"The labels pin them down"

An Interview with Mervyn Morris
by Pam Mordecai

Pam Mordecai: There have been, I think, a few definitions of dub poetry, and I would refer you to one that recently appeared in Ted Chamberlin's Come Back To Me My Language. He talks about the business of what the word "dub" originally means, which is putting just the music on the reverse side of a reggae piece and somebody else doing their own words to that music. And then he says: "Dubbing words over a musical background became common enough that dub poetry came to include any rendition incorporating reggae musical rhythms and any verse combining reggae rhythms with local speech." How would you respond to that as a definition of dub?

Mervyn Morris: That may do; I'll talk about Ted's thing in a moment. What might be more useful is for me to tell you when I first heard the term, and from whom under what circumstances. Because I first heard the term from Oku Onuora, whose name was then Orlando Wong, and his notion was that dub poetry, which he had started trying to write, was poetry that incorporated a reggae-rhythm; and you might find that you should be able to hear the reggae-rhythm whether there was music playing behind the voice or not. That was sort of his central definition, which he gave me in 1979. Now, later on Oku, who personally I regard as the sort of source for a lot of my notions about what dub poetry is, because he has really been someone who's been thinking about it quite a long time—

- I saw recently a documentary in Toronto, on dub poetry - and I hope I am not misinterpreting or misquoting them - but they said that dub poetry originated with Oku. Is that true?

Well, they may have got that piece of information or misinformation out of an

1 The following interview was conducted in Kingston (Jamaica), on 7 January 1993. The discussion was transcribed by Marlies Glaser and edited by Gordon Collier, who has supplied the notes that follow.

article I wrote called “People’s Speech: Some Dub Poets,”\textsuperscript{3} where I was trying to talk about what was for me then – and for everybody, I believe – an apparently new phenomenon. That was originally written for \textit{Reggae International}, and it was published in \textit{Race Today}, then picked up by an American journal and various places. Now, I say “information or misinformation,” because Oku’s and my good friend Linton Kwesi Johnson, years after I’d published this, gently questioned the notion that “dub poets” originated with Oku, and was able to point me to a particular use of the phrase “dub poets,” which pre-dated the time I was telling about; and it was used by Linton, who had done a lot of music journalism and was then applying it to the dee-jay artists such as U-Roy, I-Roy and so on, from whom Linton certainly has learned a lot in relation to his own dub poetry. But the use that Linton was making of that term was significantly different, I think, from the use that Oku was making. When Linton said “the dub poets,” he really meant the lyricists of dee-jay, and he was not trying to define a new form. One of the interesting things is that, when Oku came up with the term “dub poetry,” I am confident that he did not know anything about Linton’s previous usage – and, indeed, had been introduced to Linton’s work (some time after he had started talking about dub poetry) by me; it was a very rare connection. In 1973, I think it was, I happened to be in England teaching on exchange for a year, and had the pleasure of hearing Linton recite, speak, some of his poems in London, and I was really excited by what I heard. What was the most interesting feature of these poems was the way in which, in a manner which did not seem forced, they used the creole and incorporated reggae-rhythms. You could not fail to hear the reggae-rhythms coming through many of Linton’s poems at that time. And he was, of course, at that stage not using music at all; and this was exciting.

\textit{Can we tie Eddie Brathwaite in anywhere here?}

Not only can you tie Eddie Brathwaite in here, but I think it’s important to say explicitly that Eddie Brathwaite, in an interview in recent years, has complained that the people who talk about dub poetry, in terms of its origins and so on, and ignore his possible influence on it, are distorting history. And I have promoted the notion (largely based on interviews with practitioners of dub or what they call dub poetry) that “the mother of it all,” to quote Mikey Smith, is Louise Bennett. That makes a kind of sense, especially in relation to the language; but Kamau makes the point that, in relation to the incorporation of music-rhythms, he would have thought that it was natural to trace some connection between many of the things he was doing in, say, \textit{The Arrivants} and even before that and the work of the dub poets. The problem with that analysis,