

## Linton Kwesi Johnson

### "Mekkin Histri"

*In 1981 the frustrations felt by black immigrants in the face of prejudice, bad housing, poor job prospects and what they saw as police harassment came to a head. The resulting riots, of which the most important was in Brixton in April, were seen by the Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson as an expression of black resistance and pride. "Blacks aren't helpless victims who need the white left to organise our struggles for us." — Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Mekkin Histri" from *Tings an Times*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), pp. 45f.*



- now tell mi someting  
mistah govahment man  
tell mi someting
- 5 how lang yu really feel  
yu coulda keep wi andah heel  
wen di trute done reveal  
bout how yu grab an steal  
bout how yu mek yu crooked deal
- 10 well down in Soutall  
where Peach did get fall  
di Asians dem faam-up a human wall  
gesre di fashist an dem police sheil
- 15 an dem show dat di Asians gat plenty zeal
- it is noh mistri  
wi mekkin histri  
it is noh mistri
- 20 wi winnin victri
- now tell mi someting  
mistah police spokesman  
o tell mi someting
- 25 how lang yu really tink  
wi woulda tek yu batn lick  
yu jackboot kick  
yu dutty bag a tricks
- 30 an yu racist pallyticks  
well down in Bristol  
dey ad noh pistal  
but dem chase di babylan away  
man yu shoulda si yu babylan
- 35 how dem really run away  
yu shoulda si yu babylan dem dig-up dat day
- it is no mistri ...
- 40 now tell mi someting  
mistah ritewing man  
tell mi someting
- how lang yu really feel
- 45 wi woulda grovel an squeal  
wen so much murdah canceal  
wen wi woun cyaan heal  
wen wi feel di way wi feel
- 50 well dere woz Toxteth  
an dere woz Moss Side  
an a lat a addah places  
whey di police ad to hide  
well dare woz Brixtan
- 55 an dere woz Chapelton  
an a lat a addah place dat woz burnt to di groun
- it is noh mistri ...

#### Vocabulary

**Intro/2 harassment (n.):** making life difficult by being insulting, aggressive, unfair etc. - **to keep under heel (v.):** to keep s.o. in a position of subjection and powerlessness - **to make a crooked deal:** to have a criminal agreement - **zeal (n.):** (usually formal) keenness, energy, courage - **baton lick (n.):** beatings with sticks carried by the police (to 'lick' is a colloquial word meaning to beat in a fight) - **jackboot (n.):** military boot associated with Hitler's armies; the instrument of cruel or Fascist behaviour - **bag of tricks (n.):** equipment or techniques used by experts; dirty tricks are secret or illegal activities performed for a government or other organisation - **to grovel (v.):** to lie on the ground, showing extreme respect to s.o. powerful

### Explanations

**Brixton:** an area of South London where many immigrants congregated. It was the scene of riots in April 1981, in which 324 people were injured and extensive damage was done. The scenes of rioting and burning in London streets shocked many British people into an awareness of the feelings among the black community. - **Southall:** suburb of West London, near London Airport, where there is a large community of Asians (immigrants from the Indian sub-continent). It was the scene of disturbances when an extremist right-wing neo-Fascist group, the National Front, organised an election rally in this predominantly black district in April 1979. They were opposed by the residents and left-wing sympathisers, many from the Socialist Workers' Party. - **Peach:** Blair Peach, a visiting teacher from New Zealand, died during the Southall disturbances as a result of a blow on the head from a policeman in circumstances which were never satisfactorily explained. The police at the time were accused of siding with the National Front marchers. - **Bristol:** city in South-West England, once a famous port. St Paul's, a poor district mainly inhabited by immigrants, was where the first major riots in 1980-81 took place. - **babylon:** Rastafarians see the big western cities as evil places to be compared with the ancient city of Babylon: 'that great whore', as it is called in the Bible (Revelation 18: 1-3). They see their enforced presence in these cities (needing to work there) like the exile of the Jews in Babylon: "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept" (Psalm 137). The forces of authority of this culture, the police, are also called babylon, by extension. - **right-wing man:** Traditionally, those on the right wing in politics have opposed immigration most strongly, e.g. Enoch Powell or the nationalist parties like the National Front. - **Toxteth:** the Toxteth district near the centre of Liverpool also saw serious rioting in 1980-81, as did the **Moss Side** area of Manchester and **Chapeltown** in Leeds.

### Awareness

1 Linton Kwesi Johnson was born in Jamaica. Did you know that the slogan "Black is beautiful" was coined by a Jamaican, Marcus Garvey? Find out something about him, and the influence he had on people like Malcolm X.

2 What do you know about reggae music?

### Comprehension

3 If the recording of the poem/song is available, listen to it, first without the text, then with it.

4 Try to 'translate' the poem into standard English.

5 Who are the three people the poem addresses? What does the poet accuse them of?

### Analysis

6 Explain what the poet is celebrating in each verse.

7 Explain why the poet claims: "wi mekkin histri" in the chorus.

### Opinion

8 Comment on the message of this song and compare it with the attitudes expressed or implicit in, for example, text 1.

9 The text suggests that resistance - even violent resistance - is sometimes necessary. Would you agree? Explain your view.

10 Reggae, dub poetry and rap all began as a form of rebellion. Investigate whether their character has changed since then.

### Projects

11 In the wake of the riots a commission under Lord Scarman was set up to enquire into what had caused them. Find out about what was recommended in the Scarman Report, and what effect the recommendations had.

12 Find out more about fusions of music/poetry/politics in reggae or rap, for instance in the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, Jean Binta Breeze, UB40, or some of the Los Angeles rap artists.

13 Try to write and perform your own rap or dub poem.