**Introducing Matt Chamberlain, Vicar’s Picnic Festival Angel C. Dye asks the questions.**

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**Tell us about Vicar’s Picnic.**

**It’s a fantastic festival. It’s the biggest little festival in Kent. It combines the feel of a big festival with the intimate family atmosphere. Wonderful! A bunch of guys who failed to get Glastonbury tickets a couple of years ago went to the pub to console themselves and ended up forming their own festival. I performed at it last year and enjoyed it very much. So I was delighted to be invited back. I may even have invited myself.**

**How will you inspire the crowd there?**

**I’ll wear a disguise, dig out my old Mancunian accent and tell them my name is John Cooper Clarke. Beyond that, all I can do is perform my poems wearing my heart on my sleeve. Some won’t like it but, on past experience, some will. And some may come and chat and say kind things and we’ll have interesting chat and all go away thinking from a slightly different angle. If that happens, that will be quite inspiring I think.**

**Yeah that is what you want, people to leave with your words on their lips.**

**That’s a very good way of putting it.**

**What does being Festival Laureate mean to you?**

**It means a great deal. Last year it was a fantastic event and I hoped I’d get to perform there again so to have this additional is just wonderful. The first job was to produce some short promotional films helping to whet the appetite for the festival. I hope the films don’t put people off! If the laureate fails to wreck the festival with his films, then I’ll be performing in the Artists’ Quarter and milling about and chatting to people with a view to producing some crowd-collaboration poetry.**

**I hoped it is a fantastic event.**

**Oh, your hope is safe. It will be. The Fratellis, From the Jam, Tom Hingley, the Duallers, Seb Fontaine, comedians, poets, and so much more crammed into two days. People reading this should stop here, shove vicarspicnic.co.uk into their browser and buy tickets.**

**Give us a potted history.**

**What’s a potted history?**

**Your life in a capsule?**

**I was brought up in Lancashire, went to University in north Wales, lived in London for a bit, then moved to Kent about ten years ago. I was always good with language but didn’t think I could be a writer until three or four years ago when a strange set of circumstances caused me to write (and then perform) a bit of poetry.**

**Oh do tell**

**Well the short version is that I lost a friend at a time when health scares and deaths were circling around. I was pretty fed up, on a train, and the Metro newspaper wasn’t much comfort. I started scribbling miserable poetry and one thing led to another.**

**Aw, I am sorry you had all those horrid things collide but trains are the writer’s new birth canal don’t you know?**

**What a lovely poetic thought.**

**So you are a well-travelled man. Does Medway offer you anything different?**

**It has a DIY feel where art is concerned. People just get up and do it without permission and they appreciate each other for doing it. I had a very rose tinted view when I first entered into it and, naturally, as time wears on you get knocks but overall my positive view of the Medway ‘scene’ remains firm.**

**Where else can people hear you perform this year?**

**I have writing seasons and performing seasons and at the moment I have been concentrating a bit more on writing and a bit less on performing, so the diary is not full of gigs. However, I will be popping up at the Vicar’s Picnic festival. The kind people of Roundabout Nights have always tolerated me and I love them very much, and Clea Llewellyn’s nights at Sun Pier House, Chatham are another favourite so I’ll be back there. And the Faversham festival, naturally. I recently did the Canterbury fringe and would kill to be invited back.**

**Beyond that, I tend to see what crops up and then do what I fancy. If someone out there is crying in their corn flakes so desperate are they to see me do my poetry, their best bet would be to sidle up to me online so I can tell them my plans. Or they could just see a doctor.**

**Which is your favourite of poems/books you have written?**

**Lowering Awareness is the best of my three books by a mile. I don’t disown the other two – they were ok for the stage I was at – but they’re not in the same league as Lowering Awareness. The first was written in an excited hurry just to prove I could produce a book. The second book was like another first book, to prove it wasn’t a fluke. This latest book isn’t perfect but I think it’s much more accomplished. I think it’s really obvious that the writer slowed down, thought about it, applied a bit of quality control. You can always improve but I am proud of that collection.**

**Yes you have got some outstanding reviews for the book. It is certainly a gem. You are collaborating with Spreken. Tell us more?**

**More? More? When you collaborate with Spreken, what more is there to say? She’s an excellent poet. She’s so economical – I’m glad there’s no tariff on that word because I use it all the time – and she just has the deftest poetic touch. We were chatting at the launch of the Medway Lit-art project *An Assemblance of Judicious Heretics* and realised that we were both writing ourselves into a bit of a corner, stuck on gloomy subject matter. We were both admiring each other’s work but not enjoying our own. Her idea was to write our way out of this, together, by finding positivity in banal things. It’s been a great tonic. We’ve finished the book and we think it’s really good. We’re just making the final arrangements with the publisher.**

**How has your writing changed for this project? It seems looser, more open and detailed than previous works?**

**I’m not sure about looser and more open, actually. Depends what you mean by open – linguistically or personally? It’s not the latter. For a change I’m not talking about myself, so in that sense it would be *less* open. To answer your main question, this project has forced me to think differently because it’s forced structure into the equation. We only set one rule – to put positivity where none was obvious. But even that is a rule. I used to spew but this time I have found words and placed them. Secondly there’s the debt to the collaborator. You don’t write to please them, as such, but you do feel accountable to the timetable and overall spirit of the project.**

**I did mean looser linguistically. You are usually more sparing using the most carefully weighed and selected beautiful words. How did it feel to use the word ‘shit’ in a poem?**

**Did I? Ooh, aren’t I edgy?**

**Any more projects in the pipeline?**

**Just germs of ideas. And most germs get sniffed out into a tissue. I prefer to be on the last lap of something before I own up to it. If I do something, I won’t keep quiet about it, don’t worry.**

**Is one of these germs pinning itself to a goldfish?**

**Have you been spying on me?**

**Yes of course I have been. That’s what good journalists do.**

**Don’t they just. Yes, ‘pin me to the goldfish’ is the working title of the next book. People who attend Chatham’s wonderful Roundabout Nights might get the private joke. Anyway it’ll be a little while before this book sees the light of day. I find you have to write them first.**

**I have about 130 working titles and ideas for poems at the moment!**

**Well, don’t just sit there. Go and hammer them onto a page. I want a first draft on my desk by the end of next week.**

**What advice would you give aspiring writers/performers?**

**Don’t aspire! Just do. I was helped by the circumstances in which I started doing poetry because I had no aspirations. I just needed to do it for the sake of doing it. But I later realised that this had helped because I just did it without a plan. After each poem or each performance or each book you can’t help looking back a bit self-critically and identifying where you could improve. And, by degrees, you develop some sort of ambition or progression plan. Too many people say “I want to achieve x by the end of this year” and it results in certain failure. I’ve seen people dreaming and aspiring and plotting and announcing but never actually getting round to doing it. I say think small but actually do it, then try to do it again a bit better or a bit bigger or a bit differently, and see where it goes.**

**I’m a plotter and announcer, or just a procrastinator and blagger. The 16 year old me dreamed big and was put off by her first rejection slip and a vicar quoting King Solomon 600 B.C. - ‘There are too many books in the world!’**

**Ah, but if we remove all those by Jeffrey Archer, that’ll create a bit of space for yours.**

**So what does the younger Matt wish he had known?**

**I was terribly serious when I was smaller and, believe it or not, I’ve lightened up a great deal. Don’t laugh. I’m much more relaxed about life than I used to be.**

**Sorry I am going to laugh.**

**Don’t mind me.**

**You have a sore throat, who would be your stand in?**

**Every poet I know has a more attractive voice than me, so take your pick! But actually I don’t think anyone else on earth can own your emotions can they? I tried to produce an audio book version of *Binge Thinking* and, because I couldn’t manage the studio time required for recording them myself, I decided to go for a royalty-share partnership with other narrators. The project remains ‘parked’ because I auditioned a number of people and I just didn’t want any of them. They all had great sonorous voices, not like my thin squeal, and they all read competently enough, but none of them put the emphasis or emotion in what I consider the ‘right’ places.**

**So, if eventually I am to get round to answering your actual question, I don’t know who would be my stand-in at a gig.**

**What else do we have to look forward to?**

**Donald Trump is only temporary, right?**

**Yeah he will be impeached and you will be doing rap at Glastonbury about him.**

**Prince William is more likely to rap at Glastonbury than I am.**

**Which writer or poet or musicians set your heart on fire?**

**Mine was already on fire so I didn’t need that kind of assistance. I was a pretty intense young boy. Very serious. Quite brittle. I was talkative and I loved words but I didn’t think I could arrange them in an artistic way. As a teenage softy in a tough town, the inspiration I needed was in the form of permission. And it came. There was this funny bloke from Manchester, another funny bloke from Sheffield via Hull, a stand-up comedian from outer space . . . They were writers and musicians and now, looking back, I’d say poets too. But I didn’t think they were poets then because they weren’t labelled that way.**

**What stirs you to write?**

**The idea that someone might read or hear it and like me for it.**

**So does that mean you are tied up in the poems and they can see you and like the You that they see in the poems ?**

**Possibly. It’s just as likely that people will dislike. But if you get something off your chest and somebody, somewhere identifies with it, that’s ok isn’t it?**

**Like phlegm?**

**[Arched eyebrow. No reply]**

**How are your poems born?**

**They are conceived in the heart, and delivered quietly to avoid waking the rest of the maternity ward. But once they have taken their first breaths they start to bawl for attention.**

**What kind of animal are your poems?**

**Something physically small, quiet but not well-camouflaged. A skunk, perhaps.**

**Ha ha! The poems do strike a good balance between revelation and mystery and yes their compactness only emphasises the subject. Is that the beauty of poetry for you, as a linguist to expose life’s ‘ smells.’ in a few beautifully balanced, measured words?**

**I don’t actually smell, you know! Skunk jokes always fall flat.**

**Who would you love to read poems in bed with?**

**Do you mind? I’m trying to sleep.**

**Not yet! You still have to eat. Who would you read poems at dinner with?**

**I’d love to have read poems over dinner with Victoria Wood. But that’s nothing to do with poetry. It’s just an excuse to have dinner with Victoria. Can’t I have dinner without poetry? Well, it’s too late now. But if she’d got round to inviting me before she died I would have enjoyed comparing notes with her. She’s an influence on my poetry despite not herself being a poet. There’s a deftness that I just love. It’s funny, in speech I ramble and witter. But in writing I can approximate that deftness. Don’t know why.**

**Which poem would you read/quote if you were to be executed at dawn?**

**I’d rather be executed at night because I like the dawn. But if I must face the gallows, I might find myself repeating “little body, do not die” from John Betjeman.**

**Are there any parts of you that are not poem?**

**I don’t think any parts of me are a poem. Poetry for me isn’t something fanciful or otherworldly. Its power and beauty lies in the fact that, at its root, there is simplicity and straightforward human-ness. That may sound odd because I am a quite romantic poet who appreciates delicate ideas more than epic statements. However, for me it is about angles. The pillars in the cathedral nave are in themselves fairly mundane; it’s the seemingly infinite number of views you can get by viewing them from different angles and in different light that produces stunning beauty and visceral and cerebral power.**

**What is your desk like?**

**Immaculate. Tidy desk, tidy mind. Or maybe it’s empty desk, empty mind. Either way, you could eat your supper off my desk. But please don’t.**

**What sort of music would your poems be set to?**

**Err, I really don't know. Any ideas?**

**I think they could be set to some Smiths tunes or even the Cure. That mix of jaunty and depressed when you are not sure if you are meant to be dancing or crying so do both. I think Marc Almond would have to sing some of the more tragic or voyeuristic ones such as ‘I just can’t bear to look’.**

**Yes, I’m ok with that.**

**What lives in the spaces between your poems?**

**Supreme confidence and serious self-limitation. I don't say that at all facetiously. It's true - one minute I think there are certain requirements around the poetry world which I just can't meet and wouldn't really want to. And the next minute I think I really can do this stuff and I'm going to step outside myself, sit on the front row and just enjoy this guy because he’s actually good at it! There's a caution and a confidence. Those two things really need to do some kind of deal eventually or I will go dizzy. But for now they have this running battle and nobody is sure who is in the ascendency this week. It's like Mike Baldwin and Ken Barlow. I'm not sure who is on top at this juncture.**

**Do your poems talk to each other?**

**No. They lead quite separate lives. Each one is a self-contained thing; a little dig at (or occasionally tribute to) the world. They are pretty curmudgeonly things except after a couple of drinks when they let their hair down. Just like me.**

**I do not believe you. The poems tell a story, they do link, themes run through, a ghost runs amok, you call for the ghost. They link to themes in your other two books, ‘Love, misery and Fruit Crumble’ and ‘ Binge Thinking.’ I think the stories between the poems and between each line tells us a bigger story. A poetry book is always more than the sum of its parts. By throwing them all together, you create some kind of fusion, alchemy you did not expect.**

**You may be right. I haven’t analysed them in that way – the writer is possibly distracted by the actual subject matter whereas the hearer can step back from it.**

**You begin with a self portrait where you are happy to be you [ again] and end with one where you are not. Did the book take you on any journey of self discovery?**

**Actually, the final poem doesn’t say I don’t want to be me. It says I want to possess no name.**

**The artist formerly known as… But names are so inextricably linked to being ‘I’ aren’t they?**

**Maybe that’s what I was whingeing about.**

**Are they alive?**

**There have not as yet been any signs of life.**

**I think they come alive according to what is in a reader’s heart. They awaken to particular calls or need. Some will stay dead to some people forever and come alive for others. Poetry certainly makes me come alive, if it is good.**

**Yes. The hearer/ reader sort of takes ownership of your work. You hand it over to them. You still own the freehold, but they make of it whatever they will.**

**What do you write about?**

**That is a moving feast. I started out writing mostly about people and their relationships. Especially the difficult ones. Then I got a bit tired of that and had a phase of writing about the physical landscape a bit more. Recently, through my One Man’s Trash collaboration with Spreken, I’ve been writing about slithers of beauty within mundane or unpleasant or anonymous things. I suppose the common thread in all of the above is that it’s a focus on small things. My writing has changed but that tendency to narrow in on smaller details rather than observe a big picture is still in evidence. I can’t see that changing.**

**Are there recurring themes, aspects you revisit?**

**I think I’d say injustice. And love, obviously. Everything is about love or the** **absence of it, yearning for it, need for it, rejection of it or whatever. But injustice is a slightly less obvious but very important theme for me. Again, I’m going small on this though. I don’t step back and observe the gigantic injustices in global politics etc - not because they don’t matter, but because my instrument doesn’t quite manage that note. Other people say brilliant things about them but, temperamentally, I tend to see the injustice in people’s interactions far more vividly. It sounds flippant to say that a governmental assault on defenceless people doesn’t plunge as deeply into my flesh as someone being deliberately disingenuous, but I’m afraid it’s true.**

**Is poetry relevant today?**

**I’ve always struggled with that sense of the word ‘relevance’. It seems to be used as a synonym for ‘popular’ or ‘suitability’. Poetry is relevant in this interview because it’s a conversation between two poets. But in general society? It isn’t the most popular art form but it works for some people at some times but not for other people at other times. I don’t think relevance is very often relevant!**

**It seems to becoming more popular. Nearly every town has poetry festivals and the uptake of creative writing courses is massive. Poems will pop the populace. I confess I did poetry for my degree as it was a shorter word count and therefore less time consuming. I was mistaken though. I spent about twenty hours weighing five words.**

**A certain kind of muscular poetry certainly seems to be getting more popular but I’m not sure my delicate kind is. But that’s ok. Like you, I’d rather weigh the words carefully regardless.**

**What are you reading currently?**

**Zack Davies’s poetry collection entitled “Let the big fish swim”. He is observant, warm, vicious, serious and hilarious all at the same time.**

**Viciously warm. I am intrigued**

**When you leave here, buy Zack’s book. It’s the benchmark.**

**Do you have any particular formula?**

**Not exactly. That said, after I performed alongside Sara Hirsch at the Turner in Margate I had a bit of a re-think which led to more ‘layering’ in my poetry. I wouldn’t call it a formula but I am more conscious of the possibilities of sub-threads in a poem.**

**I always like a poem with some density and texture with a little ambiguity thrown in. Describe yourself in two poetic lines.**

**Depends on the mood. But right now:**

**“I own this face’s simple smiles, which bubble up at sparrow squabbles   
and I only rent corrosive heartburn tears. . . ”**

**That’s from “I am this man” by a bloke called Matt Chamberlain.**

**That is cheating! Now, off the cuff in 5 words.**

**If I could do poetry off the cuff I’d be Ian McMillan!**

**If you weren’t a poet you would be..?**

**I’d be me but without any poetry.**

**I could never imagine a Matt with no poetry. I weep at the thought. Like a teddy with no stuffing.**

**I have too much stuffing.**

**Can poetry change lives?**

**Yes. But then again everything probably changes your life somehow. For me, poetry has changed the way I see things, definitely.**

**Do your poems make you cry when you write/reread them?**

**Only the comedy ones. That’s a joke. Are you crying?**

**Yes, some poetry (by me or by others) produces a tear. More often it produces a less visible sense of melancholy which is actually a much more powerful state of mind than actual crying. I’ve been accused of enjoying misery but that’s just untrue. But I do feel helped by bringing sadness or anger or longing to the surface, exploring it, revelling in the language of it. I think many people do; it’s just that many won’t admit it.**

**Which poem do you wish you wrote?**

**There are lots of those! It’s impossible to choose just one and I’d probably give you a different answer each time you asked me. Right now, Moonshine by Barry Fentiman-Hall comes to mind first.**

**Which poem line would you wear on a t-shirt?**

**None.**

**Untruth! I’ve seen you wear the Stone Roses one with “I wanna be adored” on it.**

**Rumbled!**

**Who is boss? You or the poem?**

**I quite like the concept of servant leadership so I suppose the answer to that question is : both!**

**Do you have any rituals around creating poems?**

**No.**

**Oh you must. That is sad. Aren’t you meant to be in a garret singing to starlings and the like? I have to have the right pen, it has to be ‘the one.’ It will take me ages to pick it, oh and a gilt inlaid very expensive notebook and then it is too perfect to write in. I jot all my themes, ideas in a bit of pebble dash on the page and build a skeleton, then flesh him and dress him, then strip him back down to pared bone and then layer him up again with skinny sub threads, and there is usually wine, and cheese and chorizo. And I am usually in gorgeous cafes or beaches or alone at 3 a.m. looking at the stars.**

**Oh you are a proper poet then if you have the right pen.**

**Definitely. There must be something. You can’t write in a vacuum, or in the loo. Well perhaps you do…**

**Eurghh, no! I have trouble believing anyone could ever need a loo. I certainly don’t use them. Disgusting - interview over!**

**Diva moment! Are you like the Queen then? Everyone knows she never goes to the loo and wears huge knickers.**

**Yes, I am very much like the Queen.**

**Like I said, Diva!**

**Nah, I’m just civilised.**

**What would your epitaph be?**

**“Couldn’t be arsed”**

**Mine will be ‘She made it,’ or ‘ and still they don’t believe me.’**

**That would require a bigger stone.**

**What do you want people to say about your poems?**

**I like the things people have said about them already. I’d like more people to say these things. People have said they express complex emotions simply and accessibly – I like that. People have said they are unprecious and unpretentious – I like that. People have said they carry powerful thoughts in a gentle or quiet way – I like that. You have said, on the contrary, that those damn poems brutally smash their fists into your heart – I like that too. Someone I respect enormously recently said I really own the words and that is great praise.**

**Yeah you do, especially in performance. I read as if disconnected from my poem. You, your inner self is wrenched out on show. You totally inhabit the world you make.**

**I’m very touched by that description. It’s true that I do feel very wrung-out when I come off stage. Thank you for noticing.**

**That’s okay. It’s not your usual compliment is it, ’Oh you look totally wrung out’?**

**I’ll settle for it. Especially if you say it in Les Dawson’s voice.**

**What preparation do you do for performing poems?**

**I do two silent read-throughs just before the gig. The first is focussed on the structure, just reminding myself where the pauses should go and reminding myself where any harder-to-deliver phrases are (I guess I shouldn’t write that line in the first place if it’s a tongue-twister!) The second, more important, inward rehearsal is picturing the subject matter and really feeling the emotion. You might call it getting into ‘character’. There’s a bit of physicality in my performing style which some people hate but some people have praised. I didn’t ever decide that; it just came out that way.**

**What do you want your poems to do to people?**

**Touch them somehow. Simple as that.**

**Are there ghosts of other poets in your work?**

**No doubt, but I am not very conscious of them.**

**That is good, to only have subconscious ghosts! Morrissey stole from the rich and stole from the poor. He ransacked everybody and everything. If you woke up and your poetic heart was stolen…?**

**I’d hold an inquiry, followed by the urgent installation of a new poetry burglar alarm.**

**I’m not sure it’s possible for someone to rob your heart, or your poetry heart. I can imagine the day when I don’t have the heart of a poet anymore but it would be because I’d exhausted the poetry well or I’d been turned off poetry or I had been captivated by something else.**

**Acting. You can act when the poet blood runs thin. You’d be a great actor with your magical changing face and transformative energy and that physicality.**

**And will ‘they’ give me money for that?**

**No.**

**Bastards!**

**Seriously though – acting is an option! I mean it about your malleable face.**

**You’re not the first person to mistake me for Wayne Rooney.**

**And where can people find you if they want to know more?**

**Google will know. But what advice do you have for them if they want to know *less*?**

**Matt, thank you.**

**Angela, thank you too.**

**Matt Chamberlain is The Vicar’s Picnic Festival Laureate 2017. The festival takes place on 14-15 July in Yalding, Kent. See www.vicarspicnic.co.uk**