

Riddym Ravings

Andrea Stuart talks to Jean 'Binta' Breeze, the Jamaican performance poet, as she prepares to celebrate the publication of her collection of poems *Riddym Ravings* with a national poetry tour, 'Women of the Word', which begins this month

Jean 'Binta' Breeze was 'discovered' at a poetry reading in Jamaica by Linton Kwesi Johnson, one of the moving forces behind the arts arm of *Race Today*, Creation for Liberation and organiser of the 'Women of the Word' tour. Linton, (who, if CLR James is the grand old man of black British arts, must surely be its most conscientious godfather) encouraged her to come to Britain. She now commutes between London and Jamaica (this trip narrowly avoiding the hurricane), writing, reading and teaching.

Her work draws on a diverse pool of influences: the reluctant melting pot that is London, her rural Jamaican childhood and the urban angst of Kingston. Her introduction to poetry didn't come from books but from listening to poetry: 'So it came from a voice not a page. The voice is as important as the poem because it brings life to the word.' Which is why she places such an emphasis on performance: 'It's hard to tell in advance what a reading is going to be like. Sometimes it's very painful and sometimes it's very freeing. But it is always a communication, I always feel connected.'

Breeze rejects the suggestion that performance poetry is somehow second rate: 'It's amazing the number of poetry readings that are happening now. Most of the poets I know make a living from reading not from writing.'

Breeze feels that literary snobbery is a luxury denied to many in her audience: 'My poetry doesn't have to be recognised by anyone other than those who hear it and feel a connection with it.'

The poems rely heavily on

Jamaica's lyrical vernacular. She sees Jamaican as a different language from English, rather than a bastardised form of it. She is really glad 'to be bilingual' because it allows influences as diverse as TS Eliot, the Bible - particularly the Psalms - and Jamaica's playful and versatile 'street language' which is evolving so fast that, 'if you stay away too long you don't understand what anyone is saying!'

Breeze feels that the Caribbean rhythms are quite distinct from those of the US, though she recognises that comparisons between black American and Caribbean writers are inevitable. She feels that there is a different spirit, a different rhythm and flow: 'The Caribbean is sea, the Caribbean is made up of islands; wherever you are, you are never far away from water. And it is much more into its peasantry; growing things. America on the other hand is a continent, advanced in technology. It's like the difference in rhythm between funk or rap and that of reggae.' But she doesn't feel that these rhythms are contradictory: 'What is music but the blend of different rhythms? They are not only complementary, they're necessary.'

Poetry for Breeze is very natural: 'Something tells you that a poem is here, and you pick up the pen ... I wish babies came like that!' About the creative urge she adds 'To be basic, if you feel the need to go to the toilet you go and hope that you won't be constipated. If you don't shit you die!' For Breeze poetry is an essential function: 'They are about truth.' She feels that it is the capacity to expose oneself that determines

hustler skank

Hail mi idren...

Love star...

Yes I, is a city full a superstar
yuh eida sing reggae music
aryuhbus gun war
an if yuh kean mek it eena eida one
yuhjusjine a posse an have some fun

herbman posse a really de bes
three piece suit - nutten less
specially ifim all a sell cocaine
yuh jus tun im pimp
an go muck up some brain

Watchyahnow-
yuhseeme-

mejus waan get rich quick
only ting mus wuk hard
is my prick
fah all my dawta wear a jungle a chain
plus ring an bangle
we nuhfeel no pain
every Friday night mi tek een Barry G
an every mont mi tek a trip to Miami
an all my madda kudda screw till she blue
mi jus wear dark glasses weh she kean see two
as to all myfaada im-cho
if all myfadda was really a scholar
im wudda leggo im sense
an go mek some dollar
ah ongle idiot wukfi govament tuttyfive year
an still katch up eena wan two room square

Eh-yuhsee me

me jus buy a house side a Cherry Garden
wenpolicetapmi
im haffi beg mi pardon
is a red B.M.W. me drive
mi trash, mi ready, an mi still alive
sowhaappen-
di man wouldn' like me set im up

Bway!

yuh want a good rahtid lick
eenayuh head cup
Is I de man really a refer to as a 'criminal'?

wait a minute
nuhyousameonewukdunga.. .a.. .a.. .yes
defirm weh hangle all dem big business
nuhyuh clean de floor
an all de shithouses

is de same man we wuk fah
yuh damn blastedfool
wenyuh haffi bow dung an sey
'Yes, sir, Mr. Austin'
who me-I jus say
'Comin, Mr. Cool'

'yes, boss'
'irie, boss'
'on my way, boss'

Taken from *Riddym Ravings And Other Poems*, Ed. Mervyn Morris.



Jean 'Binta' Breeze: Tired of people preaching to the converted

a real artist. And that capacity is very rare.

So even though she is pleased that there is so much going on in the black arts community, she is also a little apprehensive: 'I'd rather we had only two or three artists in our community that represent what is finest and truest about ourselves than a host of poseurs who have been allowed to take on the title of artist simply because they are black.'

In a society that loves to present black mediocrity, it is the black community, she says, that must maintain standards: 'We all started out

at the same place, we all wanted to make statements', but she feels that a poet can be political without being polemical. Though she avoids naming anyone in particular, Breeze adds: 'I'm tired of people preaching to the converted and saying it's art.'

Most people who come to a black poetry reading feel the same way. And as a member of the audience, she gets very upset having people chant slogans at her regardless of their validity. She feels that 'poetry can make the same statements in a different way'. •