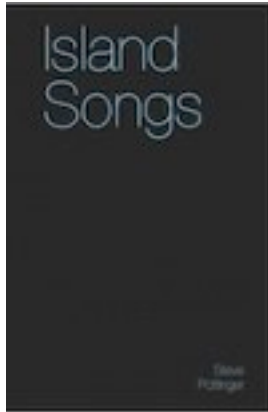


*'We look for tales that entertain and draw us in, that have something to say about our world, our society, and our common humanity. We make room for voices which would otherwise remain unheard, and we've a penchant for narratives that make us laugh out loud, then whip the ground out from under us when we least expect it.'*

**Ignite Books**



**I think you have been writing poetry for several decades now. Could you tell us when/how you started writing?**

I was still at school, and someone introduced me to the work of the Liverpool poets – Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten. It was the first time I'd read poetry which talked about a world I understood, had a sense of irreverence and wonder and social criticism, and used language in a way I recognised as mine. A little later, I discovered Adrian Mitchell. I was young enough and arrogant enough to believe I had something to say. So I decided I'd give it a go.

**Why poetry and not short stories/essays/novels?**

I'm a big fan of the brevity and incisiveness of poetry. I love the way that good poetry can illuminate a familiar subject so the reader sees it in a way they haven't before, or can take the everyday and humdrum, and turn it into something memorable. Other forms of writing do this too, of course, but the swift slap! bang! of poetry really appeals. Some of my work has been in prose, as short stories or flash fiction, and I've a few rough drafts of longer pieces which I mean to get round to developing some time in the future...

**How do you work on a poem and how long does it take you to get to the final text? Do you wake up, have an idea and scribble furiously and it's all done, or do you actually edit the text over a certain amount of time?**

That varies from poem to poem. Sometimes – and I've no real explanation for how it happens – the poem seems to write itself and the trick is simply to keep writing and not disrupt the flow. 'No-one likes an angry poet' for example, which is over three minutes long, needed virtually no editing or re-writing. I was at a friend's house, couldn't be distracted by TV or radio or internet, and the poem turned up fully formed. On other occasions, I find myself scrawling down a couple of lines, or the germ of an idea, and have to come back to it – maybe months later – and graft at hewing the poem into shape. Either is fine.

**What makes a good poem, for you? And what is "bad" poetry for you?**

A good poem speaks to me. It's honest, it has something to say about the world we live in. It challenges me, or enriches my understanding, or makes me look at a familiar situation in a new way. Bad poetry? I have two personal bugbears. One: anything where the poet is talking \*at\* the reader rather than \*to\* us – I'm not interested in how clever you are, I want you to engage with me, speak to me as one individual to another. Two: poets inflicting pieces about a relationship breakdown on an audience – having a pop at your ex may be cathartic, but keep it to yourself. You'll only look like a dick if you don't.

**You've had three collections of poems published now: Shattered (1994), published under your pen-name Spot the Poet, Kissing it all (1996) and Island Songs (2012). Would you say that if you re-read your work, you'd find there is a natural evolution in the themes/style of your poems?**

I think there is. (and yes, I did just nip off and re-read all three books). Within **Shattered**, or **Kissing It All**, there's work which – even twenty years on – I really enjoy, which has stood the test of time. What I love about **Island Songs** is that there's more of a sense of celebration of life, as well as fury about what's wrong. So yes, I think my writing is evolving and changing, and that's good, because so am I.

**Most of your work has a social and/or political angle, and your poetry is deeply rooted in alternative cultures – especially the punk community – but has a very human, “universal” appeal. How easy has it been to keep your values and opinions throughout the years? So many people lose their fire and change completely as they grow older, have a “career”, settle down, etc. Also, our increasingly homogenised and bland society makes it increasingly hard to live according to one’s own rules; everything is more expensive, societal pressure/expectations are more obvious now especially with social media, etc.**

If we’re lucky, we get 70 or 80 years on this beautiful planet. That’s all. Nowhere near enough. A long time ago, I decided I’d rather get by on less money than spend the best part of my time here doing something I hated, and seeing as I was responsible for no-one but myself, there was nothing to stop me. So that’s what I did. It’s what I try to do now. I’m way more interested in cramming as much experience as possible into my time here than slaving to buy the latest washing-machine or flat-screen TV. As the saying goes, no-one dies wishing they’d spent more time in the office. Or slobbering in front of the dead-eye, come to that. As for keeping my fire, maybe that’s been easy because it’s rooted in an enthusiasm *\*for\** a better world, rather than simply a hatred *\*of\** what’s going on. Being angry is exhausting. Loving the world is not.

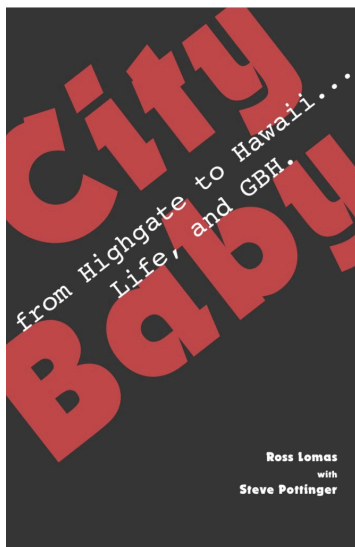
**Have you felt at some point like giving up trying “to change the world one poem at a time”?**

Of course. But in the end I come back to it because I believe it’s important and it’s part of who I am. I learned a good few years ago that if you feel you’re just banging your head against a brick wall, it’s time to go and do something different for a while. Recharge your batteries. Go and walk on a beach or spend some time down the pub or lose yourself in a book. Whatever you need. You won’t do anyone any good (least of all yourself) by burning out. Above all, it’s worth having the humility to remember you’re just one voice among many. I learn from and am inspired by others, and I hope that every now and then I do some small thing which passes that lesson on in turn.

**Your poems are inhabited by very flawed, fragile people; there’s violence and addiction, but I can see a very, very deep understanding of human nature. A lot of your poems are incredibly poignant. I think you have worked with homeless**

**people and have lived on the margins of society (correct me if I'm wrong!). Has it given you an insight in some aspects of human nature that people who haven't had your life experience cannot even begin to understand?**

I think everyone can understand it. The question is whether they want to. There can be a lot of resistance to being asked to see as fully human the person who's struggling with alcohol or addiction or whatever it might be. It's much more comforting to blame self-destructive people for bringing their misfortunes on themselves. Because then they're not like you; because then what's happening to those people – the poor and the dispossessed and the f\*\*ked up – isn't your problem. You're OK and they're not. You're a good person, and they're not. They're their own worst enemy and you don't need to think about it, because you live in different worlds and always have and always will. Ever since I can remember, I've had a problem with that point of view. And I don't think that will change. As far as I'm concerned, we're all flawed. It's always a question of 'There but for the grace of god...' and if some of my poems act as a reminder of that in some small way, that's good.



**In 2010, you co-wrote Steve Ignorant's autobiography (*Steve Ignorant is the frontman of anarcho-punk band Crass*), *The Rest Is Propaganda*, and more recently, you have done it again, working with Ross Lomas on his autobiography, *City Baby*, which I think has been the most successful book published by Ignite Books, your publishing imprint (of which more below). How have you found the writing process and how does it compare to writing your own poetry?**

When Steve came to me and asked me to work on his book with him – he'd read *Kissing It All* and loved the way I wrote – the first thing I said to him was that I'd never done anything like that before, and I couldn't promise I'd be able to make a success of it, but that I'd give it a go. I discovered that I thoroughly enjoyed it. The process of listening to someone's stories, asking questions, probing into their life, and then writing the whole thing up in their voice is an absolute privilege. I've also been very lucky that both Steve and Ross were – in their very different ways – a joy to work with. In each case, the story of their life has turned out to be one they've told with great honesty, which is often funny, occasionally very moving, and which you don't need to be a fan of punk to enjoy. I'm incredibly proud of both books.

**Would you give fiction a try one day? Why/why not?**

The rough draft of a novel has been sitting in a drawer at home for some time, waiting for me to come back to it. As with so many things, it's a matter of there not being anything like enough hours in the day to do everything I want to.



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**This year, you are booked to do quite a few gigs, and the list is growing all the time. How important is the performance side of your poetry? Can you be a poet without ever performing?**

It's entirely possible to be a wonderful poet without ever getting up in front of an audience (some poetry works better on the page, other poetry in performance); but for me it's something I value hugely and really enjoy. It's all about connection with others, which I think is something all human beings crave. Writing poetry is a

solitary experience, sharing poetry is not. I believe it should be no different from sharing music. A good gig can take people outside of themselves, immerse them in something bigger. Good poetry should too.

**What do you think about the craze for spoken word clubs that are sprouting up all around the country, with everyone getting up to say their bit?**

I think it's good. It's the old punk ethos of just getting up there and giving it a go finally making it to the poetry world. If you want a chance to read your work, you've got it. And if you approach it as an opportunity to learn the craft of writing and performance, and be honest with yourself about what the strengths and weaknesses of your writing are, that's great. Above all, you get to listen to a dozen different voices – different points of view, abilities and confidence – in the course of an evening. So it can be great. Equally, I've been to some nights where the organiser's ego is front and centre stage. That's less good. I've been to nights which seem desperate to ape comedy clubs, and I think that's a mistake. Go along and try them out, for sure, but remember that not all clubs are the same. And if there isn't anything where you live, set one up. All you need is a room...

**You are also a publisher. You set up Ignite Books back in 2010 with author and artist Joolz Denby, and your little independent venture has been gathering pace ever since. Could you please take us through the birth of Ignite, and explain why you think there is room for a small, independent imprint like yours?**

Writing Steve Ignorant's book opened the door to a different form of writing. It also drew me into involvement with editing, and proofreading, and all the work that precedes a book actually being published. All of that was very interesting, and it set me thinking... I'm old enough to remember the explosion of independent music labels spawned by punk, when musicians decided they had more to gain from being in control of their own releases rather than being dependent on the whim of A&R men. What if we did this in literature too? I knew Joolz had a manuscript which she was struggling to find a publisher for (all the majors seemed to be chasing the next Harry Potter copy or were pumping out chick-lit) so I approached her and said 'How about we do this ourselves?' She said yes, and suddenly I had to back up my idea, and learn how to make it happen. That was back in 2010, and Ignite is still here, so I guess I must be doing something right!



**What are the positives and negatives of being a small independent publisher competing with the giants of the publishing industry? What have been your biggest challenges so far? Do you think you'll be invited – along with other indie publishers – to one of the big events in the literary calendar one day?**

Ignite was a challenge from day one! I had to learn everything from scratch. I had no real idea of how to typeset a book and design a cover, or where I'd find reputable printers, or how on earth I'd create and run a website, so there was a hell of a learning curve to cope with before I even began to think about how we'd sell our books. It's fair to say that without the generosity of other people who shared their knowledge and experience – I'm incredibly grateful to them even now – Ignite would probably never have got off the ground. They gave me the necessary pointers, a much-needed leg-up, and then I had to take it from there. That's both the positive \*and\* the negative of being a small publisher: nothing happens without you rolling up your sleeves and getting it done, and while that's wonderfully exhilarating, it eats up your time and it's a lot of hard work, too. An invitation to a big literary event? I don't even think about it. There's too much to do.

**I understand that Amazon's attitude towards indie authors and publishers is far from being encouraging. I think you've had a few issues with them yourself. Could you tell us what you think about this?**

I am not a fan of Amazon. They're structured to avoid paying tax, they treat their staff appallingly, and their only interest in publishers seems to be to screw every penny possible out of them. In both the US and Germany they're currently refusing to stock titles by certain major publishers with the intention of pressurising them into accepting a less favourable deal. We deal with them as little as possible. If

someone wants an Ignite title, I point them in the direction of our website. For other books, I recommend [hive.co.uk](http://hive.co.uk). This has the same convenience of click-and-buy, and you can either have the books delivered to your home or pick them up from your local independent bookshop. Simple. And way better than Amazon.

**So far, you have released poetry by yourself, fiction by Joolz Denby, as well as autobiographical works by drummer Dave Barbarossa (*Adam and The Ants, Republica and more*) and Ross Lomas (*bass player with punk band GBH*). You all have very close ties with the world of music. Do you think this is what gives Ignite Books its uniqueness and distinguishes it from other imprints? Is this something you intend to carry on in the future?**

I'd love to say we have an over-arching plan, but the truth is I've taken whatever opportunities have come along to publish great writing and superb stories. Given that I've worked in music and around musicians for so long, I suppose it's no surprise that's reflected in our publications to date. Will it continue? Quite possibly.

**What would make your life as a small publisher easier?**

A publicist. Someone to promote what we do and put it in front of the right people. Or put me in front of the right people and let me chew their ear off.

**Could you give us an idea of Ignite's future releases?**

There's a couple of ideas being bounced around at the moment, but I'll keep the details under my hat for now, thanks! Watch this space.

**In November 2013, you released a video called "No one likes an angry poet" about Starbucks's tax evasion. Now, as we speak, you are yourself at the centre of some kind of tax evasion "storm": your letter to Caffè Nero which you sent on an angry impulse, has gone viral, you have been featured on the BBC News website, the Independent and The Morning Star. Could you briefly take us through what happened? It's like a social media soap opera, some have said! How do you think this will end? In tears? J**



Social media moves so fast that it already feels we're talking about ancient history. Briefly, what happened is this: at the end of April, I read that Caffè Nero had paid no UK corporation tax on £21 million profit, so I wrote them a letter. I also took a photo of it and put it up on facebook and twitter, not expecting much response. 24 hours later it had 300 shares. Two days after that it was up to 20,000. Then it went viral. Then the press got involved, and then Caffè Nero wrote to me, offering a meeting. I insisted it be on the record, they insisted it wouldn't be. While we played email ping-pong, the world moved on, which I suspect is what Caffè Nero were waiting for. To be honest, I was never under the illusion that they'd change their policy just because a poet wrote them a letter, but it did make for a couple of very uncomfortable weeks for them. Needless to say, I'll be drinking in independent coffee shops from now on.



**What would you say to people saying that it is naïve and disingenuous to try and tackle people like Caffè Nero, it's all legal, that's the way the world works, you're wrong, etc. ?**

What was interesting was that as a result of my letter, tax experts I'd never heard of did some digging into Caffè Nero and agreed they were deliberately structured to avoid paying tax. So the accusation I'm naïve or disingenuous really doesn't stand. Even more interestingly, this week has seen the Conference on Inclusive Capitalism in London, where you've got very successful business people,

the Governor of the Bank Of England, and so on, all arguing that businesses need to pay more attention to the need to honour the social contract. If major business leaders are saying the system is failing to serve the general public, then I think it's fair to say there *\*is\** a problem. People on low pay or zero hours contracts know that already, of course.

**Finally: who inspires your poems and the way of life you have chosen for yourself? (Literary, musical, landscape, etc.)**

Lenny Bruce said something which pretty much sums it up for me: I'm inspired by every waking moment. There's so much out there to be inspired by. For every narrow-minded bigot there's someone fighting for their rights with dignity. There's wonderful music to feed your soul. There's creativity and generosity and laughter to set against humanity's capacity for selfishness and greed. And wherever you are, there's somewhere to sit and feel the sun on your face and the wind in your hair and remind yourself the world will still be turning when you're gone. You're a clever monkey. Enjoy it while you're here.