

# Benjamin Zephaniah



## His Writing:

He writes that his poetry is strongly influenced by the music and poetry of Jamaica and what he calls "**street politics**". His first performance was in church when he was eleven, and by the age of fifteen, his poetry was already known among Handsworth's Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities. He received a criminal record as a young man and served a prison sentence for burglary. Tired of the **limitations** of being a black poet communicating with black people only, he decided to expand his audience, and headed to London at the age of twenty-two.

He became **actively involved** in a workers' co-operative in Stratford, London, which led to the publication of his first book of poetry, *Pen Rhythm* (1980). Three editions were published. Zephaniah has said that his mission is to fight the dead image of poetry in **academia**, and to "take [it] everywhere" to people who do not read books, so he turned poetry readings into concert-like performances.

## Background:

Zephaniah was born and raised in the Handsworth district of Birmingham, which he has called the "Jamaican capital of Europe". He is the son of a Barbadian postman and a Jamaican nurse. A **dyslexic**, he attended an **approved school** but left, aged 13, unable to read or write.

His second collection of poetry, *The Dread Affair: Collected Poems* (1985), contained a number of poems attacking the British legal system. *Rasta Time in Palestine* (1990), an account of a visit to the **Palestinian occupied territories**, contained poetry and **travelogue**.

## His Album:

His 1982 album *Rasta*, which featured The Wailers' first recording since the death of **Bob Marley** as well as a tribute to **Nelson Mandela**, gained him international prestige and topped the Yugoslavian pop charts. It was because of this recording that he was introduced to the political prisoner and soon-to-be South African president Nelson Mandela, and in 1996, Mandela requested that Zephaniah host the president's Two Nations Concert at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Zephaniah was poet in residence at the chambers of Michael Mansfield QC, and sat in on the inquiry into **Bloody Sunday** and other cases, these experiences leading to his *Too Black, Too Strong* poetry collection (2001). *We Are Britain!* (2002) is a collection of poems celebrating **cultural diversity** in Britain.



## His views:

Zephaniah self-identifies as an **anarchist**. He appeared in literature to support changing the British electoral system from first-past-the-post to alternative vote for electing members of parliament to the House of Commons in the Alternative Vote referendum in 2011. In a 2017 interview, commenting on Brexit negotiations, Zephaniah stated that "For left-wing reasons, I think we should leave the EU but the way that we're leaving is completely wrong".

In December 2019, along with 42 other leading cultural figures, Zephaniah signed a letter endorsing the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership in the 2019 general election. The letter stated that "Labour's **election manifesto** under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership offers a **transformative** plan that prioritises the needs of people and the planet over private profit and the vested interests of a few."

# Benjamin Zephaniah- Vocab

1. dyslexic \_\_\_\_\_
2. approved school \_\_\_\_\_
3. street politics \_\_\_\_\_
4. limitations \_\_\_\_\_
5. actively involved \_\_\_\_\_
6. academia \_\_\_\_\_
7. Palestinian occupied territories \_\_\_\_\_
8. travelogue \_\_\_\_\_
9. Bob Marley \_\_\_\_\_
10. Nelson Mandela \_\_\_\_\_
11. Bloody Sunday \_\_\_\_\_
12. cultural diversity \_\_\_\_\_
13. anarchist \_\_\_\_\_
14. election manifesto \_\_\_\_\_
15. transformative \_\_\_\_\_



What else I would like to know.....