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## **PRESS RELEASE – 18/02/2015**

**Dr John Cooper Clarke**

On the 18th February, the Cambridge Union Society welcomed the punk-poet and “bard of Salford” Dr John Cooper Clarke. In his career Clarke has performed on the same bill as the Sex Pistols, Joy Division, and New Order, whilst his poem “I Wanna Be Yours” recently featured on the Arctic Monkeys’ most recent album, AM. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Salford in July 2013.

Till Schoefer conducted the interview before he took students’ questions from the full halfchamber audience, asking about Clarke’s feelings at being described as a punk-poet and a performance poet. Clarke said he was “proud” to be a punk-poet, but disputed the label of performance poet by saying that “if it doesn’t sound any good, it isn’t any good” and that poetry should be aloud.

Clarke spoke about how “everyone has had a go at poetry”, calling it the most “inclusive and accessible” form of art, comparing it to the expense of playing an instrument or the difficulty of learning an accent for theatrical performance. Clarke admitted, however, that he could not prove that everyone has tried writing a poem at one point or other in life. He described poetry as a “kind of music” and attributed periods of ill-health in his childhood to the development of his love of reading.

He was also asked about the humour which is characteristic of many of his poems; Clarke replied that he felt it was his obligation not to make poetry tedious when he was performing on cabaret circuits, figuring that he could make the “incongruity of a poet in a cabaret venue” work in his favour to make him more memorable as somewhere in between a singer and a comedian.

His poem “I Wanna Be Yours”, which featured in the Arctic Monkeys’ most recent album AM also came up as Clarke was asked what he thought about the record, particularly the fact that the middle verse had been cut out. Clarke responded that he thought it was “fabulous” and said that he wished he had done the poem in that way.

Advertising also cropped up in the interview, as Clarke was asked about his relationship with adverts such as for McCains chips and Sugar Puffs. He did not write any new poetry for them (only recorded reading) but admitted that they emulated his style very well, commenting that “they get me”, but adding the caveat that he would never advertise anything he didn’t understand or use, such as financial schemes.

Clarke was asked about his prior drug use, as he used amphetamines when he first rose to prominence in the 70s. He spoke about the accessibility of amphetamines as they were regularly prescribed as dieting aids for housewives, claiming that he did not even know they were drugs until a policeman told him so. He said that opiates, however, “made everything stop”; describing amphetamines, on the other hand, as “an aid to modern life”.

Clarke also responded to queries about his rising prominence amongst a younger generation, citing that his poetry was set on the GCSE syllabus as a reason for this; he claimed he was overjoyed by the fact that he could “make people’s lives a misery, and there is nothing they can do”.

In the student Q&A which followed, one member asked whether the native home of the poet affected how their poetic production. Clarke responded that it could have an effect, but said that “you don’t have to be from Shropshire to enjoy A.E. Housman”, before describing travel as “overrated” because “if you stay in one spot you can see the world”.

“Heroin”, Clarke replied when asked why he stopped writing for a period, “makes it stop”, before describing how a period of not using enabled him to overcome his writer’s block. Another member asked about the role

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of fashion in his life, to which Clarke replied that his style is “careful” and that he has always dressed very carefully, before pointing out that he is growing out his hair.

After a brief lavatorial break, the evening concluded with Clarke performing, including his most recent poem, “The Title Appears At The End of Each Subsequent Verse With Monotonous Regularity”, which he described as “quite contentious”.

**By Sarah Sheard**

Deputy Head of Press, Lent 2015

