

HIGH PROFILES

Kate Tempest

The rapper, spoken-word artist, playwright and novelist interviewed by ***Simon Jones*** in Ladbroke Grove in London

25 October 2016

Love Beats Everything

Kate Tempest

'captures the confusion of a modern world with dagger-sharp lyricism,' said the *Independent*. In her own words:

*We are still mythical.
We are still permanently trapped
somewhere between the heroic and the pitiful.*

Simon Jones met her in Ladbroke Grove in London.



PHOTOGRAPHY: NEIL GAVIN

You write in many different forms: lyrics, poems, plays, novels. What was the first kind of writing you encountered?

I used to love to read from a very young age – before I could talk, probably. I loved stories. My dad's mum was a nursery-school teacher and she had loads of rhymes in her head that she knew by heart – these old-school kind of cautionary tales, like, these *fucking* dark stories. She used to tell this one about this kid that got away from his parents at the zoo and got eaten by a lion called Ponto. 'Down, Ponto!' It bit off his head. I remember just being engrossed in the way that she would rhyme it as well. She had a real good rhythm.

When did you become interested in myths?

I think I got into the old stories when I was about 17. So many writers that I was reading were talking about myths, you know? If I was reading a poem by Yeats or something, he makes all these references and I didn't know what he was talking about and I [felt] I was letting him down. Sometimes it really pissed me off – like, if it's necessary [to have] done some background work before you can take a poem on its own terms; but with someone like Yeats it kind of sparked this desire to be learned for him, you know?

On top of that, there was this old bookshop [near where] I was living and the guy had this shelf with these battered old Penguin Classics on it for, like, 80p, and I was kind of drawn to the idea of these classics, I wanted to know everything about them and what they meant. And so many of those referenced the myths as well...

What appealed to you about the classics? Was it just that you'd left school early and you felt there was a gap in your education?

I don't know, it's just [that] if you're a writer, you want to read the best ones, don't you?

When did you decide that's what you are?

I remember being young and not quite being able to deal with the way that my mind works. It put me in quite a difficult space sometimes, the way that my mind needed stimulation or got bored or... I used to have to smoke a lot of weed just to be able to relax, and I kind of knew, probably from *really* young, that I felt more at ease with that side of my mind when I was reading or writing, or in some kind of communication with other people who had been through what I took to be a similar experience of having a brain that felt too big for you, you know – that needed you to do things or think about things or have ideas that didn't really fit in with being, like, a 13-year-old kid. Do you know what I mean?

I suddenly realised that there was this whole – I want to say 'fraternity' but that wouldn't include me, so that doesn't really work. There was this world of people that I felt very close to, you know.

Who were you reading in those days?

Ursula Le Guin¹ – she was really cool. And Orwell and Mervyn Peake. Graham Greene.

You have said you couldn't *not* be a writer and it reminded me of the start of Orwell's essay 'Why I Write', where he says that when he turned his back on writing, 'I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature.'²

Yeah. Well, if for one reason or another I'm not writing – because I've got to do this [interview], for example! – I feel far away from myself, I feel, like, a bit ill, like mentally not able to compute. I get stressed out, restless – or lethargic or whatever. It definitely has a physical effect on me.

Is writing, then, for you a way of making sense of the world?

It's like a kind of filtering process. I feel like when you're a writer you're tuned in to the

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world at a particular frequency where your sensitivity is so raw and everything you see in your journey through the city is such an onslaught of either, like, unbearable beauty or, you know, unbearable horror. It's so loud and big – or tiny-quiet – like, intimate, like the way you're holding your neck now. And to write about that is, yes, to make sense of it but also to kind of expel it, because you imbibe it all day and it needs to be purged as much as it's gorged on, you know? Otherwise, if I'm not writing the experience I get lost in the experience – I don't know where I am, you know?

But I think it's important to make a distinction between the writing that you do to satisfy that impulse, that need, and the writing that you do for the work that you make. I think that as your work gets bigger and more important to you and you take it all very much more seriously as you develop your skills to be able to accommodate the bigger ideas, there's something really important about just opening your notebook and losing yourself in writing some bit of nonsense, like a silly story. There's a real joy that I get just from knowing that this doesn't have to contribute to the Next Thing.

When you're creating new work, do you have a particular audience in mind?

I feel very much that my work wants to connect. It's not for and of itself, it's for *you*. Probably all my work in performance has taught me the importance of connecting, and I feel like the poet's role is to speak, you know, to and with their community.

But none of that is at the front of my mind when I'm beginning to formulate an idea, or to turn an idea into reality. It's just about following the idea, really.

How early in the process do you know which form an idea is going to take, whether it's a story, an album, a play...?

Well, I'm learning to consult the idea and equip myself with as many avenues as possible so that the idea can go its own way, kind of thing. I know it sounds a bit far-fetched, but it's not that I decide what the idea's going to be, it's that the idea lets you know what it wants, if you're open enough to giving it the space that it needs. When you have been too heavy-handed with an idea, you cripple it and it dies, you know?

How do ideas come to you? For some people it might be that there's an injustice they want to address. For others, it might be a particular character whose story they need to tell. How does it work for you?

Well, to be honest with you, like, everything in my life is dedicated somehow to my craft. Everything. I have been on this mission for ever, but very specifically for the last 16 years. And I do everything I can to be able to be in tune with it. It sounds a strange thing to say, but I work extremely hard, trying to learn things, trying to read up on mythology or whatever it is, trying to facilitate – but when the idea comes, it's nothing to do with me. It just comes, like. It's not like I'm sitting there thinking: 'There's this burning injustice in the world. I know, I'm going to write...'

Everything that you think about the world will inform your work, but if you ask your work to stand for those things, it won't stand for anything, because you're telling it what to be before it's had time to emerge, you know?

Where does the idea come from if not from you?

I don't know. I have begun to think that creativity is a kind of mental space – it feels different in your mind when you're in that mode, when you are being creative – like, truly, not forcing it, not doing it because you have to – than it does [when you're

functioning] normally. So, all I can say is: I think it's just a part of the human mind, some way of understanding events in life, and also, yes, it's about sensitivities that we're born with and that we spend our lives accommodating, dealing with, sharpening.

I've gone to the same space in my work as a performer that I go to when an idea is coming. I think [that] lots of people who go on stage know that space, and you don't know how to go there, you don't know why you've gone there, you just know it when you haven't gone there. The only thing you know is when it's *not* right. You've got fucking no idea how to get there if you're not there. And performance is not about what you 'put on', it's about what you 'take off'. It's about what you can drop.

Now, I should say that this happens very rarely. An idea comes in that pure sense pretty rarely. You spend the whole [of the] rest of your life doing everything you can so that when it does come, you're ready for it, like. These little moments of understanding, they're so rare and you spend the rest of your life fucking hitting your head against a brick wall. This is the agony of it. You have an idea, it's perfect; the finished thing is *shit*, you know?

Our culture has a tendency to hail an artist as some kind of genius on whom God has put his finger, if you like. Do you feel you were given a gift – or is it all the product of hard work and application?

Well, I believe it's common, that many people – in fact, probably *everybody* has this sheer, electric joy when confronted with music they love or a book that just fucking blows them to pieces, like. And that feeling is *life* for me, you know? And because that feeling is so vivid, I've not been able to stop doing this every minute of the day. My mind is constantly thinking about the work – and in any other trade that would be extremely unhealthy, do you know what I mean, but in this trade it's not only understood but kind of expected from you.

My best friend – my brother, basically, since we were kids – is a drummer and he is as obsessed with rhythm as I am with words, like. I realise [now] that not everybody has that, and some people are lost and don't know where to apply themselves, or what that even means, you know; but a creative outlook, I think, is really natural – everybody needs that space and has the capacity to express themselves that way. Everybody.

So, could an accountant, say, be fulfilled in the same way?

Well, why couldn't they? Maybe they absolutely buzz off numbers. Maybe that's their thing. Like, maths – it's like music without any music, isn't it? From what I hear.

Are you saying we can all be fulfilled by creative expression?

I don't know. I don't know. I'm pretty sure that the, like, professionalisation of the artist has taken us away from this idea that everybody can hang out together and play music – you don't have to be Mozart to be able to enjoy the feeling that you get from just playing the guitar. Everyone's so *rigid* and, like, 'Oh no, I can't sing! I can't sing, I'm sorry!' – whereas a few hundred years ago we had folk traditions in England, you know,

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we would hang out and sing each other songs, it would not be a problem. So, without wanting to sound too kind of, like, outreachy about it, yeah, I do think everybody needs creative expression. I think it's extremely important.

It's so fucking important, because otherwise you're just stuck in the real world, which isn't actually the *real* world. In fact, the only way I can deal with this reality is through entering into somebody's created reality. Listening to an album, watching a movie, sitting in the dark and watching a play or something brings me closer in to this world in a way that I can deal with, you know?

But some people just don't have access to the arts, do they? There are people who grew up without and, even if a Penguin Classic cost only 80p, they still don't feel they can walk into the bookshop - they wouldn't know what they were looking at if they did.

I know what you mean and I agree with you, I agree with you; but everybody has access now, because of the internet. Like, it's not difficult to pursue a desire to learn - at all.

But that desire to learn has to be instilled. It's not innate in everyone.

Of course it's innate! We're human beings, that's what we're born with.

You seem more ambitious for your own creativity than a lot of people would be.

I don't know. This is the only brain I've got, you know? I know no other way of being. Like, before I knew that's what I was doing, that's what I was doing, you know? And, actually, lots of poets I know kind of speak similarly about it: it's just a way of understanding the world. It's a personality trait as much as anything - it's just like a part of your make-up.

And where do you think personality comes from?

Well, that's, like, the big question we've been asking since the beginning of time.

Yes, but we've all tried to come up with an answer, haven't we?

Well... I definitely felt very connected to ancient things. There was something about, yeah, myths but also religious texts, old historical descriptions of the last days of the Mayan empire, all these things. (I was always interested, actually, in the ends of empires.)

I have this idea that everything that's ever happened on the planet remains here. Like, every death, every joy, every kiss - it remains. If you're walking down the street and you get this kind of feeling of a great violence or something, like maybe somebody... Do you ever get that? Or you suddenly hallucinate a kind of a warmth. I have this idea that everything we do just stays behind, repeating.



So, maybe that's a little bit connected to where I think personality comes from: it begins a long time ago and your life is a process of remembering it.

You quote William Blake at the start of all your books and he seems to me to be a presence on almost every page you write. When did you first encounter him?

I was about 20. Maybe earlier, but that was when I discovered him on my own terms. This is also something that's really important: you have to discover these writers on your own terms. You can't be taught to be inquisitive about a writer, you can't be taught to love them. They have to come to you, you know. Or you have to seek them out, but it has to be you, not some teacher or whatever.

So, yeah, Blake – it was *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and it just absolutely, like, rang me like a bell. It just shook me. To read things like 'The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' is very useful for a 20-year-old, you know? 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.' At that time, that was exactly the validation I needed to be throwing myself in the directions I was throwing myself in.

I was desperately trying to make it as a rapper, a writer, and nobody was listening and, you know, Blake had this visionary, prophetic, unarguable genius but he was dismissed as a madman and a drunk, nobody gave a fuck about him. And it gave me this kind of righteousness about the idea that you have to really struggle and no one's listening and it's OK. It just felt so exhilarating and comforting and I just – I just saw him all the time, in everything.

Some of the stuff I have to take with a pinch of salt – he's got some pretty fucked-up views about women, you know? But the way that he talked about the poet's role... And his connection to England, to the land, you know, the soil – that really connected with me. And he's a south London boy as well.

Blake is a man with a clear moral purpose and a moral vision. Is that something that you –?

Yeah. And [it's] also so... concrete. The whole underpinning of his philosophy is unshakeable. When you consider what he must have been going through – like, coming home and being assaulted by these visions, seeing them 10-foot-high on his stairs, you know – [and yet] the bedrock of his work is this solid set of, yeah, morals or principles or ideas about the world that were so at odds with what was happening outside.

You know, he was living in squalor, in real poverty. So, some of the really violent imagery in his work, the kind of assault of big forces on the strong but fragile human form, this was just a response to what he saw every day in south London.

Do you feel driven by the same kind of moral purpose?

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's in my work.

The idea of, like, a moral framework and a moral urge exists really strongly in hip-hop and that had a massive effect on me, I think – even before I was rapping [myself]. There

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was this distinction between rappers who had something to say – that’s how we would describe them: ‘That guy’s saying something’ – and [those who were] kind of boasting about their sexual exploits or, like, how much money they were making – or just talking shit, basically. The rappers who were ‘saying something’ – ‘knowledge rappers’ is another way that we described them – just absolutely kind of flooded my brain. There was a rapper called Klashnekoff,³ a guy called Roots Manuva⁴ and lots of others. Every time I’d listen to an MC [like that], it rang so true with me, it was very inspiring. I never really understood the drive to be any other kind of rapper.

So, somewhere between my childhood and teenage years, falling in love with the idea of music that expressed wisdom and then falling in love with William Blake much later and realising [that] the same thing was present in his work, you know...

Throughout your work, it’s obvious that you feel a lot of compassion for your characters, but sometimes you are quite explicit about the need for empathy. In [your 2013 dramatic poem] *Brand New Ancients*, you say: ‘A god becomes a god when he has the guts to love.’ Many people say, ‘If only we could all love each other more!’, but I sense that with you the sentiment has got more bite to it.

Well, it’s difficult to talk about it, you know. It’s the driving principle of all of [my] work, but it’s hard to talk about without it just sounding really trite –

I appreciate that.

But I believe that at the root of most of the problems, if not all of the problems, that we face, just in our tiny little, atomised lives – if an aggression is inflicted upon us or if we find ourselves straying somehow and ending up in behaviour that is really damaging – at the root of all of this is a lack of love.

And [love is] an active thing. It’s not just ‘Sit back and open your heart’ or whatever, it’s fucking active: you have to really work, to push yourself into a more connected state with your fellow human beings. To engage with your empathy is difficult. To radically engage with empathy, and love, it’s like – for me, it’s...

There’s so much that divides us. Just today, coming here on the Tube, I found myself judging some of the people that were in the carriage. There was this mother, she was, I think, quite well off and she had her two kids with her, a boy and a girl – they must have been seven and 10 or something – and they were playing this game where the mum thought of a word and she would say whether it was an adverb or a noun or a preposition – I can’t fucking say it! – and then the kids had to guess the word. And I was like: What the *fuck*? I don’t know why I was so shocked, but it just felt so unfair. It kind of angered me a little bit, at some level, like.

I had to [ask myself:] Why is this an affront to me in any way? Like, this is amazing! A seven-year-old kid who knows what an adverb is? This is beautiful!

Is it?

I don’t know. I don’t know. [I had to argue to myself]: Those children are so loved! They’re so loved! And they are engaging in this world together... I started to think about how families create this world for each other where their rules are *their* rules and you can’t [judge them].

And then, getting off the Tube, I saw this man who was, like, a bit older, quite a shabby suit on, really nice face, and he had his little daughter with him and she was kind of

bored and playing with her tights, and all he did was, he just crouched down, so he could be on a level with her while they waited for the train. And I thought that was the most beautiful thing.

In your first example, maybe what affronted you was that those children were being well prepared for academic success, but that's a far cry from creativity and beauty of expression. They were learning about the tools you use, but it's like the tools were stripped of magic.

What interests me is the connection between love and creativity.

Well, OK, so some people would say that creativity doesn't necessarily come purely from a place of love, you know? Some people are driven to write because of fear – because of fear of death. I've talked to writers that have said that's why they write – it kind of shocked me to think that. And some people want to be singers because they have some score to settle with themselves and the world.

So, there are all these different compulsions towards creativity and in your journey to get to the point of becoming a professional artist or whatever, you will probably inhabit lots of different compulsions and be driven by different things. But the end point – or the beginning point, really – is this place of trying to cultivate... Yeah.

It's really heart-warming to hear you say that. But how do you react when you cannot empathise with what someone is trying to say or do or be – or maybe the political policies they are pursuing? Do you write them off?

OK, so this is interesting. This is, like, a thought experiment I've had to do a few times. If I believe in empathy, if I believe in it radically and fully, it has to extend everywhere. There is nobody that isn't entitled to my empathy – because if there is a stopping point, it's all complete nonsense.

So, my thinking is: If some [politician] can pursue a policy that leaves somebody in dire need, there is a lack of love in that person and so I have to love them more. They need more of my love, more of my understanding. Which is really at odds with everything that a lot of people around me think...

What the Government is doing to the country, what is happening to people, in terms of really difficult living conditions, as a direct result of people who are so *removed* from understanding the effects that their policies are having, so *removed* from the reality, like – the instinct is to hate them. But that's not going to get me anywhere, or them. And the divisions between people are the reason that we're in such a mess.

And that goes as far as someone who has done a terrible thing. It goes as far as somebody who has assaulted me. It goes as far as somebody who has... yeah, who has done an evil to somebody, like. It is terrible for the person who has suffered it, but the only healing is love, for both of the people that are involved in an incident like that.

There are people who would say that justice, too, matters.

I have my problems with the judicial system as it stands, but justice is done in people. I believe that, like. I know some people who have done some pretty fucking terrible things

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and they don't feel, like, bad about it. You know, I have seen that in men and it kind of contradicts what I'm saying; but I don't believe that at their core... There *will* come a moment in their life when they see [what they've done]. And that's just about connection with yourself. It's as I was saying earlier: If you live [entirely] in this world, it's not healthy. Sometimes you need to read poems or listen to music...

So, yes, justice and love and creativity and magic, yeah, it's all the same. It's all the same place.

I think we have to end there.

Damn! It was just getting good, wasn't it?

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- 1 See bit.ly/2fsxblm.
 - 2 bit.ly/2gprmgO
 - 3 See eg bit.ly/2fuGnPG.
 - 4 See eg bit.ly/2fVgfBb.

Biography

Kate Tempest was born Kate Calvert in 1985 in south-east London, where she was educated at Thomas Tallis School in Greenwich and the Brit School for Performing Arts and Technology in Croydon. She studied English literature at Goldsmiths, University of London.

She first performed when she was 16, at 'open mic nights' at Deal Real, a small hip-hop store in Soho. She has since won two poetry slams at the prestigious Nu-Yorican poetry café in New York and has supported, among others, Billy Bragg, John Cooper Clarke, Femi Kuti and Scroobius Pip.

She recorded her first album, *Balance*, in 2011 with the band Sound of Rum. It was dismissed by *NME* as 'mockney dreck'.

Her first collection of poems and songs, *Everything Speaks in Its Own Way*, was released in 2012 in paperback and on CD and DVD.

In the same year, she was commissioned by the theatre company Paines Plough to write her first play, *Wasted*, which had two nationwide tours and two sell-out runs at the Roundhouse in London. It was followed by *Hopelessly Devoted* (2013) and *Glasshouse* (2014).

In 2013, her epic poem *Brand New Ancients*, performed to an orchestral backing, won the Ted Hughes Award for innovation in poetry, a Herald Angel award at the Edinburgh Fringe and the 'Offie' (the Off West End Theatre award) for the best production that 'defies traditional categories'.

Her second collection of poetry, *Hold Your Own*, and her first solo album, *Everybody Down*, were both released in 2014. The latter was shortlisted for the Mercury Prize (and in 2015 won the inaugural Soundcheck Award in Berlin). Also in 2014, she was included by the Poetry Society in its once-a-decade list of 'next generation poets'.

In 2016, her first novel, *The Bricks that Built the Houses*, was published by Bloomsbury and her long poem *Let Them Eat Chaos* was released both in paperback and on CD.

She has toured Europe, Australia and the US with Sound of Rum and has performed at The Big Chill and the Latitude, Shambala and Glastonbury Festivals.

She has worked on various projects with Yale University, the BBC, the Old Vic and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

In 2015-16, she was a visiting fellow at University College London.

She has been chosen to curate the 2017 Brighton Festival.

Up-to-date as at 29 November 2016