

## Black Country Creatives ...

### AL HUTCHINS, WRITER, POET, MUSICIAN

**Tell us a bit about yourself and how your interest in poetry started:**

“To begin at the beginning: It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black...”

That’s how it started and for me, it was always about words, so it was probably Richard Burton as the First Voice in *Under Milk Wood* that hooked me in and let me in on their secrets. But thinking about it now, it’s significant that Dylan Thomas’ words came to me via Burton’s rendition because the words and their performance are two sides of the one coin of what I do as a performance and page poet.

Being a writer seemed like an impossible dream, like saying you wanted to be an astronaut, but hearing John Cooper Clarke’s stuff on a punk TV compilation (*The Way They Were*), the way he savoured words and characters and played with them in performance made me realise this was something I could do too: just taking bits and pieces from what lay around you, casting them in a different light and entertaining people.

**What made you embark upon a career in poetry?**

I never embarked on a career in poetry and I don’t really think you can. It’s just something that pulls you along. It continues to be that bit of haulage for me still. Who was it that said, that if you’re still writing poetry after the age of 30, then you’re a poet? But a career in po-



etry? Nah, for me at least, poetry is part of the natural fabric of what you do, so talking about a career in poetry is, like talking about a career in knitting! And there’s a great strength to be drawn from that: it’s a vocation.

The poetry started at the same time as I put the band together and here’s why: I think we’re talking the exact same time as the baked bean price wars in the late 90s when the price became as low as nearly 1p (I think it was 3p.) The reason I say all this is that I had tons and tons of Aldi carrier bags full of writing and I just thought this stuff should get more!

I’d been reading tons of Joyce and Beckett, was trying to writing a novel, and in my twenty-something idiocy and ambition, thought I could put the whole city of Birmingham on the page. I just kept starting and restarting that many times, before reaching a dead stop at a certain point and throwing everything away, then I read the stand-up come-

dian Lenny Bruce (in his autobiography *How To Talk Dirty and Influence People*) saying that you should never throw anything away and that the editing process was a whole thing in itself, how you could look back at an entire page you'd written and pick out one line and use it. So, I looked at all this stuff I had ('stuff' is one of my favourite words, by the way) and realised that I could just do something with it and put it out there and, better still, use it to provide something raw and alive and immediate.

So in 1998 I formed a band (The Courtesy Group) and kind of used a CD shop where I was working at the time in Birmingham to recruit musicians. I'd play stuff I liked and just spark up conversations with people. Could I sing? Not really, but then neither could many of the people I admired like Ian Dury, Patti Smith, Mark E. Smith or even Bob Dylan, but I knew I could definitely front a band and write and create something different. Between the songs, I used poems and fragments of stories as patter and in a noisy Saturday night pub crowd, you gain the skill of how to hold a crowd, which wasn't easy at first, but it's a great discipline to develop. I just thought, well if Patti and all these other folk can do it, then so can I.

And I suppose what all this meant was that I was attempting to write stories, but in a different way, with the colours and space of music and sound around to sculpt them, so they weren't ever going to be verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge etc. And that's a real challenge – a load of musicians + a writer/non-musician, but it's one that really creative musicians can handle and it makes for an entirely unique sound.

**Blimey, that was a long answer: are you still there?**



*image courtesy Pete Ashman*

**We're still here, yes!  
What is it (about the Black  
Country) that inspires you?**

I was brought up in Birmingham, but I lived in Smethwick for fifteen years and I live in Stourbridge now, and have worked in the Black Country for nearly twenty years, so I've had my Black Country passport a couple of years now. Smethwick's a funny one as it's right on the border, so there are some places where you can flag a bus down between stops and others where you can't, if you know what I mean. That's a very Black Country thing I think, that down-to-earthness and local flavour. I suppose it's that local thing that creates a lot of stories and humour for me which differentiate it, and some of that is not really printable, but a lot of that is reflective of the fact that not everyone in the Midlands is plugged right into London or feels that they should be; for a writer, that's a treasure-trove, folk in Tipton talking about West Brom, as if it was another country, for instance! It all comes back to the people and part of that links in to the history of the region, which is undeservedly unsung.

## Tell us about some of your successes

The last poem or piece of writing, and the next one – the last gig, the next gig! These are still what provide the biggest buzz because you are always in the business of making new things – there's no better feeling than finishing a poem or song or story and realising that 24hrs before it wasn't even a speck of imagining – it didn't exist! That's one of the real privations with lockdown because not being able to get out there and deliver this poem or that song is a drawback, there's nothing that beats feeling that energy move round the room when you're playing to a new crowd in a new town, and then someone tells you afterwards that they've always thought they hated poetry, but they loved what they just heard!

I also work in education and have worked in alternative provision/pupil referral units a great deal. Knowing that you can make a difference to young people's lives and seeing that positive change actually happen is a privilege.

But of course, seeing your work in print and being written about is fab. The week our album (The Courtesy Group's debut *Tradesman's Entrance*) was reviewed by the Stewart Lee (the comedian) he gave it \*\*\*\* and right next to it was a Rhianna album they'd awarded \*\*\*: things like that are a bit of fun!

## Tell us about your publications and recordings

My short fiction has been published by Tindal Street Press, Eccentric City and my poetry by New River Press. I have a past life as a music journalist, and have featured in *Mojo* Magazine, *The Word*,

*The Birmingham Post* and as part of the reissued *Live in Berlin* album by Birmingham's post-punk feminist pioneers, *The Au-Pairs*. As a performance poet, I've shared the stage with everyone from Francesca Beard, Salena Godden, Malika Booker, John Hegley, Mike Garry, Bobby Parker and many times, with John Cooper Clarke, who's been a kind of mentor to me over the years and name-checks me in the film *Evidently John Cooper Clarke*. My band, *The Courtesy Group*'s tunes are played on BBC6 and have been lauded by a range of people including John Peel, Stuart Maconie and the comedian Stewart Lee.

## What advice would you give to aspiring poets?

Writers and teachers always say write about what you know, but I reckon any aspiring poet would be better off doing the opposite: write about what you don't know – use

your imagination and put yourself in someone else's shoes. Inevitably, your own perspective will come through in some way, but putting something in a different frame, from another point of view, will open far bigger possibilities. There are some poets, like Bobby Parker, from Kidderminster, who write confessional stuff, but it works because he takes it to the nth degree. But very often, if you get caught up in talking about your own life, and unless you've traversed the globe several times and had a stack of hair-raising adventures, it gets a bit dull a bit too soon. Maybe I'm just talking about my own process: it's just that for me, sitting down to write about yourself is a big turn-off, but approaching it through a different character's lens interests me.

The beauty of writing poems is that you're unlikely to spend months on one poem, unless it's an epic, which means that every new poem can be a fresh start and a chance to inhabit something totally new, a different world, if you like. So while rhyme is a great discipline and can give a really tight focus, there are a number of different ways of coming at things. So, if your inclination is to rhyme, then carry on, but then try to unrhyme things and mess with the formula, as well, you can have a lot of fun that way!

It's also worth remembering that as daunting as putting stuff down on paper may feel, a story or poem proceeds, advances, line by line and all you need is one line or phrase to start. Very often, I'll just have a title for something-like Man Reading Gibbon On The Midland Red – and let that germinate until I begin. In that case, I literally saw a chap reading The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon on a Midland Red bus and thought, well, this is a bit unusual!

As with anything, it's all about routines and finding those that work for you. Writing for a page or two the moment you wake up, without allowing the pen to leave the paper is a good one, as you're still in that uncensuring semi-conscious brain mode, and trust me, if you do this every day for a month, sure you will produce a fair amount of cods-wallop, but you will also harvest some interesting individual lines, that will give you direction!

## Where can we get hold of your work and see you perform?

I've been doing some lockdown gigs virtually, and just started a weekly weekend Facebook livestream gig called

VERBALIST, which is a mixture of my own stuff and renditions of other poets and authors I like, living or dead, famous or neglected, local or global. I've been rediscovering so many writers I love during lockdown that it felt stupid not to share some of this – and the response so far has been tremendous and it's something I want to forge ahead with.

Past lockdown, once we put all the pieces back together, I'll be out and about with the poetry again in the West Midlands and The Courtesy Group. I'm speaking to various publishers at the moment, so watch out for a collection of poems in 2021!

Al Hutchins is a writer, poet, journalist, teacher and workshop facilitator based in Stourbridge. His chapbook REBEL ADMIN #1 is available for £5 (inc p&p) by contacting him at . He hosts a weekly Facebook livestream VERBALIST via his Facebook alias, Godfrey Salter.

Al is the founder of The Courtesy Group, whose BBC-6 played and critically acclaimed albums are available via The Courtesy Group's first confirmed post-lockdown gig will be supporting Imperial Wax at Dead Wax in Birmingham Saturday April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

Al is a key player in Memorhyme Education which comprises specialist creatives, poets, performers, artists and facilitators working in education and ACTOV Change who use emotion coaching as the cornerstone of their creative work in education.

*Al is a long-suffering supporter of Blues and in November 1992, after a 1-0 defeat at Barnsley, walked 34 miles home, after misreading a train station timetable giving times for the following year. It doesn't get any better.*