

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Luke Wright is a poet and broadcaster. His poetry stage shows have toured the world and played sold-out runs in London and Edinburgh. He is a regular contributor to BBC Radio and his verse documentary on Channel 4 was nominated for a Grierson Award. His first collection, *Mondeo Man*, was published in 2013.

PRAISE FOR FRANKIE VAH

‘With *Frankie Vah*, he’s managed to craft a gorgeously-worded powerhouse of a play, in one of the only verse dramas that could claim to get a crowd cheering and stamping their feet throughout. Again.’

★★★★★ *Broadway Baby*

‘This is a mature, lyrical and politically relevant piece of poetic writing ... beautifully performed... I watched and listened in awe and pleasure, just drinking, drinking, drinking in the beauty of this show.’

★★★★★ *Exeunt*

‘This isn’t just socialist agit-prop, though; it reaches far further than that. In his visceral, virile verse, Wright skewers the essential cadences of all political drama.’

★★★★★ *The Stage*

‘[Wright] explores the themes that are central to our lives, the light and shade of lives lived to the full. He connects with all of us in a performance that feels so personal that it must be his own story, but this is theatre, this is telling a tale, this is poetry in motion, a ballad for right now.’

★★★★★ *Norwich Eye*

ALSO BY LUKE WRIGHT

POETRY

The Toll (Penned in the Margins, 2017)

Mondeo Man (Penned in the Margins, 2013)

The Vile Ascent Of Lucien Gore And What The People Did (Nasty Little Press, 2011)

High Performance (Nasty Little Press, 2009)

VERSE DRAMA

What I Learned from Johnny Bevan (Penned in the Margins, 2016)

NON-FICTION

Who Writes This Crap? with Joel Stickley (Penguin, 2007)

Frankie Vah

Luke Wright

Penned in the Margins

LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS
Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB
www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International

ISBN
978-1-908058-58-4

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for Rosy

THIS STORY STARTS at university.
Some people leave home ready, almost baked,
a diary full of hangovers and heartaches
stuffed inside their rucksacks. But not me.

I come from Dedham Vale. That bit of Essex
Constable painted. It hasn't changed
that much. An adolescence spent gazing
at ponds and water mills... and altar screens.

See, Dad's a vicar. Actual vicar. Yup.
I needed university. I tingled
at the thought. Three years to make myself.
And so... I joined loads of societies.

A desperate attempt to pour myself
into a score of moulds until I set.
From Buddhism to sailing via Urdu
and, my favourite one, creative writing.

Honey pot for nerds. We'd meet up in
the union once a fortnight and swap stories.
We went on socials too. And one of these
would change it all, would change it all forever.

It was in the Spring. A bar in town.
We'd heard a bunch of poets would be on.
Instead, we walked into a full-on gig.
The Clash was ringing from the speaker stack;

the floor was rank and sticky; and the poets?
Frontmen, centre stage without a band.
They spat out angry words like Gatling guns,
political and urgent: Thatcher, Reagan,

skinheads, fascists, nukes, the tabloid press.
The bedsit generation shouting back;
they pumped the cultural landscape full of lead
then kicked the casings at the baying crowd.

These were the Ranting Poets. A new breed
of wordsmith, forged from punk and now at war
in Thatcher's Britain, spitting stunning lines
that ping-ponged round your aching brain for days.

John Cooper Clarke, Attila the Stockbroker,
Linton Kwesi Johnson, Swells and Joolz.
The rhythmic sermons emanating from
their beery pulpits beat a path to me.

I know it's niche, it's not for everyone,
but we all have a thing that lights us up,
something that makes our insides sing with joy.
The girl who tastes a kind of truth in numbers,

native-tongue in sums. The boy who feels
his body billow at the beck of bass
and drums. And right there in that skuzzy boozier,
rapt in rat-a-tat, a singular

desire consumed me: *I wanna do that.*
And so I went to every Ranter's gig I could,
scribbling poems, dreaming of the night
I'd take the stage and bare my bloody soul.

I got my politics from poetry.
The Ranters lead me to a secret door
that opened on a wild, exotic garden
of subversive thought and socialism.

It was '81 and radicals
were fighting on two fronts in Tory Britain.
As well as kicking out at Thatcher's reign
the Labour Party raged in civil war.

It all came to a head one Sunday night,
the end of Freshers' Week, my second year;
my friends and I all gathered round the box
to swear and shout at Labour's Autumn conference.

Tony Benn and Denis Healey's battle
for Deputy Leader of the Party.
But more than that: the battle for the soul
of Labour. For the future of the Left.

And Healey wasn't it. Too '70s;
befuddled under caterpillar brows,
with all the pickled fug of portly aunts
on sherry-sodden Sunday afternoons.

No. No. For me and all my new comrades
the future looked like Tony. Tony Benn.
Democracy and power for the people!
When Tony spoke he filled a space in me

left empty since I spurned my father's God.
Yes, there it was, at last, at last — belief.
Belief in something bigger than myself.
The answers seemed so clear. We knew it all.

First Thatcher and her Yankee fascist clown,
all Milton Friedman market forces porn.
Next hollow men like Healey and his type
who claimed to be like us but had no fight.

Then us and Tony Benn and all those women
down at Greenham. Chained to one another.
Flesh and blood against the guns and bombs.
Let it be Benn. Let it be Benn. Let it.

*I'll say this once. The votes have been counted three times, Tony Benn:
forty-nine point five seven four. Denis Healey: fifty point four two six ...*

NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! We screamed and spat
and hurled salty abuse that made us sound
like burly union reps. A glass was smashed
as righteous anger swooped and dived and howled.

Injustice so bare-faced and undiluted
I could scarcely breathe. The air was thick
with smoke and booze and on the tiny screen
our hero jammed his tongue beneath his lip.

But did not hang his head. So nor did we,
but stored the moment in our hearts and drank

and marched and scrawled our fag-ash manifestos
late at night, convinced that we were right.

Yes, that was me: a fist-clenched, bloody mess
of socialism, poetry and beer;
light years from who my parents were, and glad.
My time at university swept by

in student marches, rallies, gigs and chants,
crowd-surfing on a surge of youthful brio,
guts and gurning glory, righteousness
and right-on, sweaty-swaggered verve until...

I fucked up my exams.

§

I SHOULD HAVE shrugged it off, or learned my lesson
and sat my exams the following year.
Instead, I came back home to Dedham Vale
where all that time spent making me unravelled.

I arrived home in time for the election.
'83. The darkest night in Labour's
history. I knew the worst might come.