

World Poetry Day

By Chelsea Stephenson

Dub Poetry

Held every year on 21 March, World Poetry Day celebrates one of humanity's most treasured forms of cultural and linguistic expression and identity. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO) first adopted 21 March as World Poetry Day in 1999, with the aim of supporting linguistic diversity through poetic expression and increasing the opportunity for endangered languages to be heard. World Poetry Day is the occasion to honour poets, revive oral traditions of poetry recitals, promote the reading, writing and teaching of poetry, foster the convergence between poetry and other arts, such as theatre, dance, music and painting, and raise the visibility of poetry in the media. As poetry continues to bring people together across continents, all are invited to join in the celebration. In Jamaica, words have always been a primary tool of expression, from jubilation and joy to sadness and pain. Jamaicans have an uncanny way of using words to draw people in, especially through poetry. One of the most unique forms of poetry born from great Jamaican poets is Dub Poetry.

Dub poetry emerged out of the reggae culture in the 1970s in Kingston, and spoke to the everyday reality of the most downtrodden and disaffected members of society. It is a form of performance poetry which evolved out of dub music which consists of spoken word rhythms. The 'dub' in dub poetry is similar to the improvised toasting that disc jockeys of the dance halls did to woo their patrons in 1960s in Kingston. The 'deejays' (as these early toasters were called) performed improvised 'raps' over the dub or B side of the reggae recording, which is unique because the special effects make it difficult for the spoken wordsmith to perform on. According to ethnomusicologist Michael Veal, dub music should be regarded as the 'C' side of a reggae recording because it is a performance in its own right.

Musicality is built into dub poems; yet, poets will generally perform without backing music, delivering chanted speech with pronounced rhythmic accentuation and dramatic stylization of gesture. Sometimes, dub music effects, such as echo and reverb, are dubbed spontaneously by a poet into live versions of a poem. Many employ call-and-response devices to engage audiences and with thought-provoking themes which highlight the situation of the poor and disadvantaged of society, making dub poetry one of the most distinct and recognizable art forms in this regard. There are many stalwarts of dub poetry, but the one who holds the credit of being its father is Orlando Wong, more popularly known as Oku Onuora.



Oku Onuora- the father of dub poetry

Born in 1952, and raised in Franklin Town in Eastern Kingston, like many youths at the time, Wong received an informal education through reasoning with the elders around him, which made him aware of social inequality - the

main driver for his later poetic works. As a teenager, having experienced the harshness of life in the slums, his rebellious outlook led to his demonstrating against the police, which resulted in various conflicts with the authorities. Wong even became a real-life Robin Hood, committing a series of armed robberies, the proceeds of which went towards saving a local youth community centre that had hit upon financial difficulties. During one such robbery, he was captured and ultimately given a fifteen-year jail sentence, but his sentence was eventually reduced to ten years. While incarcerated, he began campaigning for prison reform and, in 1971, he started writing poetry. His powerful words and perspective led him to become the first inmate allowed to perform with a reggae band in 1974 when Cedric Brooks and the Light of Saba visited the prison. His work soon came to the attention of Mervyn Morris, a professor at the University of the West Indies and a poet in his own right. Wong went on to receive much critical acclaim and literary prizes and when he was released from prison in 1977, and he changed his name to Oku Onuora and began performing with another of Jamaica's most powerful dub-poetry voices - Mutabaruka.

Onuora may be the father of dub poetry, but Linton Kwesi Johnson is arguably the most famous and highly regarded dub poet. Born in the rural community of Chapelton, Clarendon, Johnson, at age eleven, travelled to London in 1963, where his mother had already journeyed to, like so many other Jamaicans, seeking a better life for her family. By the time he left Jamaica, he was already well-grounded in Jamaica's oral tradition, remembering the nonsense rhymes and Anansi stories of his childhood in the countryside. He never saw poetry as a calling but as a visceral need for self-expression at a time in his life when he was trying to find his place in the world. His poems first appeared in the journal *Race Today*, which was published by a Brixton-based black radical collective that he himself was a part of. The sense of alienation and rejection that he and fellow Windrush generation migrants experienced really propelled his art. One of his most notable works, "Dread Beat and Blood", was a call to arms and sounded like a warning from the heart of a disenfranchised black British community against police harassment and the social repressions of blacks. Even today, Johnson still writes, publishes and performs his poetry and still inspires many young artistes to hone their craft and not be afraid to speak out and be an advocate against injustice.



Linton Kwesi Johnson performing at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival held annually in Indio, California.

Even decades after the emergence of dub poetry, its influence on Jamaican culture is undeniable. Johnson and Onuora are only two examples of those who express themselves in this way and they all should be celebrated. Dub poetry has become a staple in Jamaican cultural expression and has its own category in the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission's (JCDC) Festival of the Visual and Performing Arts. The words of the Dub poet are no longer just used as a way to protest but to celebrate and inspire those from every walk of life. In keeping with the mandate of UNESCO's Poetry Day, we encourage you to seek out and learn the works of not just the dub poets mentioned here, but a host of other artistes who express themselves through the spoken word.

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