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Episode 29 – Tim Wells (May 2015)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Tim Wells – **TW**

Conversation:

DT: Hello. My name is David Turner. This is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. This episode is going to be a special ranting edition with poet Tim Wells.

TW: Hello, how are you doing?

DT: We're out on the street, so you may hear some noises. That's life. We'll start with a poem.

TW: All right. This is one of mine from school, so it's proper ranting.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much. I probably should start at the beginning. When did ranting poetry begin and when did it become known as ranting poetry?

TW: It became known as ranting poetry quite early on. We started really early 80s, late '80, '81 and Seething Wells really really kicked it off. He had a fanzine at the time called Molotov Comics so it kind of came from that. Then '82 to around '84, there was a lot of ranting. In those days, we had national music papers covering a lot of stuff, which I've been blogging about.

In those days, there were four TV stations, so quite a bit of stuff on TV and so the profile of ranting was good. There were a lot of live gigs and we used to gig with a lot of bands, so we wouldn't just stick to poetry audiences, which is pretty good, because they were very few and far between in those days. We still had hippies in those days, that's how bad it was.

So we toured with a lot of punk bands, we'd do a lot of reggae shows as well. Really, the groundswell of punk music and reggae music were part and parcel of ranting poetry.

DT: We'll go on and talk about the Stand up and Spit thing, but just taking a brief look at it, the fanzines seem to be a big thing with spreading the word.

TW: It might come as a shock to you, but there was no internet in those days.

DT: I hadn't even considered that.

TW: See? You Google it and it doesn't come up.

DT: How did ranting poetry develop? I'm going to call it a movement, but we may disagree on that term or not, too long to go into. Did the movement develop under its own steam? It can seem, looking back on it now, like it was almost just a rejection of other ideas.

TW: I think there was a lot of rejection of miserable-ism, as we used to call it at the time. I think they still call it miserable-ism because that's what it was. There was definitely a rejection of that, but at the same time, I think when you look at ranting, it was a moment rather than a particular style because in actual fact, there was a lot of diversity in it.

What it did have in common was people getting up and having a pop. I think that's the important thing, rather more than literary content these days, to be honest. I think the bare-knuckle, get up and say it and make people listen, that is what was going on.

DT: How easy is the ranting style to define?

TW: I think people like Attila [The Stockbroker] and Seething Wells had a particular style, but again, I think somebody like Joolz or Ben Zephaniah is a completely different act, but they are equally important as ranting poets. What they did have in common, we had the same enemies and we were standing on the same stages. To me, that is the crucial bit.

DT: There seemed to have been a lot more unity. It wasn't just about smashing down the established.

TW: You've got to build as well. Smashing down is fun and important, but you've got to build as well. Unity is now an important message and it definitely was then as well. Bad as things are now, the fact that in those days black and white people were on the same stage was quite radical, quite often.

DT: I interviewed Niall O'Sullivan, it's going to go out in June, but he made the point that it was perhaps important for a lot of ranting poetry to be fairly simple in style because of trying to grab people's attention. You weren't standing up at the Poetry Café to a captive audience. You were just trying to get people's attention between acts.

TW: Also because we were doing stuff between bands, a lot of the time, a lot of the audience wouldn't like it, so if you just did a machine-gun approach, there were no gaps.

DT: You can't get heckled if you don't shut up.

TW: There were definitely a lot of people who did that.

DT: Who were your audiences?

TW: All sorts of people. There really wasn't a poetry circuit as such in those days. There was a tiny, tiny one and that was full of quite tiresome Beat poetry types who I'm really glad to see the back of, to be honest. The audience would be people in pubs, football fans, reggae crowd, punks, skinheads. People are more selective where they go out now.

In the 80s, we just went out. If there was something to do, we'd go. We didn't have computers, we didn't have the internet. The only porn we had was found in hedges, it wasn't on the 'interweb'.

DT: What sort of venues were you playing?

TW: Mostly music venues, but a hell of a lot of pub gigs. Anti-apartheid was really big, miners' strike was really big, we were gigging a lot around those issues as well. We did a lot of gigs for those kinds of people.

DT: A lot of people might have the impression that ranting poets constantly faced hostile crowds. How accurate is that?

TW: Sometimes we made them hostile. It wasn't always hostile. Sometimes it was, without a doubt. Even now, I don't like an easy crowd. I like to split an audience and I certainly did the same then. I was antagonistic until I was more, let's pull people together.

DT: I was talking to Janine Booth recently. She was talking about gigging at benefits. I can't imagine you'd get heckled at a benefit, but I suppose it's possible. You can still wind people up.

TW: There's always a drunk.

DT: Maybe we could have another poem or two.

TW: Let's have a Seething Wells poem. This is pretty much a Seething Wells declaration of war. It's called Poetry.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Cheers. It struck me that it must have been quite nice when ranting poetry first started because you weren't surrounded by a spoken-word scene mainly made up of people who wanted to be famous.

TW: It was a good way of not becoming famous.

DT: Now, a big problem spoken word faces is that people think it's just a route into YouTube and to be spotted, rather than just doing it for what it is.

TW: There are good people on YouTube and there are people who write for YouTube. We didn't have YouTube. You were held to account. Directly.

DT: Could you talk me through some of the poets that were involved from the beginning? Some of them are not around at all and some of them are around, but not gigging.

TW: Seething Wells, definitely one of the first and biggest. He's dead now. He's quite important. He ran a fanzine called Molotov Comics, he lived up in Bradford, which is quite a big centre for ranting poetry. Attila's probably the other best-known name. Attila the Stockbroker is still gigging, still doing a lot of gigs. Actually, he's consistently gigged since and pretty much supported the same sort of causes and the same sort of things and good on him.

Porky the Poet drifted off into comedy, but has come back doing a hell of a lot of poetry gigs and good ones too. Joolz Denby, who was Bradford as well, definitely an important writer. She, as far as I know, is writing a lot of crime stuff, crime novels, and doing quite well for herself, which is good. Janine [Booth], who I know you interviewed recently, the Big J, Ginger John from Manchester who's gigging as well. Ben Zephaniah is still with us, still doing quite a lot of work in between acting. In fact, he was doing poetry in Peaky Blinders, wasn't he?

DT: He's working on a collection at the moment with a girl called Poppy Kleiser, who is a guest on a former episode and I noticed recently they are working together, that seems quite interesting.

TW: Ben's a good lad. Clarkey [John Cooper Clarke] obviously, still knocking around, LKJ [Linton Kwesi Johnson], Mikey Smith was pretty important but he was murdered in 1983, so quite a sad loss. Swift Nick from Hull, who did a fanzine called New Youth.

DT: You can find a reasonable amount on YouTube.

TW: On YouTube, there's not a lot. Videos were quite new then and stuff wasn't really recorded. There's still the odd bit that turns up. One of my favourite things is before ranting, it's Roger McGough, who I'm not a huge fan of, but Roger McGough in The Liver Birds, which is a '70s sitcom, early '70s at that.

The two girls, the Liver Birds, go to the pub - it's a Liverpool sitcom - to watch Roger McGough do poetry. That's quite exciting in that back then, it was an OK thing for working-class people to do. So that's quite a nice little turn-up. Fanzine-wise, I've been looking under a lot of people's beds, going through carrier bags and attics and unearthing all sorts of stuff.

DT: Every time I look at things, Bradford always pops up. Any reason?

TW: I think Seething Wells, Ginger John at the time, Joolz, all lived in Bradford, as did a guy called Nick Toczek who ran a really big punk club called Adam and Eve's in Leeds. He lived in Bradford as well. Nick put on a hell of a lot of gigs around Leeds and in those days, loads and loads of bands would have poets in between. So we were gigging with all sorts of bands and Nick definitely was a major part of that. I was up there myself quite a few times. I saw some good bands, saw some good poets, Nick included.

DT: Can we have some more poetry?

TW: As we're sat up in Stamford Hill, this is a poem called Kosher Village.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: I would like to talk now about the vinyl that was put out.

TW: There were some records put out. I think the first would have been a split single with Attila and Swells, which I was recording in Wandsworth, I think, so that would be about '81, '82, around then. That was quite exciting at the time. A lot of small bands, small labels, were kicking around at the time, which was a very positive thing, not unlike people doing YouTube hits, I suppose, but more hard work.

DT: You've also got to lug it around with you afterwards.

TW: Exactly.

DT: How did that come about? Was it artists themselves pressing it?

TW: Actually, it was small labels coming forward and thinking actually, there's something bubbling away here, let's have a slice of it. There was another one with Swells,The Rising Son of Ranting Verse was Swells and Little Brother. Joolz did some pretty good records. Ben Zephaniah did some great records.

DT: Maybe next we can talk about Stand Up and Spit. It's probably easiest if you explain what that is and what's happening with that.

TW: Yeah, well, I was chatting with Niall [O'Sullivan] about ranting poetry and then one of the ladies who runs Speaking Volumes saw that conversation and said let's have a chat. That kind of led me to start doing a blog and that was kind of painful. I've always hated bloggers for good reasons. Now I am one. Nietzsche was right, we all become that which we hate.

So I started really digging through my old fanzines, collating stuff, pestering all my mates and going through their fanzines and putting together quite a lot of stuff. I'm not overly commenting because I think it's good to let things talk for themselves. It then spun round to us putting on a season of gigs. We've had a couple of them, there are a few more coming up. We've got a lot of the old ranters together, they're doing some bits and pieces, we've got some ranting, some discussions, an event focusing on Mikey Smith, obviously because he's dead. I'm quite excited about that one actually.

It's really just looking at that moment in history and linking it up with young writers today. Unless it has something to say with young writers today, I don't see much point in doing it. It's important to have young voices in there as well. We've got funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which means ranting is now officially heritage. I feel like a Toby jug, it's brilliant.

DT: We'll have to take you on the Antiques Roadshow, get you valued.

TW: Rapidly decreasing. More than a few cracks.

DT: Why is it important to do this?

TW: For me, on one level, at some point, someone else is going to come along and be the expert on it. I was like actually, I was there, so I'm taking it, I'm doing it. Also, it became apparent to me when I worked with young writers there's no real history of spoken word. Young writers always have a shock that there was spoken word before hip hop. I was going to say not always, but yeah, they do.

On the one level, it's really exciting how vibrant and diverse the spoken-word scene is at the moment, which is a really good thing and I'm really pleased to be part of the history. At the same time, I want the true history of it to be known and the true history isn't arts organisations making it happen. The true history is fanzines and scumbags doing it.

DT: It's good it's happening at a time where at least the majority of people are still around to talk to and there is still a physical record.

TW: Even the fanzine stuff we're rooting out, I found interviews with me I'd completely forgotten about. That was quite weird. There's a lot of stuff out there, we're winkling it out. Also, the whole fanzine thing is interesting. Take someone like Linton [Kwesi Johnson]. He'll have a new album out, it will on tour, he'll have interviews in the main music papers, which everyone will have read. These are national newspapers and NMEs and Sounds.

At the same time, you're doing a fanzine interview. Each town would have a couple of fanzines. These are quite small readerships. At the same time he'd be on tour, he'd be doing fanzine interviews and what he says in the national papers as opposed to the fanzines is actually quite different and what he says in the fanzines is actually quite revealing. Even comparing the two, done at the same time, is quite interesting.

DT: Going back to the point about younger people on the spoken-word circuit referring a lot to hip hop, I suppose they can't be held to account too much because there is very little record. Again, if you go on YouTube, which is sort of the default research mechanism, you will find stuff back to 1988.

TW: You'll find stuff that goes to where the internet starts. That's the window-pane of history and we're just before it.

DT: We could take another poem.

TW: So this is a poem by Rowena Tosh and it goes like this.

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DT: Janine Booth said she hoped the Stand Up And Spit project, rather than being a retrospective, would actually become a revival. With the election result, maybe it could?

TW: I don't think we need a revival. I think spoken word is in a pretty good place. There's things that annoy me about it but at the same time, tell me how good it is. Unless you've got something to punch, life's pretty dull. I think it's quite apparent, certainly I'm surprised going through 14 months of blogging now, how we were actually saying the same thing then as we are now and how we've still got the same enemies and we're still fighting the same things.

There are young writers talking about that and dealing with that as well. Surprisingly enough, there are actually some writers doing it entertainingly and intelligently, which is more to the point. I think the young writers are there. I don't think we need a revival. I think we need some encouragement and a sense of history. They also need to be the ones running with it. I'm glad to be a part of it, but being an old futurist, I want the young ones to kick my arse, just not too hard.

DT: Are there any particular young artists or poets you think are carrying on the tradition?

TW: I think Emily Harrison, definitely, Chimene Suleyman, Sophie Hall I saw recently, she was quite interesting, Keith Jarrett I've got a lot of time for. There are quite a few out there. Holly McNish's stuff.

DT: I was really impressed with Joshua [Idehen].

TW: Joshua is superb. That Mikey Smith poem. He was superb at that. I was really pleased at that. Well done, Joshua.

DT: I'm hoping to get him down at my night. He's a busy boy. Maybe we could have another poem.

TW: This is another Seething Wells poem. It's called Please, Doc.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Cheers, Tim, I think that's it unless there's anything in particular you wanted to mention about Stand and Spit.

TW: The next gig is on Friday, 15 May at the British Library, that's a discussion. We've got Suzanne Moore, Gary Bushell, Salena Godden, myself and Professor Mathew Worley looking at angry kids of the 80s, fanzines and ranting. Then on 13 June we've got a fanzine workshop in Clerkenwell. We'll be having Miki Berenyi from Lush and Joe England, who does a really good football fanzine, a literary fanzine he sells at West Ham called Push. And myself. And there will be some poetry, The [Betsey] Trotwood, which will be fun. I'll be singing Hurry Up, Harry.

Then Thursday 18 June at Camden Town Hall, we've got pretty much all the ranters that are alive. That's going to be quality. We've got Linton, Clarkey, Ginger John, Attila, Porky, Joolz and a lot of people. That's going to be good.

DT: Below the video, I'll have the link to the Stand Up and Spit blog so people can just click on that. Whenever I read out websites, no one understands them.

End of transcript.