behind your work. Perhaps in terms of the subjects and the themes that you tend to address the most, as well maybe, any wider reasons that get you wanting or needing to write?

SG: I guess, poetry-wise, William Blake has inspired me a lot. I studied him at school and at university and that understanding between innocence and experience. You know, when you see the world and the different systems... you're not really aware of it until you're older. I think that's what I'm trying to address in a science-fiction sense. Seeing another way of being.

LP: Yeah. On that note we'll have your second poem please.

SG: Sure. So this is called Event Two.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:08:12]

LP: Thank you. Following on from the last question, obviously science and science-fiction features quite heavily in your work. Science and art are often seen as opposing things, do you think much about combining those two? Is it a conscious process you have to go through to marry the two together or is that just something that happens naturally?

SG: I think it happens naturally. It's interesting because when I was a child I wanted to be a writer, but I also wanted to be a doctor as well. I was really interested in science and actually one of my earliest memories was... because I wanted to be an inventor as well. I used to sketch out these inventions and show them to my grandfather. He would always go through them with me and I'd explain them to him and how they worked.

When I started writing, a lot of the science I had read up on influenced my work. So, I don't think I consciously tried to put them together.

LP: Sure. Another thing I was wondering was whether you have a writing process, whether that's a set thing, a set way that you do the writing every time? Whether it's more fluid than that or whether it's totally unconscious? I was wondering if you could maybe tell us your thoughts around that?

SG: I always have my notebook on me so before I go to bed I'll sometimes write a bit and when I wake up I'll write a bit. I have a lot of notes on my phone so I just scribble odd things in there. I'm trying to do, like, a daily thing but some days that comes more easily than others.

LP: Yeah, it's not that easy! [LAUGHTER] Do you find that the way you write has changed much over the course of your life?

SG: I guess, in a way. I think when I was getting into performance poetry the subject changed because I didn't think that you could do science-fiction poetry. So I did a lot more personal things but at the same time tried to mix the science-fiction and the personal together in the poetry.

LP: That seems quite a big task. That leads us on to my next question. I wanted to ask about your performance, maybe you could just talk a little bit about it in general? How long you've been performing your poetry for and the effect that that's had on your writing, if it has had much effect?

SG: It's interesting because as a child I was very much into drama and then when I went into high school I hated drama which is very strange. I think that's part of the teenage, self-conscious fear that you go through. It wasn't till I joined the Roundhouse Poetry Collective that I found my feet in performing. I found out about about the collective through a pamphlet when I went to see a show at the Roundhouse and I didn't know it was performance poetry. I though you would just write something in a workshop and then take your poem home. Polar Bear was the facilitator and he told us to write a poem in three minutes and perform it. On the first day!

LP: A bit of a shock? But you're glad you did it, presumably? There a lot of similarities between us, actually. I was the same, I always loved drama and I always found performing came quite easily to me when I was a character. But since I started performing poetry, years later, I find that a totally different experience, reading my own stuff that I've written and being 'me'. In fact more 'me' than I ever am. How different do you find those two experiences?

SG: I find it comes more naturally from me, rather than from characters. It's interesting because my work is also sometimes seen as a bit detached. So I try to put some kind of personality in it through performance which is sometimes a bit hard. I've had this feeling when I do science-fiction that I'm not really doing as personally as other people because I'm detaching myself from the world we know. But I'm still trying to have that sense of character in it. It's hard to pin down.

LP: That's really interesting. Do you find that the more you perform that does become easier or is it still something that you are thinking about a lot as you perform?

SG: I think there are initial nerves but then once you get in there and start performing everything freezes in time so it's really hard to analyse what went on before hand.

LP: Do you find you 'blank-out' when you're behind the microphone?

SG: In a sense [LAUGHTER].

LP: And you've forgotten everything that's just happened? Could we have your third and final poem please?

SG: Sure. This poem is called Glitch.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:15:19]

LP: Thank you. Finally, could you tell us a bit about what projects you've got going on at the moment? Do you have any upcoming gigs?

SG: I've got this project called, Lunar Mission 1, which I thought was very appropriate for the podcast. [LAUGHTER] I've written some poetry for them and I've been working on a poetry competition which should be announced very soon.

LP: And you have a chap-book out as well, don't you?

SG: Yes. It's called, Energy (or the Art of Keeping it Together). It's based on the idea that energy can take any sort of form and it never truly disappears, so we never truly disappear we just change. This idea really fascinated me so I wanted to write about different ways that a person can change or that humanity can change. So each poem is quite different but in a way still under the same umbrella.

LP: That's a lovely idea for a book of poetry. You have a blog as well, don't you? With all your other bits and pieces on there. As usual we'll put the written links to all of these things in the episode description. It's been wonderful having you Suzie, thanks very much. Thanks everyone for listening. Bye bye.

Part two (00:17:02):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Repeat Beat Poet – **RBP**

DT: That was Susan Gray. If you want to follow what we're up to on Twitter it's @Silengt_Tongue and Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and SoundCloud.

Next up is Peter DeGraft-Johnson. He is a London-based poet and performer, co-founder of The Pad which happens out in Essex and a member of the Typeface Poetry Collective. If you want to find out more about his work then you can go to www.howlingonthebeat.tumblr.com and its @RepeatBeatPoet on Twitter. So coming up next is me chatting to Peter.

RBP: This is called, A Black View.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:19:31]

DT: Thank you. My first question was going to be; how did the name come about?

RBP: Repeat Beat Poet? I had it as an idea in my gap year when I was basically reading an absolute cavern full of Beat poetry. It was the time of first reading On The Road while I was travelling which is a bit of a classic. I delved a bit more into the history and the culture of it. I thought Repeat Beat Poet had a nice ring to it so I stored it away for a rainy day.

DT: Yeah, that's where the question was heading, I didn't know how much it was beat as in musical terms or beat as in Beat poets.

RBP: It's both I suppose

DT: Maybe you could introduce yourself a bit before we chat and your work.

RBP: My name is The Repeat Beat Poet, also known as Peter DeGraft-Johnson. I'm a 22-year-old spoken word artist living in London, I've been writing for about four or five years properly now. I had a private Tumblr account but then I decided to take it public. My first open-mic experiences were during my first year of university, moving to London from Essex and throwing myself into the world and I very much got the bug.

I read for the first time and then thought, "this is something I can do". I'd had a musical upbringing and experience before that but I always loved lyrics. Lyrics, oratory, storytelling, vocalism, anything in that world encapsulated me. So, I thought, "if I can find a way to make this work, this experience, then I'll stay here forever and try and turn it into a career and try to survive".

DT: Who were the first people you were looking at, in terms of writing, and thinking, "I'd like to do something like that"? Was it poets or musicians?

RBP: It was musicians to begin with, it was just hip-hop. I was always surrounded by a lot of hip-hop, even when I didn't really know about it. Before that it was things like like gospel music, I grew up in the church, in an evangelical church. Seeing a pastor effectively MC a crowd for two hours, I remember looking at and thinking, "that's like public speaking, that's performance. I can do that".

I have an older brother as well, I got my first iTunes library from him and he was into a lot of hip-hop, like the Nas. He was listening to a lot of '90s more socially conscious stuff like Roots, Mos Def and Blackstar, Talib Kweli, that kind of world. But I also had all the other sorts of lyrics in all the other music I enjoyed. I was an Indie kid, I had a lot of Libertines love. The writing of Pete Doherty really encapsulates me as well. A bit of a hodgepodge of a bunch of stuff but started early with hip-hop.

DT: Yeah. It's interesting talking to people in London to find out where their early influences came from. Michelle Madsen was in Nigeria, in Lagos talking to WordUp 411. The whole spoken word thing at the moment in Nigeria has just exploded because it's such a natural link to the church. It runs on like that quite naturally...

It's different for me, I didn't have any experience of going to church when I was younger so I never saw that side. There's a big difference, isn't there, between different congregations as well? So, I might not come across that anyway. What was your education like when you went to university, was there any literature involved?

RBP: Yes, I studied English Lit at the University of East London, which was alright. The reason why I went to university and the reason why I always wanted to go to university was just to meet people and to be in London and to have the opportunity of basically being a 'sponge' and just imbibing all of the stuff that was around. Within two weeks I'd been to my first open-mic night and I was also working as a journalist at that time and writing for a bunch of websites.

I ended up getting a writing gig within the first two months, as well, so I had one eye on the university and one eye on the opportunities [outside]. But I loved my dissertation, I manage to write a dissertation that incorporated my love of poetry and spoken word, so that was pretty enjoyable. It was about hip-hop, it was about the continuation of black expression through time.

It started off with the Harlem Renaissance, Cab Calloway, the Hepcats' dictionary, the Jive dictionary. Then it moved on to the 1960s and '70s and the Black Power era and the Black Art movement Amiri Baraka, lots of that stuff. Then the third section was hip-hop, it was hip-hop culture in the early '90 talking about a lot of Nas, a lot of Wu Tang Clan, a lot of poetry as function, especially rap as function.

When you have an album called Lyrical Swords and it's all about using words as function and poetry as function. That stuff has been central to the Black expression all the way back since we started talking about the term. I was trying to trace that lineage and connect up the dots between things that don't usually get connected in that way.

DT: There's obviously a connection between that and the first poem that you read just now. I felt a bit bad going from something that was quite charged in tone into such a mediocre introduction into your work but that's the way these podcasts work sometimes. Is this a theme that runs through all of your writing or is it just by chance that you chose that as a first poem?

RBP: I chose the first reading because we're recording this on the 2nd of August 2016 and it's been a really febrile feeling and situation in London and across the world in terms of race relations and conversations we're still having; micro-aggressions. I recently performed at a festival and the theme of it was 'wonders of the ancient world', so it lent itself to micro-aggressions to lots of cultural appropriation. You know, people wearing the dread-lock hats or Aztec-printed shirts.

I wrote that piece, A Black View, a while ago when I first heard about Tamir Rice and I looked at the lineage of killings of black people in public and how they've been documented. It's just very present in a way that it hasn't always been for me. I felt I had to kick off with that because I think it's a really important piece for me right now. And a really important piece for people to hear right now and that's where that comes from.

DT: I'm glad you chose it because it's nice when people come on and... this is going to sound patronising like this. I was going to say "brave enough to open with something like that". It's not always easy to decide what to open with. Sometimes you fall into a pattern and a habit of the way you think these conversations should work.

I was going to follow up with something I've been thinking about a lot and I think we might have spoken about it the other day when we were chatting about whether spoken word is the right medium for talking about really serious messages. Obviously, it is because it can easily reach a wider audience but my feeling is that it's sometimes too easy for people on Facebook to put a 'thumbs-up' click 'like' and claim to have understood and engaged. Does this mean that spoken word is too easy to ignore?

RBP: I think it can be and it can be transient just because in terms of a short-form two-minute video on Facebook when you see it when you're coming home from work; you can watch that and then gloss over it and then it can be forgotten very quickly. I was a film journalist and so I have a lot of love for proper 90-minute-long feature films as a medium to address stuff. The reason why I do come back to spoken word is because it's instant, it's really direct. It is someone onstage in front of a microphone telling you about their position and if they're good at it you'll understand it and it will stay with you.

I can remember lines from poems I've heard three or four years ago from a poet and everyone can relate to it in terms of lyrics. You'll hear a couplet that will just stick with you. And I think that's what spoken word can do really well, it can distil stuff into more sizeable chunks that can be easier to carry around with you in your head.

DT: One of the positives, I think, is that sometimes people are put off of engaging with certain topics because they feel like they're being lectured and I suppose the short form of spoken word can seem more successful. It perhaps feels more like a shorter message, doesn't it? I think it's something I need to come back to, personally, about whether...

That's what I mean, as it grows in popularity and becomes more mainstream and there's more content everywhere then the people just stop ignoring it because it becomes such a standard way of communicating.

RBP: I fear for that happening but I do reckon that as the spoken word scene grows we'll just get a larger variety of stuff. It'll be stuff like this podcast and documentaries and what you might call secondary stuff around the culture. Making sure that people, when they find out about it for the first time can see it all laid out in front of them can churn to everything they can see the full spectrum of one-and-a-half-minute slam poems or eight-minute spoken word epics about other topics.

Once we have all that stuff laid out for new people to find I think that's how we keep it vibrant. That's how we keep it direct and we keep it accessible. There is a danger of it becoming mainstream and then losing what you might call credibility. As long as we can keep the full spectrum available to new people then I think it's in a good place.

DT: This is a good time for a second reading.

RBP: Yeah. After having spoken about the short-form, I'm now going to do like a five-minute poem and it's called Reconciliation. I won't say much about it, I hope it speaks for us.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:37:10]

DT: Thank you very much. We've probably talked enough about you personally as a writer or as much as we have time for here. Let's talk a bit about your collaborative projects. Maybe you could just list a few and then we can get to talking about them?

RBP: Yeah. So I write with two poetry collectives, the soon to be legendary Typeface Poetry Collective and then the newly formed Little Versed Poetry Collective, both reading and writing regularly. We meet up, we chat and we get into the bones of some poetry, it's just a really great situation to be in with other writers.

Also I run a creative arts venue called The Pad. We founded it. It was founded by myself and two friends from university at the end of second year. We got the physical space in Dagenham, we're coming up to a year now, so we got it in September 2015. The idea behind this space is to be able to bring together creative people, artists into a physical space where they can see all different types of art. We're into the crossover and we're into the full spectrum of the creative process.

We really like seeing a DJ who will end up doing backing for a spoken word artist while an illustrator is capturing the entire event and then maybe like a sculptor is just there in the corner as well. We always make a point with our programming to have a full broad variety of creative events and we also want to make sure that people feel comfortable in the space. It's called the pad because we want it to feel like your mate's 'pad'. Like, a cool place to hang out and from what people have said about it they tend to get that, so that's really good.

We do a lot for the community and we're trying to build up a community and it's difficult but it is also really really worthwhile seeing people talk about it when they're leaving an event or seeing people feel comfortable there and seeing people come back. We love people who come back. If you come once that's cool, that's great, you managed to find the place but if you come back and bring a friend we're like, "yes, you meet people". That's how you build a community and we're really into that, that's The Pad.

DT: Why is it so important for The Pad to have these crossover relationships between artists. Why not just do the easy thing and follow the template of booking different people without any links? b

RBP: Because nobody is singularly into one part of creativity, no one just likes films or just likes music or just likes visual art, or just likes photography or just likes anything. I think it's a

weird thing that hasn't always been present in, like, how people view themselves creatively. We now live in an age where I can access every music song etc. via Spotify, Youtube, the internet etc.

We have such a broad access to everything that we don't have choose in the same way that we would have had to 25 years ago when your identity was so much intertwined with the music you listened to or the films you watched. Now you get to build your identity a little bit more, I would say, independently through what you enjoy across all forms of art.

I've spoken a little bit about the films that I used to watch and write about and also, obviously, spoken word but then I have a great love of visual art as well and many other art-forms. Podcasting, you could argue is an art-form and conversation and that's why it's important for The Pad to have all these different strands of stuff going on. Because you may come looking for a short film that you really enjoyed but then you hear a DJ who's mixing music in between the two films you're watching and then all of a sudden you're into another thing.

It keeps the ball rolling, keeps people on their toes and also keeps them interested because you never know what you're gonna get you're going to find some incredible stuff and it may be in a field that you don't feel comfortable in and that's great. It means you can get people onside, get them experiencing new stuff in a situation they're comfortable in and they're then more likely check the person out when they leave.

DT: We spoke before that discussion and conversation is a big part of what happens at The Pad as well. Maybe you could just give a short description of what that involves at the nights and then tell us why why that became a part of what The Pad is?

RBP: Yeah. I host a monthly night called 'Poetry at The Pad' and it's subtitled 'Lyrical-something' every time. So, we've had Lyrical-Critical, Lyrical-Powerful, Lyrical-Improvisational and the structure of the night is that we get a feature to come down and do the standard 20-minute performance. We then also allow them to talk about their work for 20, 25-minutes in conversation with myself, just to give the work more context, to bring it into a new critical space where people can discuss it a little bit more than the standard, "over the fag, outside the back of the venue".

The reason why that's important is because that is how we make sure we respect spoken word as an art-form and make sure that other people respect us as an art-form. If we speak about it in a very flippant way, if we don't give it the time and the respect and the energy it needs to properly engage with all this stuff then of course if we're not doing it then why should anybody else outside of our communities pay attention?

I really believe that we need to value spoken word in a larger way because larger institutions, corporations etc. are now coming around to our way of thinking. There's a reason why the BBC, Channel 4 etc. are money into spoken word. There was the Words First Collective, Channel 4 previously filmed six or seven poets reading a poem each and it went out on E4 that night.

There's all of this energy and momentum now but if we are not controlling where that goes and making sure that we can give an academic, critical and properly invested view of it... If we can provide that as an alternative to the mainstream side of it, like the short-form three-minute slam poetry which perfectly has its place and we need both. That's what I'm trying to do with Poetry at The Pad, trying to provide a space where spoken word can be valued and given space and time to investigate and see why we do what we do. Why it's important to do what we do and why it's important to keep on talking about why we do what we do.

There's a film maker called Tyronne Lewis, who is also an incredible poet, we had him feature as one of the poets at Poetry at The Pad for our first event. He also is a documentarian, he's made two spoken word films now, one of them is called New Shit and one of them is called Scores Please, they're both about the spoken word scene.

There is an artist called Spike Zephaniah-Stephenson, also another poet. He sketches the poetry scene and has sketches of probably 80, 90 people and these, what you might call, secondary parts of the culture... they're not the actual spoken word poetry community but they are they are content around it and of course the Lunar Poetry Podcasts, what we're doing now... all this stuff increases the value of what we do to people who don't know about it and if we can convince people that there is value in this through having a half-hour conversation about two poems it means we get to keep a strong view and a clear view as a community about what spoken word is and what it can do and what it can be.

I think the purpose of The Pad is a really nice way of doing that because also I love to chat, so it's a really good way to introduce people into some of the details and some of the other stuff that you wouldn't hear usually.

DT: I won't do much else other than nod in agreement because you know full well I agree with pretty much all of that and I think until people start treating their own work with more respect no one else is going to cotton onto that and do the same. So when is the next Pad event?

RBP: Our next Poetry at The Pad will be Thursday the 25th of August [2016] and we're still putting together the line-up for that but it's sure to be great. We'll also definitely do something for our first birthday towards the end of September. And we have a couple big things that I can't mention right now but there sure to be great as well. If you want to find out more and you can go to 'ThePADTV' that's across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. That's where you can find out more.

DT: Cheers. I'm hoping that they'll be some sort of Lunar Poetry Podcasts presence toward the end of September as well. I'd like to get along and document some of that. I'll be tweeting and announcing stuff that you're doing as well so people can follow here and there and just about everywhere. Embrace the power of Google. [LAUGHTER]

RBP: We're all about social media.

DT: We'll take a final reading please.

RBP: This is the piece that I usually end sets with but it's a really fun angry political type rant thing and in the context of U.K. politics and even U.S. politics it's become more and more relevant to me across time. I love that about poems, that you can write them a moment and then perform them at different moments and they take on a new relevance. I guess this is addresses that a little bit. It's called Push It.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be reproduced in the transcript.]

[00:51:29]

DT: Thanks very much. People know where to go to check out The Pad but where can people check out you personally? Any gigs you've got coming up, any new work?

RBP: You can follow me on all the social media at Repeat Beat Poet. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter.

DT: As I said, I'll be re-tweeting stuff so go over to us @Silent_Tongue which is our Twitter feed. Thank you very much Peter.

RBP: Mad love to you man.

DT: See you later everyone.

End of transcript.