

## **My Tribute to Benjamin Zephaniah, the People's Poet, by Mukhtar Dar**

My journey with Benjamin Zephaniah began in the vibrant cauldron of ideologies that was Handsworth in the mid-80s. As a member of the Sheffield Asian Youth Movement, I found myself immersed in the Black revolutionary politics that defined this hub, attracting artists, activists, and academics. It was here that I first encountered the magnetic presence of Benjamin Zephaniah.

In those tumultuous times, I was documenting the anti-racist struggles of Asian and African Caribbean communities, and in particular the Newham 7 and Newham 8 Campaigns — Asian youth who defended themselves and their communities against brutal racist attacks in East London. Benjamin and his brother Tippa Naphtali actively supported these campaigns, lending their voices through performances at fundraising events and, together with Tippa, and I engaged the crowd on the mic while playing drums during the weekly pickets outside the Old Bailey in London.

Life took me to Manchester and Liverpool, where I had the privilege of teaching art at the Centre for Arts Development Training. It was during this time that I discovered the personal connection—Amina, one of my students, of Pakistani background introduced me to her husband, Benjamin Zephaniah.

In the late '90s, I returned to Birmingham, this time as the community arts producer and later the director of arts and marketing at the Drum art centre. In April 2014, as part of the senior management team, I had the honour of asking Benjamin to become one of the patrons of the Drum—a role he graciously accepted. Occasional Board meetings and programming sessions became opportunities to witness not just the artist but the unassuming person behind the poetry.

Our paths continued to weave together during pivotal moments, such as the Mikey Powell demonstration in Handsworth in September 2003. The tragic murder of Mikey Powell, Benjamin's cousin, at the hands of the Lozells police underscored the dire need for justice. Handsworth, especially in the '80s, served as a crucible for Black revolutionary politics—an arena where activists, artists, and academics intersected, engaging in debates and drawing inspiration from the wellspring of radical Black culture.

Wearing dreadlocks as a public figure during that era, particularly in Handsworth, stood as an act of rebellion. Benjamin, alongside other influential poets, played a crucial role in a resurgence of radical Black political culture. Spoken word artists were pivotal to this movement and included figures like Martin Glynn, Moqapi Selassie, Sue Brown, Spicy Finger, and those who have sadly departed: Ryland Campbell, Roi Kwabena, Yussef Ahmed, Birry Nkosinathi, and Kokumo. As Spicy Fingers astutely noted, "I&I are an endangered species" in the context of Birmingham Dub poets.

Reflecting on my encounters with Benjamin, I see not just the poetic wordsmith or the fervent radical activist but the person—humble, sincere, and true to himself. His multifaceted existence, spanning art, politics, and family, spoke volumes about the

interconnectedness of the human experience. He was a living embodiment of the principles he championed—justice, equality, and humanity.

As we say our farewells to Benjamin, I carry not only memories of his stirring performances and the lasting impact of his words but the essence of a person who defied categorization. A Rastafarian poet, novelist, vegan, professor, and storyteller—Benjamin was the people's poet. He shared bread with everyone, from children to elders, prisoners to the oppressed, animals to teenagers, and health workers to freedom fighters.

Speaking of freedom fighters, at this critical juncture as Israel enters the third month of its brutal genocide in Palestine, it becomes even more vital to underscore Benjamin's unwavering opposition to settler colonial occupation and his solidarity with the Palestinian cause. As a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign he passionately expressed, *'When I was young, there were two things that I really wanted to see: a free South Africa and a free Palestine.'* In April 1988, Benjamin undertook a significant journey to Occupied Palestine to comprehend first-hand the Palestinian struggle for liberation under Israeli apartheid. He meticulously documented his experiences, later compiling them into the insightful publication, "Rasta Time in Palestine."

He defied easy categorization—devoted to anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism while firmly grounded in humble working-class origins. Rejecting cultural nationalism and separatism, he embraced an identity liberated from the constraints of identity politics. In stark contrast to self-centred opportunists, Benjamin demonstrated unwavering ideological conviction, remaining true to his principles and political beliefs. Unlike some who prioritise name, fame and personal gain, Benjamin had the moral fortitude to stand resolute, shunning imperialist 'honours' in alignment with his anti-imperialist and anti-colonial worldview. His most notable act was rejecting an OBE in 2003, and today, his letter of rejection stands as a scathing indictment of the British honours system—a profound legacy for young people in our communities to emulate and follow.

Benjamin's journey inspires us to continue the fight for a compassionate world, where truth, justice, and creativity reign supreme. In celebrating his life, we in Kalaboration Arts pledge to keep the flame of activism and artistry burning bright, carrying forward the legacy of a man who, in his ordinariness, was nothing short of extraordinary. Benjamin, your words will continue to guide us—a testament to the enduring power of truth and the indomitable spirit of those who dare to speak truth to power.

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