



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Alex Wheatle.

(Music plays)

The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper. And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page, and screen about their lives, work, and artistic practice. We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

Patricia Cumper His writing has been described by Linton Kwesi-Johnson as pacey and witty. Lemn Sissay says he is an inspirer, a vital writer, a prince among men. He has an MBE for services to literature. Today we're talking to the Brixton Bard himself. Alex Wheatle, welcome to the Amplify Project.

Alex Wheatle Really glad to be with you, Patricia and Pauline.

Pauline Walker (chuckles) That's wonderful. So I'll kick off with first question. So your childhood was the subject of a major television drama, so many people will feel they already know about it. But we want to go a little bit deeper and ask you, how did you consume stories as a child? What did they mean to you?

AW As a child, Pauline, I accessed stories from magazines and comics. I needed an outlet because my everyday existence was quite a brutal one and a very lonely one. And so reading, in a way, became my saviour because it became a space that I can occupy to get out of my daily woes, if you like, and just immerse myself in somebody else's narrative, whether it be a comic character, a footballer, a cricketer. It just took me away from my daily woes.

PC Alex, I have a theory, you see, that most writers live, not necessarily at the heart, but more at the edges of the world that they occupy because they're observing and they're looking to understand what they see. So I'm really curious to know, what was it like for you as a boy coming from a care home in Surrey to arrive on Railton Road and on the frontline on Railton Road in Brixton.

AW Yeah. I was definitely an observer. I had to be, because I found it very difficult to understand the Jamaican accent or even a Brixtonian kind of twang. So I had to pay very good attention to what was being said because my first days in Brixton - you know, sometimes I just nodded my head, kind of pretended, but I understood what people were saying. Especially when I went to the barber saloon what - you know, in my kind of world, it was a barber's, but to Brixtonians, it was like a barber saloon. And I remember there was this single by - I think it was Mikey Dread that had a big cargo over barber saloon. So I quickly had to acclimatise myself. So there's no doubt that I became an observer. I had to be because, like anybody else, you feel kind of like a fish out of water. I really wanted to fit in and embrace my new community.

PC It sounds to me like it was sort of brimming with energy. There was a lot going on. You must have been taking in things from, you know, what to wear, what to say, who the good folks are, who the bad folks are. I'll be really interested to hear how you approach that. Were you a quiet one? Were you noisy? How did you find your way?

AW I was very quiet and shy. And I spent my early days just looking up around me, just trying to absorb everything. And, as you say, it was vibrant. The music, the smells of the Caribbean food in a market, with different fruits and vegetables that I wasn't used to, the loudness of people interacting with each other. I just had to absorb all of it and try to - "Okay, Alex" - It was like that "Wizard of Oz" moment. You know, Dorothy, when she says, "I'm not in Kansas any more." It feels really like that. And sometimes it was very funny because I had no idea of what kind of clothes I should wear or how I should walk or how I should try to present myself. So, I just had to look around me and see what the guys were doing and try to imitate them if I could.

PW Did you feel that you were successful in your imitations?

AW Not in my first week, I can let you know. But early friends would say that I was a disaster. But I think after three or four weeks, I started to get the hang of it. I guess the - One of the main embarrassments was me going to my first house party, where my friends were encouraging me to ask girls to dance and so on, but of course I had no idea how the way they dance in Brixton. And so that was quite a moment when the girl kind of, "What you doing, mate? What you doing?" So I had to learn quickly.

PW You had to learn how to find your rhythm.

AW Oh, yes. Absolutely.

PW Are there other music forms or was reggae the music that spoke to you, really?

AW When I was 13, 14, I was a bit of a soul boy. I guess that was all that I ever saw on TV on Top of the Pops. So, I was a fan of Tavares, The Real Thing, all these soul groups who wore these immaculate suits, sky blue colours or red, and had these amazing dance steps. And so I used to practice in the fields the dance steps, but - It was something to dance to, but it didn't really speak to me. It was just dancing music, really, that I could just dance away my worries. But listening to reggae for the first time, it just struck a note. I really felt the artists were addressing me and my circumstances, and my loneliness, and my hunger for belonging. And so I just attached on it immediately. And, you know, I got to love it.

PW And is music something that has sustained you through your life now? I mean are you as still as passionate about music now as you were back then?

AW Oh, yes. My family sometimes say, "Dad, turn off that old school stuff!", you know, but I don't care. On a Sunday morning, you know, I'm still playing my music wearing - I might be using headphones now, so I'm not distressing the family too much with heavy bass lines like I did when they were very young. But, yes, it still means so much to me. So whenever I'm sad or I'm going through a particular rough time, music is often a way that I can soothe myself and just calm down and don't worry so much. Because, you know, the world sometimes is not a kind place, so music gives me, again, that space for me to immerse myself in and say, "Yeah, better times will come."

PC I completely agree with you. And I think particularly at the age that you were then, I can remember the lyrics of songs from my being 14, 15, and I can't tell you what happened last year. So it becomes a very deep part of you.

AW Yeah.

PC You did get into some trouble though, Alex, when you were there.

AW Yes, in Brixton. Obviously, there's good and bad everywhere, and then Brixton was no different. You had your hustlers, you had your bad people, and so on. And, you know, it's like an act of survival. You have to put on this kind of bold kind of front, a high machismo kind of way of presenting yourself, and so you did not appear weak in any kind of way. Otherwise, you know, you could be manipulated into doing something that you're not happy doing. So I had to get used to kind of living in that urban kind of swell of South London. And sometimes you have to be more tougher than you really wanted to. And, yes, I had a couple of fights. I had a couple of skirmishes. I had a couple of frats, you know, knife frats and so on. I've got stabbed once or twice. But, you know, I'm here to tell the tale.

PC I like that - Hold, no, no. Go back a little bit. You said, "I got stabbed once or twice"?

AW Yeah.

PC That's huge. And how do you - Tell us a little bit about that. Just a little.

AW Well, sometimes when you hold dances, and especially blues dances, people would come in. They do not want to pay money. They try to bully you. Before - you know, you're trying to push them out. They take out something. There's a skirmish. There might be a slash and they might run off sometimes. They did it rough. And often - But there's one particular time where two or three of my friends had to wrestle the knife out of this man's hand. You know, these things were not a regular occurrence, but on occasion they did happen.

PC Yeah. And I think - That I think makes you grow up quite quickly.

AW It does.

PC I've chosen for us to read chapter six of "Uprising". "Uprising" is something you wrote for a very young audience and for new readers.

AW Yes. That's right, yeah.

PC But I have to say, the thing that really impressed me about it is the absolute clarity of the storytelling. You know, at so many times you read something and you think, "Okay, where is this

going?" There is such a cleanness of language and such a clearness of focus in it. I think that's why I chose chapter six.

(Reading from *Uprising*)

PW I found that last image quite funny, actually. This is quite sad and, you know, tragic, Alex.

AW Yeah. I had no idea about library decorum or etiquette. I just thought it was okay to borrow as much books as you wanted. And I really had to read in bulk. But they seemed encouraging enough for me to - for me to take out whatever books I wanted. And I did bring them back, possibly past the sell-by date, but I did bring them back.

PC I'm sure you did. Right. There's something else I want to ask you about. Because when I read about you when you're young, you've come back and you've found a way of living in Brixton. You make yourself into the Brixton Bard as a sound system DJ, which is - I mean I love the way that you talk about how you learnt and how you kept coming back. And then you suddenly decide that you're going to write a novel. Now I know as I writer, going from writing lyrics and chanting lyrics, to taking on publishing and the literary establishment. They're two completely different tasks. And I really - I mean I understand, I think, that you have created within yourself a love of words, yes? And a discipline. But I want to know what gave you that little nod of confidence in yourself to say that you could become a DJ and then become a novelist?

AW There were many steps, Patricia. It didn't happen immediately. I performed with a sound system called Crucial Rocker from about '79 onwards for a few years, and I was very much encouraged by the early express books that included Yardie by Rita Hadley. I think there was another one called "Other People's Property" by Naomi King that was hugely successful. Then there was a baby farmer series. And then there was this organisation called The Right Thing that were based in Brixton and they would facilitate workshops and seminars and so on. And I would attend these, and I just thought to myself, "Well, it's happening. Why can't I write down my narrative?" Because I always felt, from very early, from 16, 17, that a narrative like mine or that I shared with my friends or my sound system guys, that wasn't there in the bookshop in WHSmith's or anywhere else. And so I really felt that I deserved a place in that whole narrative or that bookshelf or whatever it may be. And slowly I gathered enough confidence to say, you know what, my story's worthy, my story's valuable. And it was Simeon who drilled that into me from prison when he said, "Alex, you know, don't let anyone tell you that your story ain't worth nothing." He said, "Your story is valuable as anybody out there, including Prince Charles and -", and, you know, that really stayed with me. So even though at first, when I used to submit my manuscripts to publishing houses and literary agents, those of words of Simeon kept coming back to me. My stories are worthy. I said, "Just work on this, do what's necessary," and that's how I stayed the course, because I had that belief.

PW That's wonderful.

PC Yeah. And then when it's planted like that, it clearly took root. We owe Simeon. We definitely owe Simeon.

PW And how did *Brixton Rock* come about then? Because that was the first novel that you got published. Tell us about that story and how it actually came to be published.

AW Yes. *Brixton Rock* was very personal. It came from a personal situation of a friend of mine who went through a similar journey to my major character, Brenton Brown. And, in fact, I had jotted down ideas about that kind of narrative. I had a skeletal structure from long, long time ago when I was 20, 21. It was written on the back of record albums and notes here and there, notepads. And it was a real situation about a young man trying to find his parents, and then he wasn't aware that the girl he was dating, he was related to. And I thought that would make a cracking story. And so I set to work on it seriously when I was about 28, 29, something like that. And then I wrote first in longhand. I actually submitted to a literary agent whilst it was still in longhand, and they kindly told me, "Mr. Wheatle, you better type it up." And so that is where - In a *Small Axe* episode, that was kind of placed back in the time, but the timeline is not quite correct there. But the scene was correct, where, basically, I bought a £10 typewriter from a friend of mine. The P didn't work. And so I typed up the first draft of *Brixton Rock*. And, oh my god, I must have gone through about four tubes of - What do you call it? Typex?

PW Yes.

PC Yeah, yeah. Another one.

AW But, finally - Yeah. Finally, I - You know, I made a decent first draft.

PW That's brilliant. That's amazing.

PC And that is tenacity, you know? I don't think people appreciate with writers be - I get so irritated when people drift up to you and say, "You know, I could write a book." And I think, "No, babe, you couldn't. You don't know what it takes."

AW Oh, absolutely. That's, I would say, 80, 90% of the battle. You have to have this determination and tenacity to even get that first draft out there. So I admire who does that or any playwright or anybody else who goes through that long process. It's not an easy one.

PW So you've written the book. You sent it out to publishers. How did you find your agent?

AW I found my agent after *Brixton Rock* was published. Rosemarie Hudson, who ran Blackamber Books, I think she was basically on her own. I think she had an assistant called Joan Beech. I think she did some of the editing on a freelance basis, but it's basically her and Joan. And, Patricia, you was the first one to be published by Rosemarie Hudson.

PC I was, I was. She's a fierce lady.

AW Yes, she was.

PC Fierce lady.

AW Yeah. (overlapping conversation)

PC And I'm so grateful to her because she has that same confidence that you do, that these stories have to be told.

AW Yeah.

PC Yeah. She - Blackamber Books. Yes, I owe her a lot.

AW And that's what we need in our community, to get these stories out there. We really do. So after about 30 rejects from major literary houses and literary agents, Rosemarie came along and said she wanted to publish me. And I had to pinch myself about a thousand times to actually believe it. And she has so much energy.

PC Yeah.

AW I remember in Brixton one afternoon, and I saw a 109 bus going down Brixton Hill with a poster of *Brixton Rock* on it, and I thought, "Wow, look at that." I couldn't believe it. It was an amazing moment. And also she supplied rocks, like a Brighton Rock.

PC Yeah.

AW With the book at book stores. I was like, "This is amazing." This is, you know - It was a really happy time of life that - And I talked to Simeon. He was living in Jamaica at that point, in Westmoreland. And I went to see him, but I went to see him two - 1990 - two thousand and - 2001, I think, I went to see him. And I presented him with the book and he nodded his head. And he read it and he wrote me a 10-page critique telling me about - telling me of the - how I could improve it and so on, so bless him.

PW He didn't take any credit for it though, but (overlapping conversation).

AW No. No, he would - He was one of those guys. He was very selfless, you know. And men like that and women like that are so rare to find, where they want to do for others rather than do for themselves. And he was - I'd agree that he was a very educated man. At one point, he was an English teacher back in Jamaica. He came to the UK. He did a bit of cabinet making and so on. He did a bit of teaching on the side. I think he worked in those Saturday schools that were around in the early '70s. And he was one of those community people that you need. I mean we're crying out for them now, aren't we?

PW Yeah.

PC Yes. Yes (overlapping conversation).

AW So he was such a blessing for me, he was.

PC Yeah. I'm going to ask you a slightly... Well, the question that we want to ask of all of the writers - We put it like this. When are you considered a Black writer? And what does that mean to you?

AW That's a really good question. I've been debating that for the last 20-odd years.

PC Yup.

AW I think, indeed, yes, I am a Black writer because I write about the Black experience. And I'm not just a Black writer though because I can equally write about the White experience. And many people forget that when I was raised as a kid in children's home, there was Black, there was mixed-race, there was White in my household, so I'm perfectly comfortable writing those narratives. But in the main, because of my literary output, I don't mind being described as a Black writer. Because when you look at *Cane Warriors*, when you look at *East of Acre Lane*, *Brixton Rock*, when you look at these books, then there's no doubt I'm trying to relate the Black experience.

PC Do you feel a sense of responsibility? Because I always do when I'm writing. I feel as though I'm a small voice in a large wilderness, but I have to keep talking.

AW Oh, definitely, I feel that. And I felt that from - I was a DJ, that I need to relate my experiences on a microphone. So when I was making up lyrics about walking down to Brixton Employment Exchange and the scowl of the people behind the counter, all that kind of stuff, I felt that that was necessary for me to relate my experience. For me, I might be writing longer texts, but I'm no different to that 16, 17, 18-year old with that urge, that hunger, to share my experience to people who I know they experience also.

PC I read when we were preparing for this that you felt a certain frustration with the literary world.

AW Oh, yes. But I still feel that. I still feel that, that I'm not totally accepted. I mean, for example, I've never been invited to some of these fancy clubs, like these elite groups, like the Royal Society of Literature, all these kind of things, and I'd seen other writers, other Black writers being invited to these groups. And I think, "What's the reason why?" Is it because of the subject matter I'm writing about? Is it because I'm writing about the raw Black experience? I mean we had this thing last year where the Black Writers' Guild was launched.

PC Yeah, (overlapping conversation). Yeah.

AW And it was launched on the back of what happened with George Floyd.

PW Yeah.

AW And when I checked it, there was a Black published involved. She was influencing things. And I'm thinking, well, you know, these people haven't invited me to do anything, and yet my very writing is born from Black struggle and Black activism against the police, for example, and the oppression that we had. And, you know, there's very few writers like myself who described what it was like living in Brixton, described what it was like fighting the police, describing what it's like to living under Thatcher. And all these things that we had to face. Like, just recently, we'd been watching the *Uprising* documentary series this week, and I've wrote about this and DJ'd about this for more than 40 years, and yet still I feel like an outsider, you know? So that's - that hangs with me. But (overlapping conversation), you know, they can do what they want and I'll do what I want.

PC Yeah, but... Can I also point out... But I just want to say, Alex, consider the volume of work that you've got. We've got people who have published two or three books and we've got the body of work that you've done. And I think, for me, what's - because I've given your books to my grandsons - It's the influence and the changes that you've made.

AW Yeah.

PC But I agree with you. I agree that you have a right to be frustrated. It's - I think it's a process. I hope change will continue. But just thank you for the body of work that you've created.

AW Well, thank you. And I've learned over the years that it's much more enjoyable for me when I go into a school, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a major city, and a librarian comes over to me and he or she might say to me, "Alex, little Tom or little Sarah has never been in the library before. I could never interest them in any kind of book, but I placed, for instance, *Liccle Bit* into their hands, or *Crongton Knights*", and there they are every dinner time in the corner reading my words. I mean that's quite powerful, isn't it? That makes me sleep easy at night. It makes me feel delighted of what I've written over the years.

PW I want to move now towards - switching from the adult fiction, you know, the very gritty, gritty stuff that you write, to the young adult fiction and why you made that leap.

AW For a variety of reasons. Firstly, I felt there was a ceiling for me with my adult writing. Even though books *East of Acre Lane* got incredible reviews, and *Island Songs* as well, I felt that my publishers at that point weren't pushing me forwards, so I found myself denied to attending the major literary festivals, where I could really promote my work. So I felt, "You know what? Maybe I

should change tack here.” And my books have always been popular in schools. And, basically, many of my characters are young anyway, between the ages of 15 and perhaps 20. And so dropping down a year or two or three I thought wouldn’t be too difficult for me. But it was difficult, you know? It’s a different skill set because you have to make sure that your narrative is plot-heavy. You have to make sure that you’re sentences at times are shorter to engage that young reader. Because if you don’t capture them in the first chapter or so, or even the first two pages, they’re going to put it down and read something else. So I had to learn that skill. It took me two or three years to finally say to myself, “Yes, I’m ready now.” Because there is a couple of narratives I did attempt to write, that my agent tried to sell, but, no, they weren’t published. So it was quite a long process, but I felt it was necessary. But once I’ve decided, “You know what? Let me be inventive about this. Let me be creative about this.” And so I’m writing these novels, the Crongton series as I would, say - as a microphone man or a toaster back in the day, just creating and inventing words here and there. And that’s when it started to flow, you know. I’ve created my own individualistic style, if you like, that’s not really out there at the moment, but it engages with the young generation. And so I think you have to put yourself into it, rather than try and imitate - you know, I could never imitate Malorie [Blackman] or anybody else. You know, I just couldn’t do that. I have to remain who I am, essentially, the core to “Who is he?” And the core of me is that little kid listening to reggae music, writing little lyrics on a notepad, trying to be inventive, trying to be creative. So I went back to that, and it’s been very successful.

PW That’s wonderful. Just as you were speaking there, that leads us very neatly into the next reading that we’re going to do, which is we’re going to hear the opening from your latest young adult fiction book, which is called *The Humiliations of Welton Blake*.

(Reading from *The Humiliations of Welton Blake*)

AW I guess many people think that because of my life experiences that I must be some kind of dull, sour, bitter individual. But, no, I don’t think I am. And so writing *Welton Blake* was a nice relief, especially after writing *Cane Warriors*, which was, in many ways, very emotional because I felt like I was writing Jamaican history, even family history. So to come back off that and write *Welton Blake* was - and, again, it took back to my DJ days, where it wasn’t always required to write about or chat about serious issues. Sometimes in a dance, you get the biggest salute if you try to mix it up with a bit of humour and a bit of wit. All the best DJs did that. I mean I remember Yellowman, he is one of my DJ heroes, he did that and he had a massive following. And so I never forget that, that what I do, I’m an entertainer. And this is all well and good to try and pick up on certain issues or hidden histories, like *Cane Warriors*. But if I’m trying to engage with a young readership, I have to make them laugh or I have to make them sad. I make them bust out and giggle every now and again. And so they think, “Oh, going back to this book is a nice experience.” And so, yes, I approached it with my DJ hat on, if you like.

PC How did it feel when you won the award for *Crongton Knights*? And in 2020, the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature. What difference did it make to your life and to your work?

AW Wow. First of all, the “Crongton”, that was 2016. I couldn’t believe it. I mean I kept on thinking back to my childhood, reading those Beano magazines and Scorchers and The Dandy. And it all came from that. And I was thinking, despite my difficult start in life, I’m just blessed with this reading gift that I received from my mother, because I was reading from the age of five, six. And despite my difficulties in secondary education, I was always the best reader in my class, so it’s always something that I advocate for. So it was a overwhelming feeling of achievement. It really was. And I think that I shared with my mother, who lives in Washington D.C. now, because she’s always struggled with guilt. And I’ve always tried to tell her that things happen to all of us and we’re all human. And this made her feel a little bit okay. All that pain and struggle, all that guilt was worth it. So she had great kind of feeling about any award I get. And the Neustadt, that opened up doors for me kind of globally because it’s a global award. I mean I didn’t win it, but to get nominated was an incredible achievement. And now I’ve got kids reading me in the Philippines, in Australia, in South Africa, in Europe. It’s just amazing. You know, little old me, who came out of this children’s home and I’m read globally. Sometimes I have to shake my head and think, “Wow, this is happening. It is really happening.” But that’s what really convinced you because it becomes a great leveller. If you read a great deal, that means you could create a great deal.

PC And it’s the glory of it, is it? The language is - you know, they always say that we’re an island joined by an ocean. Well, the words are like that ocean, aren’t they? They wash up all over the place and everybody responds to them a little differently. Now I’m going to ask you the question that I’ve been wanting to ask (overlapping conversation). You went to Jamaica with your father. I read that. Is that true?

AW Yeah. Yes...

PC (overlapping conversation) Jamaica in *Island Songs* and in *Cane Warriors*.

AW Yes.

PC What did that connection mean to you?

AW Oh, so much. So much, Patricia. I first was reunited with my father in 1987. And he lived in Old Harbour. That is on the way to May Pen. And he was quite an avid reader, too. And he actually knew that Noël Coward had a property up in St. Mary. And I asked him - No, he asked me, actually. He said, “Alex, where would you like me to take you on your first trip to Jamaica?” And my first thing was he’s got to take me to Nine Mile, the birthplace of Bob Marley. And he kind of thought

about it and really shook his head. He wasn't a reggae man. And then he said, "How about Firefly House?"

PC Yes.

AW And so it's only when he took me up to that property, Noël Coward's property, that the tour guide explained to me that this was a site of where Chief Tacky attacked Fort - the fort - What's it called? Fort **Haldane**? I can't remember of it now. But the British fort that Tacky - that he captured in his revolt in 1760. And so that's when I first heard about Chief Tacky's story. And so Jamaica offered that to me. It offered me a deeper identity. And I loved it, especially with my cousins. My cousin took me to a King Jammy dance in Kingston. And then he took me to Skateland as well and I listened to all the top DJs. I listened to -

PC So you've got the full experience (overlapping conversation).

AW Oh, definitely. I remember Beanie Man - They got Beenie Man on a beatbox. He was very young at the time, very young, but, oh my god, was he talented. And so I was listening to Papa San, who was also - Oh, god, so many, so many. Pinchers, I remember seeing Pinchers live. Admiral Bailey. Oh, so many. So many on King Jammy's Sound that night. And I was in heaven. I was in perfect heaven. There's all these DJs.

PC And I think the performer in you would - is absolutely proud of - by the people that you're talking about because it is the facility with language, the facility with rhythm and the way that they use words, and then performance. I mean Admiral Bailey, Pinchers, all of them, they can get up on stage and sway a crowd.

AW Yes, they can.

PC And it's hard to explain to people who haven't been there and haven't seen it.

AW Yeah.

PC But, yeah, I'm so glad that you go that. I really am.

AW In fact, before I finish, that first night, something that you don't hear, you know, a London blues or party dance was country music. Jamaicans - I couldn't believe it! Jamaicans were dancing to this country music, and rock and roll at some point of the night. And everyone is going crazy, jumping up and down. It was such a lovely atmosphere. Open air, of course.

PC Yes. That - We've always done that, I have to say. Even growing up there, we always had... There was definitely a reggae set. It was always and R&B set. There was usually a slow dancing set as well, where everybody (overlapping conversation) into the tile. So, yeah, we're eclectic and lovers of all music. What I want to do is introduce a reading from *Cane Warriors*, which I read. And it tugged at my heartstrings, I have to say, but the piece that we've chosen to read, I think - I found it deeply moving. Deeply moving. And we're just going to present it so people can see. It's set on - it's towards the end of the book. It's in chapter 20. And it's the night where the central character, Moa, comes back to find his mother and tell her what has happened.

(Reading from *Cane Warriors*)

PC It's so powerful. And I love the fact of - the economy with which you do it. The sentences sometimes drag, sometimes they're short. It's completely visual. I can hear the night. I can smell - It's just - It's lovely. It's lovely.

AW Well, I think the last two or three chapters were written in tears because I knew how it was going to end. But I wanted to leave some kind of hope. And for me, when I look on that whole period, it's about mothers saying goodbye to their children. Because in that situation, when the boys came of age, they were often sent away again to the next-door plantation or wherever. And so I wanted to have this kind of last meeting, if you like, with Moa and his mother, and how difficult that must be and the trauma. And I still believe, Patricia and Pauline, that we hold this trauma in our DNA. It's never really been resolved. That's why sometimes - A few brothers I know sometimes they fight and I don't know what they're fighting for. They get angry and don't know why they get angry for. And that goes for women also. So, you know, it's so good that now at last we're seeing our narratives play out on TV much more. And I really want more of it. I mean, to be honest, I see *Cane Warriors* as a theatrical production. I mean I was working with a dance group. Unfortunately, we didn't get a grant we needed, but we're going to fight and struggle for that because it's a visual piece. That's how I see it, how I envisioned it. So hopefully we can get there. And hopefully with my new contacts in the TV and film world, we can realise that dream because this is where we've been lacking for so, so many years, where our narrative is not front and centre. But now it's like it's about time that we told these narratives, whether they're about Black pain, Black cane warriors, or Black love, Black romance, Black science fiction, Black sitcom, whatever it may be. It's our time now. I strongly believe that. So that's where *Cane Warriors* is coming from. This is - Again, this hunger, this urge to relate our story.

PC That's what The Amplify Project is about as well. We're talking about the tellers of those stories and all the things that have gone into making them who they are at this point.

PW I think it's so beautiful what you're trying to do, Alex, because it's really important to be seen and to have your - have our stories out there. I just want to take you back to 2008.

AW Yeah.

PW When you were awarded an MBE for services to literature. How did that feel?

AW To be honest, Pauline, I was a bit conflicted. I was thinking, on one hand, what an incredible honour. I'm not a royalist in any way. I've never supported the monarchy. But I felt there's somebody out there who recognised that good work I've done. And it wasn't just me writing books. It was also awarded for my work in prisons that I'm very proud of, trying to engage young men and young women to often write letters back to their children. I'm very proud of that early work that I did from 2000, 2001. And of course on the other hand, there's this empire thing that - I know Benjamin Zephaniah, he refused his MBE. And I think, you know, it's a individual's decision. And so I had to think about it and consider it for quite a number of weeks before I decided, "You know what? It's not the Queen, it's not the Prime Minister. It's somebody out there recognised what good work I've done." And at this time and moment, nobody else is saying, "Oh, Alex, I think you have done this and done that. Here's a reward," or whatever. And so that was my main motivation with taking it. I think it will be weak if I say it'll make my mother proud, just - even though that is true. But, mainly, I've decided to accept it because I believe that I've done something good, and that's how it should be - You know, people should look through the lens of that. And when people do something good, they should be rewarded. And it doesn't necessarily mean that, you know, I'm a bowing kind of forelock-tugging kind of apologist for the Queen. No, I'm not. But I think it's important, especially for young people coming, that they see someone like me eventually be the equal of anybody.

PC And sometimes, you know, it can open a door. And once you go through that door, something can happen. I know exactly what your dilemma is and I always said it was on the basis that if it could amplify my voice in a good way, then it was worth accepting.

AW Yeah.

PC So I completely understand that dilemma. Definite.

PW And you mentioned your work in prisons. Can you tell us a little more about that and how long you've been doing that and why you do it.

AW I think I've mentioned before that I wasn't really invited to any of the major festivals until around about 2015, '16. I've been a writer since 1999. And so I had to find other ways of securing income. And one of those other ways was to work in prisons. At first, I thought it was necessary for me to just pay my rent and so on. But I found it really engaging, very rewarding, to work with people who find themselves on the other side of those walls and encourage them, to give them some kind of belief that things are getting better. So I've been probably visited most prisons in this country. I've been on Isle of Sheppey. I've been up in York, that prison that's - What's it called? I can't remember the name right now, but it's high-security. But I've been to all these prisons. I've been to Belmarsh and so on. And I try not to see the crime or whatever someone's committed. I just try to see the human being behind that and try to engage with them in reading and trying to say to them that really can offer a solace and a comfort for their heart.

PC I think that also is tremendous and it's - to me, it's a little bit sad that that isn't seen as equally important as going to festivals. But I know exactly what you mean. As a writer, sometimes it's very hard to make a living that you've created a body of work. And I hope, between, you know - you work at Manchester University as well, don't you?

AW Yeah.

PC And all the other stuff that you do. You've managed to create a living as a writer, which is great, many other people haven't been able to do. And, again, it goes back to that determination, I think that I saw in you as you became, you know, the DJ, and then the novelist, and then, you know. You've done something that a great many writers haven't been able to do.

AW Yes. It's not easy in this country, especially if you decide to write about themes and subject matters that some people feel uncomfortable with, the establishment and so on. You know, it's not easy.

PW Talking about that, your life was turned into one of Steve McQueen's "Small Axe" films, which was on the BBC last year. An amazing set of films. How did that come about? And how did it feel for your story to be part of that anthology?

AW Around about four, five years ago, Pauline, I heard about the series being developed by Steve McQueen from my agent. And she said, “Alex, you got to be on this production somehow as a contributor or a writer.” And so what she did, she sent four or five of my books to the production office hoping that Steve McQueen would get back to us and maybe I might have an interview with him. And that is what happened. And so after three interviews, I finally got to meet Steve McQueen on third interview, I believe. I was invited to the writers’ room to help develop the series. And so the first stages, there was about six of us in the writers’ room discussing the themes and issues and the things that we felt important to relate in a series. And halfway through this process, Steve McQueen came in one morning and he said, right, he really needs a narrative about a young black boy who has experience of institutions, perhaps children’s homes, perhaps prisons, and so on. And one of my fellow writing room colleagues, Alastair Siddons, he pointed to me and he said, “Alex, that is you.” And Steve looked at me and he said, “Alex, have you been holding out on me?” And for the rest of that day, I told my tale. And at the end of that day, he said, “Right. You’re going in.” And I was like, “What? Oh my gosh!” So I kind of went home. I told my family and we’re all stunned. And the next day, I hunted around for my files and so on, and I collected them all, and I took them back to the writers’ room, and everyone read them, kind of shared everything. And that’s how it all started. It was just overwhelming. I mean to go on the set and to see the young Sheyi Cole play out my days in Brixton and so on, you know, especially when a chopper scene, when I’m in my hostel. And if you could visualise it, I had a very small bed that was propped up on paintings, and I had my flyers, my reggae dancehall flyers and tickets and so on sticks up to the wall. And they had really dedicated themselves to recreate the scene the way I remembered it. And when I walked into that set, I just broke down. It was so, so emotional, and it triggered a lot of things for me. So immensely proud, Pauline and Patricia. Immensely proud, because how many writers get that honour of seeing their life played out when they’re living.

PW Yeah.

PC You have to admit it’s a pretty remarkable life. But, no, I think you have every reason to be proud. I think we’re sort of drifting towards the end now, so I have just one more question I want to ask, which is a little bit of prognostication. That’s not right. I’m going to ask you a question about the future now.

AW Yeah.

PC What do you see for yourself? What do you see for writers generally? And what do you see for the society in general? So it’s kind of three-parter. You, writers, and the society around you.

AW For me, Patricia, I really want to try different art forms. Maybe writing for TV, writing for film. More drama. I’ve only done two plays. I really would like to do more plays when I find the time. For the whole Black narrative thing, I’d really like it to diversify itself. I mean for so long we’ve

concentrated on Black pain. I'd really like to see that branch out to Black comedy and other genres. That'd be fantastic to see. Because I still believe in what Simeon first taught me, when he said to me that reading leads empathy. And so I'd like more of the population, of this UK population, to read more of our narrative, no matter what guise it comes in, whether it's crime, whether it's comedy, whether it's Black pain, Black love, or whatever. Because, for me, through the arts, people can change minds, you know? So I'm a champion of that, of expressing ourself. And especially in education, in secondary education, you know. So I kind of cry when I hear that drama has been paused or halted or anyway, or there's no funding for music and so on. I think we really need the arts to express ourselves and more people to feel included and for their narratives to be heard and listened to.

PC Yeah. Yeah, absolutely right. One of my favourite quotations from Ben Okri, is "We are half human, half stories." And I think that just encapsulates it. We become more than we are if we take in stories, and that's the power of what we do as writers.

AW Absolutely.

PW And just before we finish, Alex, I want to ask, you've got children?

AW Yeah.

PW Yeah. Any budding writers amongst them?

AW No, but I have one son, he's working in the film business. In fact, he's working on the live action film of "The Little Mermaid" as we speak. My oldest son, he's a graphic designer. He's actually designed two of my book covers. He's a freelance. He's doing very well. And my daughter, she works in education. She works in HR down in the school in Battersea. So they're all - I'm very proud of them.

PC Yeah. Sounds like a good (overlapping conversation).

PW And what - Just to finish, what are the best things about being Alex Wheatle?

AW The people I meet, Pauline and Patricia. I remember before I gave up my engineering job - My days were quite drab even though the money was decent. I could raise my children on that. But everyday I would go to the shop floor, say the same thing to the same people. But now I can find myself speaking to any number of people from around the world, hearing about different experiences and different livelihoods. And, you know, that is so enriching for me. It really is. Because, again, to be storyteller, you need to be story listener, and I've always been that. Love to hear people's different experiences or what - or how they have lived their lives, and so that enriches me. And I love that about my life right now. I might be here in Leighton Buzzard right now, you know. But because of computer and all the devices we have these days and how we can connect with people, I'm always meeting somebody new almost every week. And I'm bouncing ideas with them, and they're telling me about their experiences and I'm offering mine, and that is so enriching. That is the best part of being a writer for me.

PW Well, you have certainly enriched this conversation and I've enjoyed it so much. Thank you.

PC Yes. Thank you so much, Alex. It's been just a pleasure talking to you.

AW Thank you for having me. It'd be great to catch up when I've come down to London next.

PC Yes, yes. We can have a distance coffee on the riverbank.

AW Yeah, yes, we can. Yes, we can.

(Music plays)

PC Excerpts in this podcast were read by Stanley J. Browne.

PW Do check with our website, theamplifyproject.co.uk for other podcasts in the series and for further information about Black British writing.

PC The Amply Project is funded by Arts Council England.

Terms of Use

This content is owned by The Amplify Project or our licensors and all rights are reserved. If you would like to use any material from this transcript please contact either

PatriciaCumper@theamplifyproject.co.uk or PaulineWalker@theamplifyproject.co.uk

See Terms of Use: <https://theamplifyproject.co.uk/terms-of-use/>