

The Importance of Being Frank

Xochitl Tuck on survivor poet Frank Bangay

Born in Wandsworth, South London in 1951, Frank Bangay has known his life in London through the eyes, ears, heart and mind of a survivor of the mental health system and has put all these sensations into memorable words and gestures, becoming a local legend along the periphery of the mainstream poetry scene.

Frank left school at 15, to try a variety of work experience, but in his early twenties started suffering from severe depression and anxiety and was put on anti-depressants (mental illness has troubled him ever since). Finding that expressing himself through poetry helped disperse the gloom, he served his apprenticeship as a poet at the Troubadour Coffee House in Earls Court, where his confidence as a performer developed apace.

At the end of the 1970s, he collaborated with musicians in the Fighting Pigeons Band, and then got involved with the Survivors' movement in the early 80s as a campaigner for PROMPT (Promotion of Rights of Mental Patients in Treatment) which later became known as CAPO (The Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression). These groups had grown out of the Mental Patients' Union, formed in 1972 in Notting Hill alongside the local squatting community. The local squatters' organisation BIT found squats from which the MPU and COPE, the Community Organisation for Psychiatric Emergency, could carry out their crucial work, and another branch of the MPU was set up in Hackney.

The PROMPT office frequently received poems sent by people about their experiences of the mental health system, so Frank and PROMPT founder member Julian Barnett decided to put together a poetry magazine called *Mixed Emotions*. This was sold on the streets alongside their campaigning literature and at poetry venues.

In 1984, Frank started organising fundraising benefits, first at the Metropolitan pub in Farringdon, later moving to the Troubadour Coffee House where they blossomed. (This is how CAPO raised a lot of their funds as they were afraid that applying for charity status would mean they would have to tone down their politics. CAPO, like PROMPT, was a campaigning group). Some of the performers who took part were Peter Campbell ("a fine poet"), Mike Lawson ("who was very humorous – I called his act The Mike Lawson Experience!"), Richard McKane ("a great poet and translator of Russian poetry"), Davey Graham ("legendary folk musician and brilliant guitarist"), Joe Bidder and Hilary Porter ("wonderful people and poets"), and Razz and Sam ("Sam died in 2003, but they were a great duo").

In 1986, CAPO published a second poetry magazine called *What They Teach in Song*, the title of which is from a Shelley poem and was suggested by CAPO founder member Eric Irwin, who died in 1987. The efflorescence of survivor poetry that Frank had witnessed over these years convinced him that "our poetry and other forms of creativity are our only voice, and the only way we really have of communicating our experiences."

In 1990, CAPO produced its third poetry publication, *The Rhythm of Struggle, The Song of Hope*. It featured poetry, artwork, stories and articles on some of the many different issues in psychiatry and was an attempt to communicate both CAPO's ideology and the personal experiences of its members. Unfortunately, despite many attempts to keep it functioning, CAPO ceased to exist in 1991, and Frank became unwell.



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As luck would have it though, he had already made contact with Joe Bidder, Hilary Porter and Peter Campbell to discuss what could be achieved by setting up a group called Survivors' Poetry, whose name was inspired by the organisation Survivors Speak Out. Bushy Kelly at the Arts Council (who was later to run Survivors' Brixton workshops) keenly supported the idea and granted the initial funding, and by the end of 1991, the first writing workshops were up and running at MIND in Camden and the first gigs were held at the Torriano Meeting House in Kentish Town, a well known poetry venue started in the 1980s by anarchist poet, John Rety.

The organisation really started to take off in 1992 when Anna Neeta started an outreach project helping groups of survivors around Britain to set up local survivor poetry groups, and Frank organised performances and workshops in day centres, sheltered housing, psychiatric hospitals and other community settings around London. The landmarks of the latter group were the monthly events at the Hampden Community Centre near Kings Cross, where survivor poets and musicians were generously encouraged and promoted and given pay and status parity with established performers. Many new writers and musicians gained in confidence and motivation from this policy and from the approach and style of the workshops.

Frank remained with Survivors' Poetry until 1997, when he left to concentrate on a creative writing group he had set up at CORE Arts in Hackney in 1996. He then finally published his first book of poetry and illustrations, *Naked Songs and Rhythms of Hope*, and recorded a CD, *A True Voice Singing*, at CORE Arts, putting his poetry to a variety of musical backings performed by some of the many musicians there.

Speaking of his lifelong mission, Frank says: "How helpful creativity is when we have been through struggles. I see it as being important to communicate the experience of the mental health system to the rest of the world. We (the founders of Survivors' Poetry) all had slightly different outlooks, but shared a common aim. I didn't think of the organisation as a therapy group, but, as Joe Bidder once said, 'poetry can save lives!'"

In the last few years, Frank has also run a creative writing workshop at St. John-at-Hackney Community Space Centre, recorded a second CD (*This Topsy Turvy Life*, with guitarist Tunde Busari with whom he often works on stage, playing harmonica), and been broadcast on the *Life and Living* programme on Resonance 104.4 FM. Frank is currently recording with other musicians. His musical influences are delta/country blues, Afro-American gospel, punk (Wreckless Eric, John Otway) and 60s soul.

In 2004 he interviewed (the now late) Kevin Coyne, who wrote many mental health-related songs and influenced John Lydon. The interview was published in the February edition of *Mental Health Today* and on the *Life and Living* website at www.lifeandliving.net/bangay.html. The interview is to be republished with a three page article in *Splitting in Two* fanzine this June.

Frank believes that all these people and activities inform his own performances, and of his dedication and passion he says, "It's been a lifeline, being able to write!" You can catch Frank Bangay's mesmerising performances at venues around London. He is MC at East End Survivors and Outsider Poets events (**contact Dave Kessell on 0207 7900269 for details of open mic gigs**).

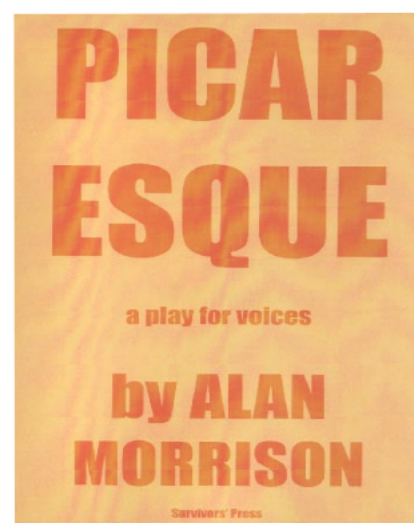
Surviving It All

Xochitl Tuck

On March 8 the wonderful Westwords Festival gave Survivors' Poetry an evening at Shepherd's Bush Library to stage Alan Morrison's *Picaresque – A Play for Voices*, and to present the work of seven outstanding survivor poets and musicians: Alistair Brinkley, Isha, Simon Jenner, Melted Demerara, Norrin Radd, Razz and Dave Russell.

Picaresque never descends into ranting despite being a bitter satire. It individually relates the experiences on the ground of the hard up and hard done by, as they describe the physical and psychic hunger they are left with after the crumbs they are so parsimoniously and self-righteously tossed by a society which just wants to keep them quiet and hidden away. Morrison's characters convey their heartaches and desperate humour through short soliloquies, revealing also something of their hostel-bound social system and dynamics. The half-hour play was flawlessly performed by Peter Holt, Simon Jenner, Robert Allwood, Alan Morrison and Razz, and hugely enjoyed by the audience, many of whom felt they had been exposed to a piece of verse of classical quality.

The rest of the evening was swept away by the fabulous performance spots of Al Brinkley whose song 'Bitter and Twisted of Finsbury Park' knocks your socks off; Isha's deliciously self-mocking poems; Melted Demerara's moving and uplifting poetry of singleparenthood and guilt; Simon Jenner's inimitably witty poem, '19 Keer Street', about his father; Norrin Radd's sharp take on male angst; Razz's hilarious jibe at 'Kylie's Bum'; and the inimitable guitar and songs of Dave Russell, which were perfect for rounding off another great talent-laden event.



[*Picaresque – A Play for Voices* is available from Survivors' Press, price £2.50. Please send cheque plus SAE to the main address.]