



## **James Berry: Windrush songs - Audio**

*James Berry*

### **Jane Dibblin**

My name is Jane Dibblin and this is an interview with James Berry to introduce a selection of his poems from a collection entitled *Windrush Songs*. Born in 1924, James Berry came to Britain on the next boat of migrants to leave Jamaica after the first, famous arrival of the *Empire Windrush*. As a poet, performer and educator he has made a significant contribution to the cultural life of both countries, publishing numerous books of poetry, and choosing to write in Caribbean dialect as well as in Standard English.

### **James Berry**

I liked the idea of writing poems from when I was in school. I wanted to get further education and my parents were not going to be able to afford it, and I decided well, if I'm going to get it, I'm going to do it myself. So from quite early I became very interested in the written word and reading aloud, and also reading to my family and so on, because my mother was very interested, very encouraging. But also I'm fascinated by the music of poetry, and in my early days at school I realised that teachers liked the way I had taken on what she was trying to teach and say: 'James Berry, read it to them, let them have it!'

### **Jane Dibblin**

But you referred just then to liking the music in poetry, so can you tell me a bit more about that?

### **James Berry**

Oh yes. Well because I had one or two friends who were doing poems but also I had a couple of friends who were singers. This was in my village. I followed what they were doing and talked a lot with them. But I mean I can't see how you can do good poems without having an ear for the spoken word, you know. Because for me it's part of the whole joy of it. The music of the spoken word, and how it is expressed.

### **Jane Dibblin**

You mention musicality in poetry and things, so is there a particular musical form that you are particularly fond of, that you feel influences your poetry? Is it jazz or blues or something completely different?

**James Berry**

Jazz and blues will always have a place in it, because I do like the music and I've heard it enough. But it was never totally satisfying because I like language, the English language anyway, in its sober expressiveness.

**Jane Dibblin**

But you also changed poetry, didn't you? You didn't just work with what was the inherited form; you also decided to change the form.

**James Berry**

Oh yes.

**Jane Dibblin**

Because a lot of people only used Standard English, didn't they, for poetry, whereas you've decided, no, no, no, I'm going to give Caribbean dialect the same weight and treat it with the same seriousness.

**James Berry**

The culture I was born in and brought up in, in Jamaica, my Jamaican village. My mother was on the church choir and we were church-going children ourselves, and I loved the choir and because from early I was very interested in language use, and, so it was fascinating to me.

**Jane Dibblin**

James also spent a lot of time as a visiting poet in schools in London.

In the school what would you do? Would you read a poem and then try and get them to write poetry? Or what would you do?

**James Berry**

Oh yes, you know, I would read to them or I would get a book where everybody can have a poem in their hand as I read it, and so they see and get a feel of the shape of the poem and the words. And then I talk to them about it and get them to say something about it. And most of the time they absolutely amazed me, of what they understood, and it's just so amazing. When you stir them and they realise that it is important and their participation is very important. Oh yes, I also try to use some of the Caribbean language pieces, and most of the kids love it, because it's just different from Standard English, you know, and it's challenging in a way. I do some of it for them, you know. 'Me nah go to bed too late, you know, man'. That's what I say and they love it.

**Jane Dibblin**

Well, you know, kids love playing around with language really, don't they, because they're always inventing their own new slang.

**James Berry**

Yes, yes, that's right. And what I try to do is to get them interested in formal language, statements, and getting the best out of language that they know in making a statement, in different ways. But I also like to work with them, to make fun, to find the fun aspects, you know, sometimes even telling somebody off. You see, but I enjoy writing poetry because it challenges your thinking, and it helps you really to find so much new and different ways of seeing. So, and I think I'm that sort of person. I am so happy with my fellow humans. I like to explore possibilities through and from them.