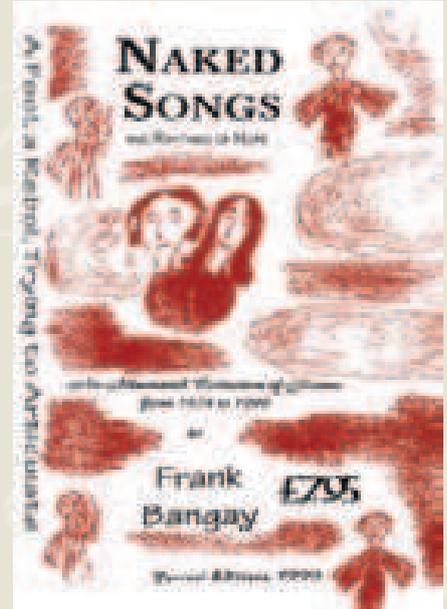


The story of Frank Bangay

ANDREW ROBERTS uses the images from Frank Bangay's poems to tell his story.

This is really the story of how I read Frank Bangay's memories. Frank lives in an old block of flats, near me in Hackney. Like most people, he does not have the connections you need to find a professional publisher. It took him six years to raise the money himself to publish *Naked Songs and Rhythms of Hope*, a book of his poems and pictures. Since then he has made CDs on which he recites his poetry to music. He sells these for the cost of making them.

The book and CDs give bright glimpses into Frank's life and the movements he has been part of. They are, as the title of one of his CDs says, "Jewels from the Pound Shop". I have threaded some of these pound shop trinkets into a story of my friend's life.



The front cover of Frank's poetry collection

His father's garden

The rhythms of hope are naked because Frank uncovers all his secrets, including that of his "Secret Garden", revealed in a CD of Songs, Poems and Prayers from August 2008.

Frank was born in Wandsworth in 1951. His father had previously lived in Battersea.

"Opposite was the large Morgan's Carbon factory. Although the area was very polluted my Dad did manage to make the plants in his back garden flower. These conversations with my Dad inspired my love of plants too."

Now Frank grows succulents and wild flowers on the balcony of his flat, walks the canals of London looking at plants, like the Giant Hogweed, that he could not grow, and studies plants from all over the world in Kew and the Chelsea Physic Gardens. "My plants are survivors", he says, and in his imagination he has a "secret garden", with a special place for plants called "weeds".

Family life

Frank's poem "And we can learn", written in August 1996, has hope for all of us. It is about growing up in a working class area of London during the 1960s. It includes children finding ways of coping with parental violence, illustrated by the children's cartoon of "Roger the Dodger":

"With his philosophy on how to shirk and skive
But his father had a big moustache
A slipper in his hand."

And it is about families struggling against poverty. But, "though we came up from being poor... at an early age we learn how to stereotype... We harboured fears of black people" and "the mental people".

The hope for us all is in the last line, "I became one of them". Frank's breakdown was part of his life's journey of learning.

Starting work

Frank left school in 1966, when he was 15. He had "the prejudice/fear that a lot of people had towards the Caribbean families who were moving into the area that I lived in". He had grown up with the belief that "these people were lazy

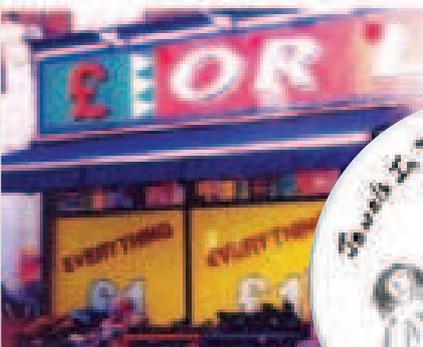
and scrounging off the Welfare State". But "when I saw the discrimination towards black people at the labour exchange, it was the beginning of a long period of learning".

The contradiction in Frank's life was that, despite the racist stereotypes he had inherited, "I liked the black music of that time, including the Ska/Reggae that came from Jamaica."

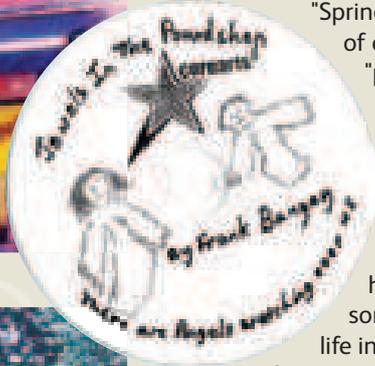
In his early twenties, Frank started work as a hospital porter and then as a hospital orderly. Here he was working alongside people from the Caribbean and learnt how hard they worked. His depression started at the same time, and the subsequent breakdown and hospitalisation taught him "what it was like to be prejudiced against and stigmatised". As a result of his breakdown, Frank met more black people and through personal relationships "started to see things differently". Nowadays, much of Frank's most creative work is done in collaboration with a close personal friend, the Congo born gospel poet and singer, Sophie Mirrel. You can find them both on YouTube.

Jewels in the Poundshop

Frank Bangay

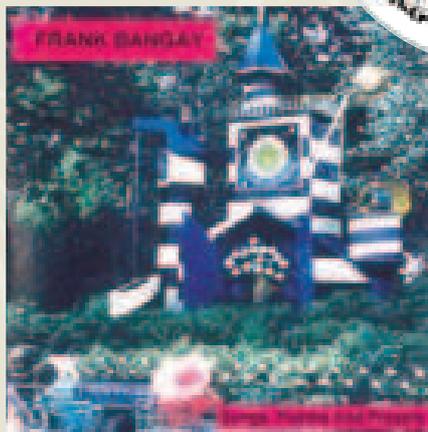


The cover of Jewels in the Pound Shop



in Springfield Hospital, Tooting, South London. Not all his experiences there were negative. He helped Kieran Brown, an Occupational Therapist, to produce *Springfield Words*, a magazine published by the hospital. It contained

"Spring is Rising", a poem of conviction that "peace in our hearts" is "more than a dream" if we "sing out loud" and "make it real". In 1979 Frank helped to organise a half hour of poetry and songs based around life in Springfield Hospital, featuring Kieran, himself and Dave Dorling, who was also a patient in the hospital. It was staged at the Troubadour and "quite well received".



The front cover of "Songs, Poems and Prayers"

Depression, poetry, recitation and publication

Back in the early 1970s, Frank found that expressing himself through poetry helped him to disperse the gloom of his anxiety and depression. He discovered the Troubadour Poets who held Monday night poetry evenings at the Troubadour Coffee House in Earl's Court, and he began reciting his poetry there. One of his earliest poems, "Fear", was published by Troubadour Poets in late August 1974. It is deeply personal and vulnerable: "You tell me that I frighten you, well I never intended to... I'm not a tough man... there are many times when I am afraid... afraid of isolation ... afraid of my superiors... afraid of love... And sometimes I'm frightened of you my friend."

Springfield Hospital

Frank's 1985 poem, "Food and Shelter", relates to experiences in 1976 to 1978 and "the revolving door system that we can get caught up in once we enter the psychiatric system". Frank was a patient

catalyst for the revolution that led to the formation of Survivors Speak Out in 1986, although, again, Frank and the other CAPO members did not involve themselves in the organisation when it was formed.

Solidarity 1985

Many of Frank's poems are combined with pictures that he draws himself. In the 1980s he sold photocopies of these in pubs and coffee bars. "Solidarity", one of the best known, expresses the pain and the joy when people who suffer mental distress come together to work towards a more humane world:

"We cried together last night, but our tears were in solidarity with the sadness of the world, and through our tears we found strength."

Music, poetry and politics

At the end of the 1970s, Frank collaborated with musicians in the *Fighting Pigeons Band*. "Park Song" one of his most beautiful poems, was written as lyrics to one of their songs. "I saw you crying in the park today. I nearly felt strong enough to cry with you."

It seems to have been the need for a human approach to mental distress that brought Frank into politics. In 1979 he found some booklets by a group called PROMPT (Preservation/Promotion of the Rights of Mental Patients in Treatment). This group later became CAPO (Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression). In the 1980s, Frank organised music and poetry events ("Gigs") to raise money for PROMPT and CAPO. The first of these were at *The Metropolitan*, a public house in Farringdon, whilst others were at the Troubadour coffee bar in Earls Court. Many activists were brought together at these events. The television feature "We're not Mad We're Angry" in 1986, although eventually not involving PROMPT, was originally a PROMPT project. CAPO was also an important



Frank performing at Together in 2009

Survivors Poetry

Frank's work led to the formation of *Survivors Poetry* in 1991, to help people express what they think and feel through words, rhythm and song, and the *Survivors History Group* (which meets at Together) in 2005 to enable us to record and celebrate what we have achieved, individually and collectively, as people with mental distress.

Naked Songs and Rhythms of Hope costs £7.95.

The CDs are £10 each. (postage extra). Frank can advise you what is available if you email him at frankbangay@yahoo.co.uk.

The Survivors Poetry website is at <http://www.survivorspoetry.com/>

The Survivors History Group website is at <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>