

# ‘Making Merry’

Transcription poems  
by  
Allan Sutherland

From the words of Robin Surgeoner

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## Nake

I remember,  
I was probably only four  
because I think it was before,  
definitely before I started school,  
because I couldn't walk till I was four,  
and I could swim before I could walk.

I remember being in the front garden  
with the baby-walker,  
and seeing a snake,  
which I'm sure was a grass snake,  
but running into the house,  
and I remember this, going 'It's a nake'  
and running into the house  
leaving the baby-walker behind  
and then my Mum bursting into tears.

And it wasn't the fact  
that there was a snake in the garden,  
(and of course this came to me at some point,  
you know, later,)  
it was the fact that I'd just run in  
without using the baby-walker.  
It was a big thing I guess.

## Hydro

I remember going to hydro  
at the hospital  
when I was probably three.  
(I remember  
what the hospital smelt like, even now.)

I had some kind of  
natural affinity with water,  
which has stayed with me,  
not necessarily open water,  
but water and the suspension that it gives you,  
the freedom that it offers  
the liberation that the water gives me.

I seem to remember  
that the physio said  
if you can do twenty lengths of the hydro pool  
then she'd buy me this truck,  
she'd buy me a present.  
Bribery always works, obviously.  
And doing it, and it being  
okay, right, I've got a truck. Sweet!  
Again, no real comprehensions  
other than that the water  
was just where I loved to be.

## Dogs

Walking like I do, I used to fall over a lot.  
I remember falling over in the park  
and the first time I put my hands through dogshit.  
I've never liked dogs since.  
Just one of those things  
coupled with the fact that,  
certainly when I walked in those days  
I had a really jerky, inconsistent walk  
that a dog couldn't get the measure of,  
so it used to freak dogs out  
and then they would bark and jump or whatever.  
I was unstable and then I'd get knocked over,  
so me and dogs, it's not a personal thing,  
it's more of a physical thing.

## School

The story goes that  
because I've got an elder sister,  
who's eighteen months older than me  
but a school year above,,  
when it was time for me  
to be looking at schools they went  
'well he'll have to go to a special school'.  
And me Dad's like 'why?'  
Well, because the child is a spastic child  
would have been the term.  
And my Dad's like  
well he's just as clever as his sister,  
why does he need to go to a different school?  
And anyway in the end  
my Dad said look, he's coming here.  
And then they put me on probation.  
Four, four and a half or whatever it was,  
I was on probation.

One morning in the P.E. lesson  
the Headmaster came into the school  
and was looking into the hall. 'Where's Robin?'  
And the teacher went 'up there'.  
I was hanging with one hand,  
you remember you used to have those big thick ropes,  
the big thick rope like they use for tug of war  
and I just pulled myself up hand over hand,  
you know and was just like 'Yo!'.

Apparently at that point  
the teacher said well fair enough, if he can do that  
then why are we worried about him being in school.

## Park Life

The first primary school I was aware of my differences  
but I just did whatever,  
because to the friends I'd grown up with  
I was just Robin.  
If I needed help climbing through the bush  
because they'd locked that park gate,  
then they would help me climb through the bush.  
It was just brothers in arms as it were.  
I got up to what every other  
six or seven or eight-year old  
wanted to get up to.  
I read Swallows and Amazons,  
and there wasn't a lake,  
there wasn't a broad in the middle of Reading,  
so we had to make do with the park and stuff.  
We had a railway line  
we weren't supposed to go near  
so we always did.  
Trees to climb that  
you were not supposed to be able to.  
So we did.



## Differentials

Going to a mainstream school there's things went on,  
presented particular issues,  
more so at secondary than primary.  
And so I did the swimming,  
that was the thing,  
that was my thing, I swam,

I remember winning the swimming races  
even those days. Most children of five and six  
aren't particularly good at swimming.  
As you get older,  
the swimmers start developing,  
differentials increase,  
not the skills or the quality  
but the speed differentials.

But then I'd got this whole other thing going on.  
I'm not going to say I'm cleverer than my sister,  
because I that really would be wrong.  
We have different intellectual capacities.  
She's studious, and erudite,  
whereas I like to think  
that I'm quick-witted and mischievous.  
I did once join Mensa, I got in,  
I've got a piece of paper somewhere  
with my IQ of 157 or whatever it is written on it.  
The point of that being whatever intellect I have  
is generally for making merry rather than academia.  
So I was always in trouble.

## **No man's land**

When we went to Hong Kong  
we were in a forces school,  
that's a different dynamic.

And of course when you come back  
to a mainstream non-forces school,  
you're always the outsider.

So then being an outsider  
and having an impairment is kind of,  
right that's your double whammy, you know.  
I think you can quite easily  
become the stranger, l'étranger  
in situations like that.

I always found myself  
in a sort of no man's land a lot of the time,  
not necessarily fitting in  
to the camp of the non-disabled, the able-bodied,  
but also not necessarily the camp of the handicapped.

I use that word quite deliberately in this context,  
because that's who you were seen as.  
And if you weren't cap in hand,  
you weren't asking,  
you weren't looking for help,  
then you were being rude or whatever.

So I do identify with this group of people  
who had things done for them,  
but then didn't really identify with the majority of,  
you know eleven/twelve year olds at this point.

### **As a child even though I walked**

As a child even though I walked,  
I used my arms for everything,  
even in walking.

Because I couldn't walk  
I used to just walk on my hands.  
Imagine a press-up,  
but just dragging your feet behind you,  
kind of like a seal,  
hopefully slightly more gracefully maybe.  
But that was it.

Even at eight, nine, ten,  
my shoulders were twice the size of my waist.  
That's what the girls like to see!  
Blond hair and muscly arms.

And so I had all this strength,  
I could do that kind of stuff  
and haul myself up walls,  
if I could reach the top I could get up it.  
If I could reach the branch  
I could get up to the next one kind of thing  
because there was just all power.

We weren't, you know  
in the Swallows and Amazons sense  
we weren't naughty kids, not that way,  
I've never been, certainly at that age,  
particularly naughty, just mischievous.

## Capacity

I can probably be honest  
and say that there were points in my time  
where I was quite rebellious.  
But I think it was that kind of,  
the transition from infant school  
to the army school  
because at six and seven it was fine, their expectations  
of a six year old child who walks funny  
and another six year old child  
don't manifest themselves in the same way.

But when you get to nine and ten  
they think that you're stupid  
because you walk funny.  
And then the whole expectation  
of who you are,  
and what you're gonna produce, change.  
And then I became badly behaved.

Not having my capacity recognised.  
There were certain teachers who did  
and then they'd get really annoyed,  
but generally the whole,  
my whole schooling career was based around  
not having my intellectual capacity recognised.  
So I got bored and just took the piss.

## Hong Kong

We lived in this block of flats  
two apartments to a floor  
and it was like three double bedrooms  
plus we used to have an amah.  
That was just what people did,  
they had amahs, which was  
a female Hong Kong servant.

All the sights and smells,  
when you see pictures on telly  
of markets in Hong Kong  
they are so like that.  
All the produce is alive in bowls,  
and the fish market was amazing.

So we lived in this big apartment  
and we had the amah and then  
we used to call him the chewing gum man  
but he was actually the fish salesman.

And for the boys,  
he would have a bag full of frozen fish-eyes  
which you could play marbles with  
till they thawed out. It was just a thing!  
But of course they're not completely round,  
so they don't roll the same either.

We lived in this twenty storey block of flats  
and we learnt that you could climb  
on to the roof of the verandah  
of the twentieth storey flat and look over.  
That makes me quiver even now,  
thinking about it, cause I hate heights.

## On The Beach

I started my swimming career in hydro,  
but then we went to live in Hong Kong for three years  
and fundamentally you went to school,  
for as little time as possible,  
then you went in the sea or a swimming pool.  
which meant that you went to the beach.  
it was on the edge of the kind of jungle,  
where the trees grow into the beach  
and there're all these billions of places  
to go and play action men in,  
you know and sail your action men  
and take them diving and have them climbing trees and falling off rocks.  
Action men were big in my life, it's gotta be said.

And of course, being a swimmer  
that was great and I could always hold my breath longer than most people,  
so I could take my action man down deep  
and talk to him under the water  
and do all sort of underwater actionmanney things as well.

The beach was ten minutes  
by however I got there in those days,  
I can't remember,  
took a trike or mum helped carry me.  
I'm sure I didn't go in a pram in those days.

## **How I walk.**

If you imagine I was walking down the road  
and every step there was a bollard  
that I had to swing my legs round,  
that's about my walk how it used to be,

but as I did it I would turn my feet over  
so I would scratch, so I would almost,  
I'd walk across the top of my foot.

So of course, Clarks' Commandos,  
(other shoes are available)  
were the school shoe de rigeur  
and I would wear them through in two days.  
Cause I would just literally scrape the top off the shoe.

My Dad managed to somehow,  
I don't know where he got this idea from,  
but a way of attaching,  
making like fibreglass resin toecaps  
on the outside of my shoes.

And I just hated it cause I looked such a twat.  
Cause I had these big things like bits of resin  
on the outside of my shoe.  
And yes it did stop me  
from ripping my way through shoes,  
but I hated it, absolutely hated it.  
But I can't walk in bare feet  
because I would literally scrape the top of my feet off.

## Orthopaedics

When I was in Hong Kong  
there's a place called  
the Duchess of Kent Royal Orthopaedic Hospital.  
It was local, you know in Sandy Bay.

I have a gazillion questions  
around disability and medicine  
and repairing versus not repairing.  
For me the issue is the attempts at normalisation.  
For me that's the biggy,  
that's where the big problem lies.

I had some operations at this hospital,  
It was world-famous,  
because that was where they did,  
this guy I can't remember his name  
but he pioneered this operation  
for straightening out spines.  
A lot of children in Hong Kong got polio  
and it resulted in curvature of the spine.

And then they invented this operation,  
kids'd be in hospital for two years,  
they'd have sort of a metal hoop  
literally bolted on their hips  
and a metal hoop that was screwed on to the skull  
and then bars joining them vertically  
which could be, a bit like a rack really,  
they would be unscrewed every so often  
to make the bar that little bit longer  
to pull the back out.

I mean, it was horrible,  
the pain that people went through,



cause you'd have to you know,  
try sleeping wearing two metal rings.  
And stuff like that.

I do remember,  
(and I know other people  
who've had this experience),  
the amount of photographs  
I had taken of me in underpants.  
And sometimes you wondered why.  
I would not want to malign any doctor  
but it still, you know if I think that  
somewhere there are pictures  
of me in my pants,  
it's a strange one really.

## Rebuild

I had tendon lengthening operations,  
which again ended up being in casts  
for ages and ages. Basically,  
if you imagine a piece of liquorice or something,  
what they do is, they don't cut it in half  
like perpendicular to the length,  
they slice it down  
like a runner bean would be sliced  
and then slide the two halves apart ,  
so they would rejoin at the bottom  
but then they'd be longer.

Then you'd be in casts,  
so it would give the tendon  
the chance to rebuild itself.  
It's kind of like splicing.  
So you'd get a thin bit  
and that would then have to rebuild  
to give it its strength,  
it's been months in cast.  
And then lots of physio.

And I just hated it.  
It was just, it was so obvious  
that it wasn't really ever  
gonna make any difference.

So what was the point of it?  
To make you walk more like everybody else.  
Well fuck that, really.

## **In the end**

In the end it was just a lot of pain  
without really any gain and I think,  
it was about trying to make me walk better,  
but morally was that the right thing to do?  
Would be the question,  
and not one I aimed at my parents,  
my parents are fab actually,  
they're extremely patient I think.,

It's not like 'oh they were allowed to operate on me,  
they allowed it to happen'.  
I don't see it like that,  
there wasn't a collusion or anything negative like that,  
it was 'well we think this can help',  
they thought it would  
and they're told well actually  
it'll make him be able to be more like his sister  
or whatever.

## The Trouble with Physio

Physio as a rehabilitative tool is great.  
If you've broken your leg,  
if you've pulled your back, whatever,  
you've gone from a stable position,  
something's happened  
and you need to get back to that stable position, cool.  
But I don't need rehabilitating.

Any need to habilitate  
is really not based on any physical need whatsoever,  
upon moral, philosophical, political or socio-economic maybe.  
But actually from the physical perspective: none.

You know, don't get me wrong,  
if there was a cure for my hereditary spastic paraparesis,  
and it meant that I didn't have  
to put up with the discomfort.  
Fine. I would probably be there.  
But not for any of the reasons that other people think,  
that you need to be able-bodied,  
you need to be like that,  
you need to be productive in this way,  
that's all, that's just bollocks.  
I don't need anyone to feel sorry for me  
I don't need power relationships in my life  
that are based on other people's interpretation  
of what they think I can do in my life.

I think that a lot of children  
have missed out on childhood  
by being made to do physio.  
And being made to take drugs  
that have dampened their cognitive capacities.

I walked as a child, a lot.  
Physio, and the damage physio has done to me  
is a long-term effect  
as opposed to a short-term gain.  
It's a major issue when it comes to my politics.

## Talking to Girls

The transition when we came  
back from Hong Kong was  
six months to go into secondary school,  
into a new school,  
all the boys are starting puberty,  
you know all would have  
football prowess and stuff like that  
and you came back and didn't have that,  
but was always very good at talking to girls,  
which always got me in trouble.

I certainly learnt how to talk to girls  
in a way that girls like being talked to,  
if that makes sense.  
And in a friendship way,  
not in a manipulative way.  
Older, story changes,  
like with everybody I'm sure  
but you know at that age it's about  
well you've got to make friends with somebody  
and actually the girls were  
a lot less morally or socially judgemental.

## Punk

In the broadest sense  
I got into being a punk.  
I mean I had many-coloured hairs,  
I got my ears pierced,  
I was the first boy at school  
to have my ear pierced.  
That's who I was,  
it's like 'shit I could get my ear pierced'.  
And then when everyone  
started getting their ear pierced,  
I then got both done. And then it was like,  
you're gay then aren't you mate.  
Okay, if that's what you wanna think,  
think what you want,  
I know I'm not but I could have been,  
but I didn't care.

And it was just to give  
a big finger to the authorities,  
cause you weren't allowed  
to wear ear-rings to school, so I did.  
And then I wore two.  
And I was told to take em out  
and I never did. Then  
I put another one in,  
so I ended up  
I had two in one and one in the other.  
I had blue hair, green hair,  
pink hair, purple hair. Bleached hair.  
I never had a proper mohican,  
but I was a swimmer.  
It simply made no sense  
to have a mohican, because  
when you're in the swimming pool

four, five times a week or whatever,  
a haircut like that, it's just in the way.

So I always had  
short, spiky, scruffy,  
messed-up kind of hair.



## Back pain

I remember, when I went to uni,  
I was having really really bad back problems.  
And my back problems  
stemmed from how I was made to walk,  
or from walking shall we say.

The biggest issue of my life  
is back pain, right now.  
Has been since I was a teenager.  
It's not about how far I can walk  
and all that shit, it's the pain  
and what that does to sleep patterns  
and all the rest of it.

I'd just started uni as a mature student  
and I'd kind of got switched over  
to the doctors in Birmingham,  
ah well we'd better see you at the orthopaedic,  
and they went well, maybe some Baclofen.  
I felt stupid for three days,  
if that sounds offensive I apologise to anyone.  
It's so, I was, it was like someone  
had put like a sort of you know  
a not quite opaque plastic bag  
inside my head  
so that everything was distant  
and like a fog,  
not a fog on the outside  
but a fog on the inside.  
I think what it did was probably  
made me forget that I was in pain  
or not be able to recognise that I was in pain,.  
There was no reparatory constituent of it at all  
I think it just dulled who you were.

I thought naah.  
But if that's what  
they're putting kids through in school.  
Well I know that they do,  
you know they wonder why kids,  
you know you see lots of kids  
dragging round special schools  
looking like they're vacant  
cause they've been drugged up,  
not because of any you know,  
and we know people that have been through that,  
you and I, not going to name any  
but I mean we know people  
who are creators of great contemporary work  
who as kids were seen  
as not able to think properly.  
And it was down to the fact  
that they were drugged up to their eyeballs.

## Down the Swanee

I got prescribed Tramadol  
and I remember taking it, now,  
jumping around a bit, you know,

I had as mis-spent a youth  
as anyone who didn't end up a drug addict,  
but I remember taking Tramadol  
and then having horrendous lucid dreams  
and waking up after the first time taking them,  
and my body going,  
'Have another one of those!'.  
And I'm like, it ain't right,  
this can't be right.

So I decided not to take any more  
but the next night being in pain,  
from reparatory surgery  
on my shoulders, through all the swimming  
and pushing the chair.  
So I still believe in that end of things.  
But then going whoah,  
I'll have to deal with the pain some other way.

I didn't actually realise,  
until only the other day  
(I was watching Designated Survivor,  
because all truth comes out of fiction),  
that Tramadol's actually an opiate.  
I didn't realise it was an opiate-based painkiller,  
perhaps I should have looked,  
but that makes so much sense to my head,  
because Co-Codamol I do the same,  
which I know is codeine-based.  
And I'd recognised the thing.

But they give you them  
and they don't go 'Be careful!',  
like you know take  
as many as you need to keep the pain away.

Hullo!  
If you have the propensity  
to have an addiction of that sort,  
then you'd be so easily down the Swanee.

## Ireland

We left Hong Kong when my Dad  
got a two-year posting to Northern Ireland.  
And we were there just six months.  
It was not a nice time to be there, '74.  
It was a difficult time.  
I can remember being spat at in the face  
by a child who knew  
I couldn't chase after him  
and kick the shit out of him because,  
whether I would have or not, I couldn't  
for being a Protestant army kid.

I got over it, I married a Catholic girl  
but I mean the things that you remember,  
I remember Ireland being a beautiful country  
but then going into Belfast  
and people with machine guns  
and things you couldn't drive through with a car  
and sentry posts.

Some of that stuff is still there  
and still quite prevalent,  
still quite obvious you know,  
I mean the wall art is amazing,  
you know there's some of the paintings,  
incredible paintings,  
what they depict is a bit more contentious  
but the art as a pure base of expression  
is amazing.

But actually, at that time,  
I don't think I can remember  
having any negative experiences  
strangely enough,

from a disabled perspective  
or as a disabled child at that point,

We came back  
after we'd been there for six months.  
My Dad's like I don't want you here,  
(There was a kid down the road,  
whose Dad's leg was blown to bits  
by a pillar-box bomb, and things like that.)  
I don't want you staying here.

So he would fly out to Belfast on the Sunday night  
and then fly back to where my parents still live  
in Camberley in Frimley, Surrey,  
and fly back to Heathrow on a Friday.

## **As a child fishing was my relaxation**

As a child fishing was my relaxation.  
Along with writing.  
So I started writing as a, as an angst,  
twelve, thirteen year old  
was when I first thought about using words  
and then punk happened  
which was like an epiphany.  
I had this swimming career,  
which I kept going  
through all of the things  
I shouldn't have done in my life.

I think actually  
if it hadn't been for my swimming career  
I probably would be dead by now.  
Because I still managed  
to do a lot of things  
I shouldn't have done.  
But I had this swimming as an anchor.

I learnt to ride a pushbike.  
Again, it's the most unsightly version of riding a pushbike,  
because it was all from my shoulders.  
I would literally go down the road  
by pushing one shoulder down  
to make the other knee come up,  
so then the bike would go forty degrees one way  
and then I'd use my shoulder to literally,  
you know like when you see them  
doing the mountain climb on the Tour de France.  
My Dad used to say, if I go past you in the car  
I think how bad this must look  
for any other driver on the road.

## **Rushmore Mallards**

My Dad had already done lifeguarding or whatever  
and decided we needed to go to somewhere  
that offered me some more swimming  
than just hydro or whatever was available.  
And then we joined a club  
called the Rushmore Mallards

At the time  
the majority of disability sports clubs  
were held on Sunday lunchtimes,  
cause that's when no-one else wanted to swim.  
But for me it was only a good place.  
And then I did my  
first junior nationals when I was twelve.  
I could already swim really really well.  
From then on in it was learning to train.

I'd got this amazing fitness and stamina base.  
I'd been taught to swim by army instructors  
and my Dad who also learnt  
how to become a swimming teacher  
and then coach and then umpire, referee  
and everything else you could be  
in the world of swimming  
to support the club that we were then part of.

I almost lived this parallel existence.  
There was Robin the swimmer,  
Robin the mischievous schoolboy cum fisher person  
and Robin the school-hating boy.  
I hated school, so, so much.



## The Incandescent Headmaster

I remember my headmaster  
being hauled in front of him  
for the umpteenth time  
and him being absolutely incandescent  
because I'd done something wrong yet again,  
but he couldn't give me the cane  
because he feared that giving me the cane  
was going to somehow  
be bad for my impairment.  
I did not disabuse him

My dad wasn't shy of smacking,  
again, it's an age, my dad smacked me,  
yes, it was a pointless exercise  
but that's how things were done fifty years ago.

I don't have a problem with it.  
I've never smacked my kids,  
or once maybe, once,  
I remembered how futile it was.

I think that the relationship I had with school  
would have been tainted a lot earlier  
so by the time I'm old enough  
to recognise those things  
I was just already a badly behaved schoolboy.  
I became a self-fulfilling prophecy,  
I was the wiseass in the class.  
But there were certain teachers  
that were really annoyed by this,  
would be like oh I'm so disappointed,  
because you're a clever bloke, you know..

Eventually I got a degree in philosophy.

## **Bloody nuisance**

I ended up having a kind of brain bleed  
which was a result of a combination of  
slipping over on ice while drunk  
and banging the back of my head  
and drinking far too much  
and probably some other things.

I just remember it hurting,  
then woke up with my head stuck to the pillow  
and then about four days later  
my mum came into the lounge  
to find me swallowing my tongue.  
Got rushed to hospital  
and then to Atkinson Morley  
which was a hospital in Wimbledon for brain injuries.

And I can remember it being so annoying,  
being in a really ungrateful way,  
because every hour they'd come and wake you up  
and go who's the prime minister,  
what's the capital of France.  
It's still Margaret fucking Thatcher  
who d'you think it is?  
Unfortunately.

And then being back in the pool  
three weeks later  
because I had the Paralympics to swim in 1988.

## Full Circle

I've swum in three Paralympics,  
couple of World Championships,  
umpteenth world records,  
don't want this to come across as immodest,  
I have this collection of things that I did.

But also managed to be badly behaved,  
enjoy sexual freedom  
of being a teenager and a young adult,  
coupled with being in a band  
and touring in a band  
and being played on John Peel,  
which was, back in the day, was amazing.  
We never got a live session  
but he played our music, you know.

I still now I'm  
it's kind of full circle, I'm coaching,  
and I'm coaching my daughter  
who is a would-be paralympic swimmer,  
I do arts and equality training.

And yet I still perform,  
and I still go out there  
and I still take no prisoners,  
less so now,

## **Faster, higher, stronger**

One of the casualties of the positive changes around inclusion is the loss of some segregated activities. And where the segregated activities gave people the self-esteem and confidence to go on to other things, people who would never even now be able to simply go to a public swimming session or join a local swimming club or local archery club or a local table-tennis club because the differential would be so big, there is then no competitive differential to allow them to be able to take part to then get to the point where you can become as good an athlete as you can be for who you are.

The principle of the Paralympics is the same as the Olympics, faster, higher, stronger. The Paralympics is exactly the same, all it does is it takes into consideration that you are being the fastest or highest or strongest that you can be and then there's gotta be some kind of strata to allow that, to categorise so that it's then fair.

If I joined Rushmore Royals, which was the able-bodied swimming club in Farnborough. I could never have competed for them because I'm a very very good swimmer for a swimmer with no leg kick. But then you put me against a twelve year old, who's a trained swimmer with a leg kick, it's not gonna happen.

Every town used to have a disability sports club  
under the auspices of what was called  
the British Sports Association for the Disabled.  
We lived in Surrey. We had our club.  
That was in Farnborough,  
Reading had a club, Basingstoke had a club,  
Windsor had a club, Woking had a club,  
Croydon had a club, Guildford had a club,  
Southampton had a club, Wantage had a club.  
What is now British Paralympics  
came out of that setup.  
But that setup doesn't exist any more  
in the same way as it did.

British Swimming are now finally taking it on board.  
But if you look at who they took  
to the last two or three paralympics,  
they were the swimmers  
that were as able-bodied as you can get.  
They were the top three, four classes,  
swimmers that, when they swim,  
they approximate to able-bodied swimming.

And we've still got swimmers  
who are just completely left behind  
because they did not fit the perception.

Disability sport, certainly swimming,  
and even track stuff  
went through this normalisation  
of you're good if you look able-bodied.  
So yeah Tanni Grey uses a wheelchair,  
but she presents as someone who's acceptable,  
if that makes sense.

## **Lady Godiva**

I took part in lots of protests,  
there's a great picture of me  
as Lady Godiva going through Coventry,  
There's me and Tom Commerford.  
At the front of a march through Coventry in our chairs  
but wearing these wigs made out of yellow wool.  
It was a kind of joint protest,  
it was a disability thing  
and it was at the same time  
as they were bringing in pension charges,  
local authorities charging pensioners for care.

And we managed for once  
to actually bring another body of disgruntled citizens,  
it was a joint thing  
so for those that don't know, listeners,  
Lady Godiva's protest was about taxes,  
that was why she rode through the streets of Coventry naked,  
as a protest to her husband.

And so myself and Tom Commerford  
Lady Godiva-ed ourselves  
and headed this march through Coventry  
naked except for woollen hair  
and marched, or rather rolled, to the Council House  
and then blockaded the Council House.

## Poetry in motion

I started as a poet,  
just trying to write things about,  
poetry seemed a way to express  
what I was feeling,  
I didn't want to hit anybody,  
I didn't want to break stuff,  
but I found that actually  
I could get really passionate, you know,  
and I can be writing and make myself cry,  
actually be that upset by what I'm writing.

The context of what I'm writing about, or really cross.  
That fuels the creativity, you know.  
Sometimes words then pour by the gazillion  
and you can't write them fast enough  
and other times you kind of, you do,  
you've got to metaphorically  
bang your head on the wall  
to find that word.  
Because that word matters.

I was doing that  
and then punk came out  
and I would sit upstairs in my bedroom.  
I didn't play an instrument at this point,  
I'd done a bit of classical guitar learning  
and hated it, hated the structure,  
hated the sound, hated the,  
well I didn't hate the teacher  
but I hated the teaching,  
cause It's just not me.

I had a metal wastepaper basket,  
which came from the BP garage,

so you can imagine hitting that  
with a pair of drumsticks.  
And I would put on first of all Deep Purple,  
not talking about 'Smoke on the Water',  
but much more punky, aggressive,  
'Speed King' and stuff like that  
that you could lose yourself in.

And of course then  
when punk came out,  
you could swear as well.  
Whoah!



## Obsession

I wasn't a performing poet as such.  
I was just a productive poet,  
because it worked for me.

Whilst I have never been diagnosed  
as having a mental health issue,  
I am very aware  
that I have managed my mental health  
a lot of the time through writing.

And at certain points through alcohol,  
but then that just proved to be disruptive  
as we all know,  
but it's easy to say that in hindsight.

It didn't ruin my swimming career,  
but it could have ruined everything, you know.

Even now the biggest driver for me is psychological.  
I'm an obsessed writer.

## Band

I had all these poems.  
I don't have an avenue to read them  
and I wanna be more organised also  
so I went back to how I'd listened to punk  
and what people could say  
and I thought well okay  
I could do that in my own way,  
so then I got hold of an electric guitar  
and decided to learn  
to teach myself to play it,  
very badly mostly in those days,  
I'm a bit better now.

And then made a band  
and just started doing stuff.

What is disability art?  
It is art that expresses my experiences  
of life as a disabled person  
and my interpretations  
of other people's experiences,  
not in a vicarious way  
but in an understanding empathetic way.

We'd do things in local pubs  
and in those days I was being looked at  
really really strangely.  
A bloke in a wheelchair playing guitar  
or if I stood up, looking really odd  
because I stand really awkwardly.  
So I did all that  
and I got better and better at playing the guitar  
and kept writing.

## **Dan Dare's Dog**

My reason I went to Birmingham  
had nothing to do with the fact  
that it was a red brick university,  
or Russell Group  
or whatever it's now known as.

It was that I'd got a place  
as a guitarist in a band.  
Cause my mate  
had gone to Birmingham  
and his best mate  
was a drummer in a band.

The band he was in,  
which were called Dan Dare's Dog  
had just lost their guitarist  
and wanted a new one.  
So I then auditioned and got in there.

Then I spent four years  
playing in the band but not really,  
I was writing poetry but I wasn't,  
we were an indie band.

It wasn't a disability arts thing,  
I was just a musician in a band  
who happened to be a Disabled Person.  
I actually think  
it did hold us back  
because we were really really good  
and had so many great reviews  
but I didn't look right  
and it was in those days  
in the late eighties, early nineties

when how you looked was so important.

I couldn't ever say that that was genuinely the case,  
but the music we played still holds up now.  
We were front runners, mood shapers, \  
ahead of the game  
doing grunge like Nirvana  
indie with drama

We were doing stuff like that  
before it was big over here.  
But we'd all grown up  
listening to more left-field  
kind of anarcho-punk alternative music.

And then we split up as a band,  
just that's what happens with uni bands,  
and apart from writing poetry I didn't do much.

But was much much more involved  
in the disability rights scene  
by this point.

## Get Back

I'd had this bit of hiatus  
of doing public arty things  
other than writing in the book

And then a really good friend  
died in hospital  
when he really shouldn't have.  
he'd gone in for an operation.  
I mean he was a tetraplegic,  
paralysed from the neck down,  
twenty-four hour care and stuff,  
but he was still really active  
in the disability rights world.  
And he'd gone in to have some simple intervention  
and died of an infection.  
It just shouldn't have been allowed to happen,  
but it did. I was asked  
to do something at his funeral  
and that was what rekindled writing and playing.

And then I'm like okay,  
I can do this, get back into it.

And at that point, things,  
that sort of mid-'90s to the early 2000s  
were a big time for disability arts,  
so I was on that thing.

## **I never did a lot in London**

I never did a lot in London,  
I never did Jackson's Lane,  
I think I might have done one GLAD thing.  
But I was in Birmingham  
and communication was different in those days, you know,  
and you had Alan Holdsworth  
performing as Johnny Crescendo.

Alan was dominant.  
He wasn't the only one  
but as singer/songwriter  
they didn't need anyone other than Alan,  
because he was just there, you know.  
And Alan's great.

I remember going to Hull  
for a DAN action cum BCODP meeting  
and Alan playing  
and me thinking I could be doing this as well.  
I'd met Alan years ago,  
because he'd done something for 'One in Four'.

I'd been kind of re-engaged  
with art as a performance thing  
through DAN and the BCODP stuff.  
And then kind of went on from that, really.

Then wrote a lot, lot more,  
did a lot of stuff as a singer/songwriter,  
different to Alan's.  
He's very good at that anthem mixing-alongey thing  
whereas mine's much more, I tell stories,  
If you look at any of my songs, they're,  
not every one of them obviously,

but a lot of them are little stories  
that have a beginning, a tail and an end.  
And usually it's some kind of long dilemma,  
disability rights, educative,  
if you're a non-disabled person hearing this  
it's telling you what you should be doing,  
if you're a disabled person hearing this  
it should be edifying.  
And then at the end happy ever after  
or not, depending how the song goes.

And so that's how I write songs  
and that's how I like doing the short stories.  
If you ever do see me live,  
even the stuff we're doing as a band now,  
that structure is there,  
but it's trying to couch it so that  
you don't feel you've been preached to.

## **I learnt a lot from Alan**

I learnt a lot from Alan.  
he always gave me a lot of work when he could,  
because what he recognised  
was that I had trod the boards,  
I've done all the time.  
I think he recognised that politically  
we were on the same perspectives,  
disability politics and stuff,  
but that I also wasn't someone  
who'd just come out of the woodwork  
expecting to be paid five hundred quid  
because I'd come down on the train from somewhere  
and done a poem.  
He knew that I'd spent fifteen years playing in bands  
and doing this and doing that.  
So actually getting paid for something  
was an absolute revelation.  
I remember the first ever disability gig  
I got paid for as an individual artist  
was like Wow! It was incredible.  
It was that sense of value.  
It's not about how much you got paid.  
And it's gone so far back from that now.  
People want everything for nothing  
and they think that you should be pleased.  
It's gone back to well  
you should be pleased that we're letting you in.



## **'Mine Won't Stand up in My Hand'**

There were two early pieces that I wrote  
that became performed by others.  
There was one called  
'Mine Won't Stand up in My Hand'.

It was done with a group of people,  
the majority of whom  
were recovering from having had strokes,  
life-changing strokes.

And it was a whole take on  
the Diet Coke advert about  
you know the kind of,  
sounds a bit bizarre but you know  
the women in the Diet Coke  
lusting after somebody and then this guy,  
used to be kind of virile builder guy.

And this was all about real people,  
but again taking their experiences  
and building it into a narrative,  
you know he loves Diet Coke  
but he can't get an erection any more.

So it's kind of a pretty white-knuckle ride if  
you're the wrong person.  
It was written as a piece  
that was then delivered with the people,  
but as a question, to front workshops  
and question and answer sessions  
about understanding disability and relating to it,  
whether that's from other disabled people  
or health professionals or whatever.

## **'Truth Heals'**

Josh would have been about ten maybe,  
and we were involved in Stagecoach.  
The principal of the school  
knew that I had started writing again  
but she said it would be really great  
to have a piece, an original piece,  
because we don't get original pieces.

So then I wrote this play  
which was entered into the then  
Birmingham and Solihull Theatre Guild Festival.  
I wrote this play which was about  
a load of kids at a theatre school  
going to a summer camp.  
Then it focuses on a relationship  
between the guy who's a wheelchair user  
and the girl who seems to be the principal of everything  
but when they go on this camp  
suddenly becomes really withdrawn  
and has always got her headphones on.

It uses this kind of  
Romeo and Juliet on the balcony  
kind of moment of him talking to her  
and then opening up to each other  
and he's about his worries  
about how people see him as a wheelchair user,  
whether he's fanciable.  
So it's a very teenage thing.

And then her opening up to him  
that the reason she always learns her lines,  
and the reason she's always  
got her headphones on like this,

is because she has dyslexia.  
So she gets all her scripts sent to her on tape,  
but has never told anybody this.

And then how this opening up  
of who they are to each other  
is the healing element of it,  
so taking the nuances of learning  
or the nuances of the relationships  
you have as a disabled person as positive ones.

For me it was  
a really pivotal piece of writing  
that made me realise  
that I could write something  
that was a bit more substantial  
but still kept my core ethos of  
disabled people helping each other  
to empower themselves,  
or empower each other within the scenario.

And it was from that  
that I then went on  
to really get the idea  
that I had the belief in myself  
that I could write a one-man show.

## **Paying for Poetry**

Ju and I have talked about this,  
that so many disabled artists  
are having to not be artists,  
because they simply can't afford to anymore.  
A lot of my work,  
what enabled me to be a artist  
was that I got a lot of work as an empowerment trainer,  
and arts and empowerment trainer.

And of course, the arse has fallen  
out of being an arts and empowerment trainer  
because, it's not that there isn't the call for it.  
I could give myself away  
twenty-four hours a day for nothing,  
but ask for some money for it,  
we can't pay for that,  
and it's not really important enough.

And how do you argue,  
we haven't got enough money  
to pay for personal assistance to change people's,  
you know grown adults' pants  
when they didn't get to a toilet in time.  
How can we justify therefore paying for poetry?

## **My One Regret**

My one regret is  
I never got to meet Ian Dury .  
I was meant to and something happened.  
I think it was an insecurity issue  
and I never went,  
cause he was always my hero.  
But as a punk, not as a disabled person.  
I think as well as a disabled person.

If there's anyone  
that my songwriting is akin to ,  
and again I'm not trying  
to measure myself against him,  
but just stylised-wise  
it's about telling stories,  
that's where I get  
my songwriting and storytelling.  
It's Ian Duryesque.

Poetry and songwriting  
is about where  
you're splitting your sentence at a given point  
So you split the sentence  
but it's still delivered  
so that you get the two points  
of the sentence to give you the rhyming,  
or the syncopation or what ever,  
(I'm a very untechnical poet.)  
so that actually  
you think the line's finished  
but it hasn't,  
cause you carry it on  
with the next line.

## Angryfish

I'd been doing lots of stuff around disability art  
for a long long time in various things,  
you know music, poetry whatever.  
And then I decided that I wanted  
to put together an album.  
And I wanted a name.

Angryfish is a combination  
of three things as a start point.  
Me as a swimmer.  
And with a name like Surgeoner,  
I've been called Sturgeon many, many, many times.  
And probably, maybe some of that but obviously from a political,  
you know disability art, politics side of it  
I do have a bit of anger shall we say,  
frustration and anger.  
And it stuck, I just used it

There have been two incarnations of Angryfish the band,  
so that's me with other people  
coming in and doing various bits.

I put out an advert for disabled musicians to create a band.  
And so we ended up with a band of four,  
four guys, but not by intention, it's just,  
you can only come back to who applies.  
It was me, Phil on drums  
who's blind and looks like he was in Z.Z.Top,  
he'll be seventy-two this year, I think,  
and still plays like a young rocker.

And I know the impairments aren't particularly relevant,  
but just for making it make sense,  
the bass player's a guy called Ian

who lost a leg as a teenager.

And then the other guitar player,  
who's a guy called Sam,  
who's late twenties and has Aspergers,  
other kind of spectrumy stuff.  
He's also a songwriter and singer.

So Angryfish as an entity  
is a kind of malleable thing.  
If there's me, I am Angryfish.  
almost everything that I've produced  
in the last twenty years  
has gone under the name of Angryfish.

And I still run it and do things.  
So Angryfish is gonna stay,  
Angryfish is here to stay.  
Just occasionally becomes a flounder.

## **The Why Festival**

The whole point of the Why Festival,  
right from its inception,  
was providing safe opportunities for disabled people  
who are not at this point necessarily artists,  
giving them safe learning,  
creative performance opportunities.

So my rationale all the way through it  
was about creating new opportunities  
for new up-and-coming  
and, wherever it was appropriate,  
mid-career artists to perform,  
to have the opportunity to work together  
to create collaboratively  
and deliver performance pieces.

Funders forget the me and yous of this world  
that are artists who wanna just do their art  
and want to help other people  
become the artists that they could be,  
or even don't yet know that they could be,  
by offering those really kind of  
small windows of opportunity.  
There's a poet now called Kuli Kohli  
who had been doing some poetry,  
had written lots of poetry  
but would not perform them.  
She's a forty-something,  
maybe even fifty-something year old  
Asian woman with CP, married, got kids,  
she's written her own back story,  
you don't need that from me,

So she came along



and she said I could do all this,  
write all those things,  
but will you perform them for me.  
And I went no. No I won't.  
Not in a horrible way, you can do it,  
she said I can't, I can't.

Without going through the whole process,  
I gave her the confidence that she's now,  
she's doing trips to foreign places,  
reading her poetry.  
So you know I've been completely usurped.  
She sends me everything and there's always like you know,  
I didn't help her particularly,  
I didn't help her as a poet,  
I helped her as a performer of poetry.  
But she's gone on.

Robert Punton , I don't know if you know Robert.  
He's now kind of operating as  
Robert Punton or the Bitterfly,  
sort of play on butterfly.  
Again he had CP, got speech issues.  
But he's now recorded  
a thirty-track poetry CD in my place,  
he did his first course with me  
ten years ago probably and then he did  
'All the Things We Could Have Been'  
and its like 'I can do this!'

But without opportunities  
like I've always tried to offer  
those people they may not have found themselves  
and this opportunity to be who they are inside  
without that kind of safe environment to do it.

### **In terms of current output**

I'm writing, but I'm writing in a way  
that's just, it's very organic.  
I mean my writing's mostly been organic anyway,  
but it's like, you know there are bits  
and they're very kind of acerbic.

Occasional vitriol,  
if that wasn't a contradiction,  
I'm full of occasional vitriol.

But I suppose without  
compromising the quality of it,  
because what I don't want to do is just become  
Angryfish actually is angry poet,  
cause I'm not.

So although the name suggests it,  
there needs to be a turning point  
in the conception of angry  
to actually creatively, constructively positive.  
There you go.

## Festival

I went to see Ruth Gould  
and we spent a lot of time chatting.  
She was really good,  
really supportive,  
said she'd mentor any ideas I'd got.  
So that was great,  
but it was the ideas  
I've already talked about,  
about doing a mix of  
bringing in some established artists to,  
when you've got your performance ready,  
the idea is that, like any support act,  
you're coming in and you've got an audience  
because someone's come to see  
somebody bigger than you. That's the theory.

A bit later, Ruth contacted me  
and said can you come and see me,  
I've been asked to throw together  
a strategic funding thing,  
looking at the six areas  
of lowest engagement in the arts,  
which included the Black Country,

She liked the whole concept of it,  
so she then built the concept that I'd put together  
into being a sort of foundational bit  
of this National Disability Arts project,  
so I was invited  
from having had this original concept  
to then be the lynch-pin for anything in the Black Country.  
I embraced what I was gonna do for the West Midlands.  
I needed to come up with a name  
and I came up with the Why Festival.

## Why 'Why'?

My concept is that  
the Why Festival  
is not about why not.  
Why is a much bigger question,  
why are you doing this,  
why haven't you done it,  
why aren't you doing it,  
why can you do it,  
why shouldn't you do it, how,  
why is that what you're doing.

It was meant to be a positive 'Why?'.  
'Why can't I?' 'Why shouldn't I?'  
Not 'why aren't you?'.

It's meant as a much more positive reflection on,  
perhaps effectively the same questions to some degree.  
And so all the stuff I then did  
under the strategic touring grant in the Black Country  
was done as the Why Festival.

## Glass House

We ended up doing an event  
at a really great venue  
called the Glass House, in Stourbridge.  
It was a college for young adults  
with non-neurotypical behaviours.  
And kind of associations, so there were  
some kids with physical impairments,  
young adults, sort of range of people,  
but this college was a tertiary place about learning,  
but learning about art skills and using glass.

So the Glass House is still there, it's like a,  
got lots of mini-workshops  
for contemporary artisans,  
it's a really, really interesting place.  
But it's also got histories  
of glass in the area and all kinds of things.

They also have this incredible performance space,  
because the college students  
as part of the broader bit  
of what they were doing,  
were doing performancey-type things,  
or had the space to do it.

So you got DJs and  
all kind of manner of things going on.  
I was able to put in local artists,  
but then we had the touring artists that came in,  
Krip Hop and Gareth Berliner and Karuna Stammell,  
as the sort of headline acts.  
But it was so difficult to sell space,  
to get people to them,  
then brought in all these other artists,

like the local artists who were  
just chuffed to be getting an opportunity.

I massively, massively underpriced it  
to get it under the fifteen grand,  
for effectively a two-year project,  
so most of it I did for free.

We built on it  
and then did loads of work around it,  
lots and lots of workshops,  
but then bringing that all together  
came all the bits of  
'All the Things We Could Have Been'.

## Workshops

What I got really good at was  
getting people to sit in a place,  
brainstorm, come up with a few ideas  
then work on those ideas  
so that we'd end up with  
so many flipcharts or whatever and drawings,  
and my cartooning got better, it's still crap but, often  
you got people who don't have  
reading skills or good reading skills  
so being able to use pictures as well.

And then kind of collating those together  
and all through agreement,  
saying okay well this means this,  
so as a set of words, cause obviously  
a lot of people who don't have English,  
written English, you know reading and writing,  
still have a reasonable understanding  
of the spoken English.

So then, putting it all together  
and coming up with, you know saying  
well this picture, that word, those things this means  
we wanna choose what we wanna do.

And then you literally put in building blocks,  
the bit that I would do generally,  
I would take what I usually classed as  
my box of hitty-bangy things  
and occasional blowy things  
I would come up with what mood do we want,  
do you want this to be a slow song,  
do you want this to be a jumpy up and down song,  
and then produce a simple set of chords  
that would drive a melody.

The whole point of it was about  
empowering people to do something different  
and to think about themselves in a different way,  
and I would say to people,  
I want you to be creative  
and if at the end of the day  
all you've done is go AAAGH  
and we've got that recorded in some way,  
that is as valid a contribution  
as 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'.

Because it's your contribution about you  
and your relationship with the world.



## **'Permission to Speak'**

I did a lot of workshops  
which were called 'Permission to Speak'.  
Very much exactly what I'm talking about.

And this is when Robert Punton came on,  
and other people  
who are now doing bigger things.  
And some who just  
really really enjoyed the experience.

That was through local authority funding  
when it still existed. So they ended up in workshops,  
I did a whole series of workshops  
in the bottom of the ICC  
in Symphony Hall in Birmingham.  
It was a great place,  
cause sometimes places  
just being there give you  
a sense of 'oh I can be artistic here'  
because of where it is.

So it would be a series of days  
of building up about how they work,  
and there was never any prescription  
about what people had to do,  
but I always had a bass guitar.  
I always had a guitar  
and some hitty-bangy things.

So people would then choose  
what they wanted to create.  
They might just want to do spoken word  
or it might have gone,  
well can you help me write,

can you turn this into a short song or whatever.

So that was 'Permission to Speak'.  
it wasn't about saying  
you can talk now at all,  
it was about the whole political notion  
of who you are  
and it's okay to have questions  
about how you're treated  
and how you engage with society  
because of barriers.

## **‘All the Things We Could Have Been’ (1)**

Then I had this idea  
to write a one-man show which became,  
(I invented the title right at the beginning,  
so it was one of those few things  
where the title came first),  
‘All the Things We Could Have Been’

It’s taken my story  
and lots of other people’s stories  
that I understand  
or had tangential relationships with or whatever

and my understanding of the world as I see it  
to create this kind of story arc  
which goes from being a completely misunderstood teenager  
to coming out the other end of it  
as a self-determined artist, agent provocateur,  
disability activist whatever.

It’s a kind of rite of passage thing,  
from being a disabled child  
and being treated as a disabled child  
through to at some point  
finding out who you are  
and starting to stand up for who you are.

So I wrote ‘All the Things We Could Have Been’.  
I’d made the decision  
that I wanted to be able to perform it  
as a solo show and be as portable as possible.  
So I designed it around,  
I would write the piece, I would create,  
any scenery would be portable  
and that I could put up as a wheelchair user.

And that I could literally perform solo  
without wanting to compromise,  
compromising as little access as I could.  
The show ended up as a solo performance.

The whole play is set in a pub  
called 'The Hasty and the Hurting'. And it's the pub  
that's next door to the pearly gates.

I play both the landlord  
and the narrator and the performer  
Behind me, running on a video screen  
is what looks like a stage,  
with 'The Hasty and The Hurting'  
written across the back of it.  
And then there's a sign language interpreter filmed,  
already doing the sign language  
of my performance.

But I'd made all of those decisions,  
that was how I would do it  
before I'd written it, so then I had to work out  
how on earth I write something that I can pace,  
with the sign language going on behind me.

So it's all written in,  
almost entirely in couplets.  
But some really, really complicated ones  
that do bear out  
as you get through them  
I really didn't compromise at all  
on any of the rhymes  
to get me the story that I wanted to give.  
The underlying idea  
that I'd written it,  
or half the reason I'd written it, that way

was so that I could then  
give myself a metre  
to be able to play in time  
with what I couldn't see was going on behind me.

No rhythm track going tss, tss, tss,  
because that would just  
annoy the shit out of everybody.  
And I tried doing a bit of  
rappy singing version of it.  
It doesn't work in that sense,  
cause it's prose rather than poetry I suppose.

So I then created this piece and then it's got,  
its got four songs in it,  
again the soundtrack was recorded  
without the vocal,  
so I would then sing the vocal,  
so that's in the video as well.

I had some mantras in it as well,  
which were sort of built in  
as natural breaks for me,  
which were pre-recorded  
but I could choose to say them  
at the same time,  
'nobody noticed, nobody cared,  
prepare to be frightened, prepare to be scared'.

Another one was  
'who died today,  
who died today, who died today,  
what did the papers say  
they said nothing'.

it was really early around the whole

people dying because of the result of  
changes to benefits and stuff like that  
And this was really prophetic.  
Six, seven, eight years after I'd written it  
people were still saying  
how did you see all this back then.  
I haven't, nothing's changed,  
it's just that other people  
now see it, if that makes sense.

## **'All the Things We Could Have Been' (2)**

So I created this show which,  
when I do it as a solo show,  
it's about an hour and ten minutes.  
People that have seen it,  
it might not be the most polished piece of art,  
and it's so long that I don't know it off by heart,  
but I don't pretend to.  
I bought myself a massive big black book  
and I use it, kind of Domesday thing,  
I read through it,  
but make it part of the performance.

And it's amazing when it's there,  
how little you do look at it  
cause you just need to see little bits of it.

And so the show ends up, so  
there's me as the only live person as it were,  
the video running,  
with music tracks in it where appropriate  
and the sign language interpreter,  
and then there are three guests.

When the landlord speaks as the narrator,  
there are various other references  
about who I am  
and how I see my people,  
but then comes this whole thing  
about my people  
and being the activist disabled population.

It covers this huge breadth of things,  
from euthanasia and aborting disabled fetuses  
through to careers offices

and there's a massive thing  
of what life is as a Disabled Person.

One song is sung by a young woman  
who genuinely has paraplegia  
but her title in the show  
is Miss Paralysis.  
And she does this heavy rock rap.

And then my son Josh,  
who is also a wheelchair user  
plays the character  
of the Little Limerick Laureate.  
He delivers six, seven or eight  
really completely un-PC,  
disability-focused limericks.

And the biggest,  
probably the longest separate section,  
which is about half way through  
is a story called 'The Red Hand from Ulster'.  
And it tells the story of the hand,  
the hand that went on  
to live for time immemorial,  
having been chopped off  
and thrown on the shore.  
It's a little baby story  
of absolute independence:  
even if you're only a hand,  
if you learn how to live,  
you can do it on your own,  
you can live.

It's written in chapters  
so it's not just an 80,000 word poem,  
so you can use any given chapter



as the beginning,  
for a workshop.

So whether you're doing disabled people,  
or social workers or whoever, it's there  
and it's a real strong critique,  
a lot of people are like really, of what?  
Particularly when  
they're not Disabled People.

## **'The Impact'**

There is a chapter called 'The Impact'.  
And actually it's all about my realisation as a late teenager  
of what Michael Oliver called the Social Model.  
Which I was living long before I had the name,  
but in terms of being able to externalise it,  
literally, on stage,  
it hit me like a slap in the face.

It's both a positive and a negative realisation,  
because it goes on to focus on the fact that  
okay, you can feel better  
that it's not you who says that,  
you go through that externalisation  
from self-blame to what's been done to me,  
but actually is that recognition any more comfort?

Because do people not want you,  
do people not like you  
because of your disability?  
There is a real sting  
in the tail of that self-realisation.  
Sometimes, while it's not in the play,  
the whole idea of ignorance being bliss,  
maybe it is, maybe you're not always -  
I've been accused, I can remember,  
but if you tell people that,  
they're gonna be more unhappy as they realise  
that they're being discriminated against.  
Yeah, but I'm still gonna tell them.  
So there is that sort of double-edged sword to it.

## Omnibus

I thought this needs to come out again,  
what shall I do with it?  
So then I thought, this moves on  
to then becoming the omnibus.

I then put a proposal to ACE  
to use the original performance piece  
as the introduction to a series of  
creative writing, creative discovery workshops  
they were eight weeks long, one day a week.  
I got the money and booked out rehearsal space  
and the end of course performance  
in the main auditorium.

We did one at Newhampton Arts Centre  
in Wolverhampton,  
and then the second one  
at a place called the Blue Orange,  
which is an independent theatre in Birmingham.

I would perform the piece  
in its original format.  
And then have the discussions  
about how did that make you feel.  
The purpose was that then  
each of the people that were in the cohort  
devised themselves a character and then  
that got slotted into the main performance.

So from the original narrative  
I would then adjust the little bits  
to be able to fit in.  
Changed some of the continuity,  
so the whole play still started at one point

and finished at the same end point,  
the play opens with the song  
'What Could Have Been'  
and finishes with the song  
'Don't Ever Give Up'.

I brought in a dramaturg as well,  
who helped with running,  
giving people some performance and drama skills.  
Guy called Patrice Naiambana,  
who's pretty well-known  
he did what I asked him to do  
but he became so engaged by the process  
that he came up to me and said  
can I have a part in this?

I wanna write my own piece and put it in,  
and he came in as this kind of African overlord  
came on stage, with an AK47  
and an anti-Mugabe T-shirt  
and all kinds of things.

So then the show ended up  
going from an hour and ten minutes,  
to being a show in two halves,  
which ended up being  
two hours and twenty minutes,

And then the band  
the band that is now Angryfish  
became creators in their own right  
and had their own spoken word pieces  
within the broader thing.  
The songs became played live  
and then we had to use an interpreter.  
She was lovely,

she was really good,  
but she's a proper arts interpreter,  
not just someone  
from the local list of interpreters.  
And that was amazing.

And people were like when can we do the next thing,  
when can we do the next thing.  
But you can't do the same thing again.  
No matter how fucking well it works.  
From the Grants for the Arts thing,  
it just seems it's gotta be,  
it's gotta change, it's gotta move,  
it's gotta evolve.  
From my point of view,  
there's 10,000 disabled people  
who could benefit from taking part in this  
and learn about themselves.

And all of this  
goes under the banner  
of the Why Festival.  
Whatever I do,  
if I'm doing anything public  
that is more than me being asked  
to go and do something,  
it comes under the Why Festival.

## Being Angryfish

I don't hide behind my guitar  
but it's a barrier if you like.  
It's the protection as a performer.  
And when I sing, a lot of the time,  
so I think not so much now  
but there've been various points  
where I go on stage  
and I am being Angryfish  
as opposed to  
Robin Surgeoner with a guitar.

So you're stepping into that character  
and putting on the armour  
that that character delivers  
to be able to go out there  
and often do things, bits of performance  
that are really quite questioning,  
undermining, abrasive as well as,  
it depends on who you are,  
because for me,  
if you're a disabled person  
and you understand where I'm coming from  
or begin to, you see it as an uplift,  
you see it as a fillip,  
you see it as solidarity and cohesion.

## **'Fascist Fucking'**

We'd entered this Battle of the Bands  
and one of the bands,  
and their very physical supporters  
were obviously a right-wing band.

And we went on  
and you could hear from the crowd  
what are they doing on there,  
they should be in homes,  
put 'em in hospitals.

Them not knowing that  
my brother-in-law, and his mates,  
were all about six three,  
they had this big band of them,  
they're not rugby players but fucking big guys.

So I changed our set and then  
finished with this song, 'Fascist Fucking',  
which is an out and out punk song.

The chorus is something like  
'you've gotta screw these fascist morons  
and their politics of perfection,  
you've gotta demonstrate how wrong they are  
through rioting imperfection,  
you've gotta take these dickheads by the throats  
and throttle their obsessions'.

I was so cross and the band  
I don't care, you said we've gotta do it, we'll do it.  
And then they got really cross,  
and the other band were on after us.  
And there was an absolute ruck,

because when we'd got off  
and they knew we were safely offstage,  
our supporters, this other band came on  
and were trying to give it some  
and they just went in  
and kicked the shit out of them.

I don't condone violence  
but there was a certain retribution needed at that point,  
in a not hospitalisation sense  
but you can get away with a lot  
in a mosh pit that you really shouldn't,  
shall we say.



## **'The Last Time Ever I Saw Your Face'**

Then I wrote 'Black Thursday'.  
'Black Thursday' is the title track  
and it's all about election days.  
But there's a song in there called  
'The Last Time Ever I Saw Your Face'. ,  
the premise of the song is that  
you should never go out of the front door  
or close the bedroom door  
or storm out of an office  
or whatever  
without resolving an argument.

Because you never know  
what's gonna happen  
the other side of that door,  
the other side of that argument.  
And so the story's about loss  
and it finishes with the line  
'and we never got a chance to say goodbye'.

I remember one of the first times I did it,  
was at one of the early Why Festival performances  
and Krip Hop were there.  
Sasha, who plays the psycho,  
his stage name is Psycho,  
just massive big German guy,  
comes from a mental health background.  
he said you bastard, I said what?  
He said how am I supposed  
to go on stage. I've been crying.  
I listened to that song in the green room  
and I was in tears.

I can't always play it.

If I'm in the wrong mood  
I can't play it because,  
if I am feeling a bit vulnerable,  
I'll choke halfway through,  
it's that powerful, and it's not even,  
it is real because it's real  
in the sense of it's not one person's story,  
It's many people's stories.

## **'Far Queue'**

There's a song on 'Black Thursday'  
called 'Far Queue',  
which is all about the experiences of music festivals.

It's probably the one comedy song I've written.  
Which goes down well  
when you've got a good audience,  
they pick it up almost instantly.

The first verse goes,  
'I was trying to park my motor  
'at V just the year before,  
'people climbing out of camper vans  
'and falling to the floor.  
'So I asked the parking marshal  
'what I should do.  
'He said there's parking over there  
'for the likes of you.  
'But when I saw where he was pointed  
'and what I had to do,  
'I turned back to the marshal  
'and said "Far Queue".'

And then it's twelve-bar, or sixteen bar.  
But then it comes back in with  
'he said you what, I said "far queue",  
'he said you what, I said "far queue",  
'he shook his head, he said  
'you come to these events  
'you expect us to provide a wheelchair tent'.

And then it kind of goes on like that.  
And then each line ends with 'far queue'.  
But without actually saying it.

And then I do it and I do it,  
and people pick it up really really,  
it's just, there's a stop, so it goes  
'and I was talking to the marshal and I said',  
then the music stops and I go 'far queue'.  
But the very last line says  
the service and the atmosphere are just crap,  
so you loose your tongue and loose your mouth  
and shout 'this is really bad service'.

And whatever it is,  
whatever comes out at the end line it's not what,  
the whole audience has gone FAR QUEUE!  
And I go 'No, rude!'  
And I'll add a bit on the end.

## **Rights and responsibilities**

I think everybody needs  
to know what their rights are.  
We are supposedly born  
with inalienable human rights.  
Unless you're born a disabled person  
or you acquire an impairment  
and then apparently that inalienable ability  
gets zapped away.

But at the same time,  
if you embrace your rights, you have to do it in a way that,  
you have to be responsible  
for how you then fight for your rights  
or engage in your rights.  
And therefore you have to be responsible  
about your actions  
in pursuance of your rights.

What I always liked about DAN historically  
was it was non-violent public demonstration.  
You know, chaining yourself to a bus isn't violent,  
holding a placard isn't violent.  
But for me when they were going  
to go to such and such and throw red paint ...nah.  
Because that's not responsible. For me, you know  
some people would call me a jesse  
if I say I'm not doing that.  
And in the same way as  
I'm not gonna put a bomb  
under the houses of parliament,  
because there is a point,  
if you start down that road  
where does that road end up?  
It ends up in civil war and terrorism.

And that might sound really dramatic.  
But I think that you can't expect people to treat you,  
if you want your rights  
and you want to be treated in a way  
that befits those rights,  
you have to behave in a way  
that befits those rights.  
Does that make sense?

To have rights  
you have to respect other people's rights.  
And that's where the responsibility comes in.  
For me there is a big difference.  
Freedom to speak and freedom of speech  
and for me freedom, the freedom of speech  
doesn't mean being allowed  
to impinge on someone else's liberty.

It's that kind of,  
you've gotta be really careful,  
that what you don't do,  
in the fight for your rights, is end up  
creating your own kind of mob mentality.  
I would never want to do that.

## **I would like to see**

I think, if I was to say  
what do I think of disability arts now,  
I would like to see us getting back  
to the opportunity for Disabled People  
to celebrate with each other inclusively,  
but what I really feel, what's been lost  
was that momentum of who we are.

You know when,  
it seems it's utterly okay  
in the able-bodied arts world to have cabaret,  
yet it's like oh no we've done that in disability art,  
you can't do that any more.

Well why not? People loved it.  
You can't have mixed cohort events.  
You can't have comedians on with poets and bands  
and do disability art within it,  
cause you can't.

I would love to see that back  
all the stuff that we did as the DAFs  
was fabulous,  
and that somehow got lost  
in the misunderstanding of inclusion.