

## **The Loud Poets, interviewed by Scottish Poetry Library Communications Manager Colin Waters.**

### **1. Opening words**

[Intro music]

[The Loud Poets read poem]

**Colin Waters:** Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Scottish Poetry Library's podcast series. My name is Colin Waters and I shall be your host for the next thirty minutes. The poem that you heard at the top of the show is by the Loud Poets, whose shows at the Edinburgh Fringe and at festivals in Prague and Brighton have been winning converts, not just to the Loud Poets, but poetry generally. Now, this collective of poets – their shows are multimedia affairs with films and music – are a real contrast to the po-faced stereotypes of readings many people who've never actually been to a poetry event might have. The SPL is delighted because they're going to be performing here on Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> Dec at 6 PM, tickets priced £7 or £5 concessions and it's going to be a hell of a way to kick off Christmas. Anyway, I've been wanting to get the Loud Poets on a podcast for a while now and their event was a good excuse.

### **2. Introducing the Loud Poets**

Here we are in the SPL. I'm joined by the Loud Poets on a very dreich Autumn Saturday morning. [laughter] We're all suffering from the cold, but we're manfully and womanfully going to push forward into this interview. [laughter] So, I'm going to let them introduce themselves, starting with Katie.

**Katie Ailes:** Hiya, thanks Colin, my name is Katie Ailes.

**Douglas Garry:** I'm Doug Garry.

**Catherine Wilson:** I'm Catherine Wilson.

**Kevin McLean:** Kev.

### 3. The tone of Loud Poets performances

**Colin Waters:** I first caught up with the Loud Poets last August. You were doing a show at the Scottish Storytelling centre – a slick and professional show it was – and I wondered if that was a conscious reaction against these very staid, very quiet, very polite poetry readings that I think people who perhaps don't go to poetry readings think that poetry readings are like.

**Douglas Garry:** The kind of tone you get with that, the reaction thing, implies that we don't – I'm not saying that you are implying – but lots of people are implying that we don't like page poetry or we don't like quieter nights. It was never about that, it was initially about the idea of going, "Well, there's lots of those..." You have so many quality nights with great poets who're reading from the page and doing great work. There was kind of no need to put [more of] that on, whereas our style initially was much more performative, we came from a much more acting, stage background, so it was an idea of going, "let's showcase people that have that style," and give them a place to go full throttle with it. Because if you're on a bill with a night with really quiet poets doing lovely page poetry and you come out with something quite big and performative and loud, you maybe restrict yourself, so we thought "Let's go to a spot where people can do whatever they want". So a reaction, yes, but not to say quiet poetry is bad.

**Kevin McLean:** A reaction but not a reaction against. [general agreement]

**Colin Waters:** So you'd all done performances yourselves beforehand? It was something you were really interested in?

**Katie Ailes:** We all come from different backgrounds, which I think is a real strength of what we do because we can draw on those different things. I grew up dancing quite a bit, Doug does music, Kev does acting, Catherine does a whole bunch of stuff. I think it's really fun because we all draw on those things, we have poems that draw on performance; I do poems where I dance, we work with our band quite a lot – they're absolutely amazing, talented musicians who we've got to perform with and compose with. I think that's a real strength of it and it's a lot of fun for us as well.

#### 4. Punk poetry

**Colin Waters:** As professional and well produced as the shows are, would it be right to say that at the heart of it there's almost a punk, DIY ethos? [laughter]

**Katie Ailes:** You make us sound so cool, Colin.

**Catherine Wilson:** That's the best description I've heard of the Loud Poets ever.

**Colin Waters:** What I really mean is that the whole idea of punk is that you just get up and do it yourself, you don't let anyone tell you that you can't do it. Was this your idea at the start? You just thought, 'I fancy having a go at this.'

**Douglas Garry:** I know for me when I started in the scene I had never been to a poetry night before. Three years ago, I started writing, August 2013 I think it was, and I'd never been to a poetry night before that. I saw it and just thought it was amazing, what a great format to be able to put work out there. I never considered the fact that maybe I should maybe learn structures and forms and things like that, because I heard what I liked. I think YouTube was great for that, in making it really accessible, that is something we've tried to maintain. I think in a similar vein to things like that, if you think it sounds good and at least one audience of people think it sounds good, then you have a reason to put it out there. So as long as we can get a room full of people [laughs] that enjoy what we're doing, then I think it has that ethos behind it. I think that the poetry scene in general has that. [general agreement]

**Kevin McLean:** There's always somebody looking to do something new in the poetry scene: start up a new night or do a one-off special or do something. It's a big group of very motivated people.

**Catherine Wilson:** Definitely.

**Katie Ailes:** But I think when [Loud Poets] first started especially, and the logo and everything, the way that the word was spread was that something really cool and underground was going to happen, and it was supposed to be that punk idea. The idea was for people to see that in the same way they would see going to see a band. It was a cool, alternative night out.

**Douglas Garry:** If you look at the roots of British spoken word... We did the Wickerman festival and John Cooper Clarke was there, and he didn't do the poetry tent – he did a 2000 capacity tent and it was packed out. He has his roots directly in the punk scene and there was that kind of idea: that with a political message and an engaging structure you can tap people into an art form that they would probably never say they were fans of. I was in a tent with 2000 guys my dad's age, screaming for John Cooper Clarke, who if you asked them in their day-to-day if they were poetry fans, they'd say no. So with LP we tried to tap more into that, tried to make it a night to go to, an event to go to.

**Catherine Wilson:** We've always been about trying to get people who don't think they like poetry to like poetry. The number of times I've talked to someone after the show and they've gone, "To be perfectly honest with you, I was dragged here by my wife, or my sister, my friend. [I] don't like poetry, hated it in high school, didn't want to go, but you guys were ace!" [Laughs] And that's what we're going for. Hopefully after that they'll go on YouTube or go to the Poetry Library and find more books and find more stuff that turns them on in that way and they'll start writing as well. That's what we've always been about.

**Douglas Garry:** I know we've described Loud Poets before as a gateway drug to real poetry. [big laughs]

**Katie Ailes:** That's what Kevin Cadwallender said after last Fringe, he said the huge benefit of – because he was in our Fringe show last year – he said the huge thing about Loud Poets was that people who go and see that, he thinks are more likely to go read classical poetry.

**Colin Waters:** Absolutely. Well, let's hear some poetry. Kevin...or Kev [laughs] [I] don't mean to insult you by...

**Kevin McLean:** No, no, it's quite alright. Cool, yeah. I often get branded as the love poet in LP, so I'll do a love poem.

[Kevin McLean reads poem]

## 5. The Loud Poets origin story

**Colin Waters:** One of the things I really enjoyed about the live show when I caught it was - being a recovering geek myself - [laughs]

**Catherine Wilson:** Recovering?

**Colin Waters:** Yeah, I appreciated the references to certain elements of popular culture shall we say, [laughs] so, in that spirit, what is the Loud Poets origin story?

**Kevin McLean:** Initially we started in 2014 and like I said before, it was that idea of going, “let’s have a night that showcases more performance stuff”.

**Douglas Garry:** We did a very strange thing for poets; we went to non-poetry open mics and started doing poems in them to try and get a new audience [nervous laughter/gasps]. It went okay [laughs], we’re still here, we’re still alive, we still have all our limbs but there were some... ‘complications’ shall we say.

**Kevin McLean:** When we’re at a show now and someone’ll go, “Ooh, that was a tough crowd” and we’ll go “No, no...” [laughs] “Be at Whistlebinkie’s at 1 AM when the music suddenly stops and they go, ‘Here’s a poet’ – *that’s* a tough crowd”.

**Douglas Garry:** Yes, but they were really good at getting the message out there and cementing the kind of poets that we wanted to be and, slowly over time, we built up this big hype around our first night and then we opened in the student union in the underground bar which is a perfect space for doing stuff like we do.

**Kevin McLean:** It was crazy though because we did a totally unconventional [thing] for poetry; we did three/four months of pure hype, doing open mic nights, hitting the established poetry open mic nights and when we launched that night had 180 people for our first night of a spoken word night, and that’s crazy. I’ve still got the picture of the queue going up the stairs. Remember at Teviot, the queue going up the steps and up into the main area?

**Catherine Wilson:** And I was right at the front [laughs].

**Kevin McLean:** That’s interesting for the origin story because as I said, Catherine started out as someone who came to the gigs and that’s always been

part of our ethos: if you want to be involved, if you write and you write in our style and get what we do, then come join in.

**Katie Ailes:** Just worm your way up to the top. “Hi guys! Can I help out at the door? Hi Guys! Can I help? Can I help?” Then you end up doing this.

**Catherine Wilson:** [talking at same time] Please, please, it was way more sophisticated than that. I let them come to me. [laughs] That is my statement.

**Katie Ailes:** You have class.

**Kevin McLean:** It kind of built up from there, so we ran a first year in Teviot underground, well, February to August, then we decided to do the Fringe and we kind of lucked into our producer and then lucked into the Scottish Storytelling centre, then got an audience, used the band, came back for our monthly nights, incorporated the band into that, launched in Glasgow the next February, had a mega birthday weekend February just there. We kind of go with the flow and take what we can find to do.

**Colin Waters:** Let’s have another poem. Doug, do you have a poem for us?

**Douglas Garry:** I do.

**Colin Waters:** Step up to the mic.

**Douglas Garry:** Funnily enough, you mentioning pop culture, this has a bit of that in there as well. It’s also a list poem and I wrote it specifically to annoy Kev.

**Kevin McLean:** Yep, and it does.

**Douglas Garry:** He really hates list poems, so I thought I’d write a list poem that he wouldn’t hate.

[Douglas Garry reads poem]

## 6. Issues and themes addressed by the Loud Poets

**Colin Waters:** We’ve already heard a few poems, we’ve got a flavour of what kind of things you hear at a Loud Poets show, but let’s be more expansive; tell

me a bit more about the sort of issues and themes and subjects you address during the course of a Loud Poets [show]. Is there anything that's off the table? Or are there any things that you particularly like to concentrate on?

**Douglas Garry:** There's kind of two different aspects to Loud Poets now. [One] which is our Fringe show that we do, where we're the biggest focus or at least our work makes up the majority of it. And then the monthly nights which are much more driven by the acts that we book and I think it's nice to have those two separations. What you see when you're booking acts is that people have issues that they generally talk about that you want to book in, you're kind of building a nice array of different subject matter. The beautiful thing about spoken word poetry, I think, is that it talks about almost everything. I don't think there's another genre where you can have, in one night, me and Doug get up and do 'Nerd Love' about geek references and then have someone like Matt McDonald get up and write these beautiful, introspective things about mental health issues and stuff. And you can book those people back-to-back. I think that's the strength of LP, we really try and harness as much subject matter as we can in an evening. The idea being that if you come along to see our show you might not like everyone, because that's personal preference, but you'll love someone [general agreement]. And that's always been how we pitch it.

**Colin Waters:** It is very diverse, the things you talk about, but I guess it always circles back – you heard it in Doug's poem there - to an emotional core. Even your 'Nerd Love' poem, it's kind of about friendship, isn't it?

**Kevin McLean:** Well, it's really funny, me and Doug get accused of being the funny poets a lot [laughs], but I still maintain that all of my poems are absolutely depressing [laughs].

**Douglas Garry:** 'Big Love' and 'Nerd Love' are both unrequited love poems and if you actually listen to what we're saying it's really...

**Katie Ailes:** It's quite sad.

**Catherine Wilson:** It's hilarious [laughs]. You're alone.

**Douglas Garry:** Each of them is essentially just a big mental breakdown of that fact that nobody would love us.

**Kevin McLean:** Two big, geeky guys screaming into the dark... [laughs] But you find what you want to find and that's strength of poetry. If you want to see that poem and laugh at the geek references, then that's great, if you're a geeky guy you're going to associate with it. If you want to look closer in, you can. And I think with spoken word, the way I was mentioning, you only have the time that's on the stage, unlike a page poem, where you can read over it and find new nuance and find new meaning every read through. With a spoken word poem that might be the only time you hear it, so it has to work on different levels for people that hear it again and again, and for people that hear it once.

**Katie Ailes:** I think we do try to encourage as many different themes. Within our Fringe show, we always take quite a bit of time to curate what exactly we want there, and there's always a huge range. In the show this year we had pieces about family, we had some political-ish oriented stuff. We had a range of different materials.

**Colin Waters:** I believe you've a poem on this very subject, Katie.

**Katie Ailes:** I do. This is the piece that I've been doing a lot now, in the age of Trump. I'm from the States originally, I moved here about two and a half years ago and that's shifted my accent a wee bit. So this is a piece a bit about that. It starts with a true story...

[Katie Ailes reads poem]

## 7. Scottish Poetry Library Christmas event

**Colin Waters:** So, you're doing a special event with SPL at Christmas.

**Katie Ailes:** Yes!

**Colin Waters:** What can people expect?

**Kevin McLean:** Something different, I guess. We found it pretty bizarre that the SPL wanted us to come in and do a show [laughs]. I think it's really cool what the poetry library is doing just now. We've had more interaction with this building in the last four/five months than we had in the last three years doing LP. There's a real shift and you see it in a lot of places; the SPL, the Scottish

Storytelling Centre, you see it at Stanza. These places appear to be set up for literature and literary poetry, [and they're] starting to see the spoken word scene and see what they're doing and see the audiences that's pulling in and realising that you can merge the two – that it's not mutually exclusive, you don't have to say one's better – and it's really nice to see, so we're really excited to come in and do the show here.

**Katie Ailes:** We'll be doing a version of the Fringe show with a [theatrically] Christmas flair on it.

[laughs]

**Kevin McLean:** Stop saying that, there's going to be no Christmas flair.

**Catherine Wilson:** [sings] I hear those sleigh bells dingling, ching-ching-chingling too...

[Kevin McLean groans]

**Douglas Garry:** We'll probably just be wearing Christmas hats...

**Catherine Wilson:** Yeah...we'll see.

**Colin Waters:** And figgy pudding.

**Katie Ailes:** The band'll have jingle bells.

**Catherine Wilson:** Definitely figgy pudding.

**Douglas Garry:** Oh yeah, has to be there. It was part of our rider actually.

[laughs]

**Colin Waters:** In the green room is just going to be a big vat of figgy pudding.

[laughs]

**Katie Ailes:** We're never going to leave, Colin! [chuckles]

**Catherine Wilson:** I'll eat my way out...

**Kevin McLean:** Hopefully we'll do something that people who come to events here don't regularly see. I guess that's the point: to always try and get people to look at a different style...

**Catherine Wilson:** I think it'll be nice to have a different crowd because I think our standard audience for monthly nights, particularly in Edinburgh, is a whole lot of, mainly students, but mainly people who just come to Loud Poets and don't really go to other poetry nights so it'll be nice having it in the Poetry Library, having a more poetry audience and seeing what they think of seeing [something] a bit different. Whether that be off page or whether that be doing more performance or doing it with music or doing it in a different sphere. It'll be nice to get people who like poetry to see poetry differently and see it in a new genre and then maybe change how they think about it as well.

## 8. Closing words

**Colin Waters:** And that about wraps it up for another podcast. Many thanks to the Loud Poets: Kevin McLean, Katie Ailes, Catherine Wilson and Douglas 'Doug' Garry for coming in on what was a pretty miserable Saturday morning, especially as they, in fact *we*, all had terrible colds. Just be grateful, dear listener, that I edited out the cough breaks between questions. It was not pleasant listening. Anyway, tickets are going fast for the Loud Poets Christmas show so if you fancy being in the audience you can order tickets online via our website or you can come in person into the Poetry Library and buy a ticket that way, but do it quickly because the tickets are going like the proverbial hotcakes. I should also like to thank Will Campbell for writing and performing the podcast theme and, of course, I must thank you too, dear listener, for tuning in. Now if you're interested in the work of SPL there's various ways you can keep in touch with us between podcasts; there's our website: [www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk), there's our twitter account: @byleaveswelve, that's our twitter tag. We have a Facebook page, of course we've got a Facebook page, and we do Instagram now as well, I think that's SPL Scotland, something like that. It's just about time now to bow out and how better to do that than with a poem. So to finish off the show let's hear from the Loud Poets' Catherine Wilson.

[Catherine Wilson reads poem]

[Closing theme]