



BLAST FROM THE PAST Zephaniah has put a V8 and a new interior in his TR7, which he has owned since 1993

Me and My Motor

Old Triumphs are poetry in motion to Benjamin Zephaniah

Benjamin Zephaniah is keen to make one thing clear: "I'm not a petrolhead." But growing up in Birmingham, the cradle of the British car industry, and seeing "old Triumphs on the road" sowed the seeds of a lifelong love affair with vintage British motors.

"Just down the road from where I lived was the Lucas light factory, and I had friends who would leave a job at Lucas's on a Friday and walk into a new job at Dunlop [the tyre-maker] on the Monday," says the award-winning poet, writer and musician. "Then it all went."

As a teenager with dyslexia, Zephaniah was sent to an approved school and taken under the wing of a Rolls-Royce engineer — the appropriately named Mr Carr — who worked with disadvantaged kids on his days off. "One day he gave me a Ford Corsair engine and told me to strip it and rebuild it," Zephaniah recalls. It took him two

months, under his tutor's watchful gaze. "He'd occasionally ask me questions like, 'Have you seen your mum recently?'" and I gradually realised he was using the engine as a way to connect with me," recalls Zephaniah, 61, who now lives in Lincolnshire.

Despite such attempts to help, however, he left the school at 13, unable to read or write, and later served a prison sentence for burglary, before falling in love with the written word and turning over a new leaf. As well as having a string of poetry books, novels, plays and albums to his name, he has owned a string of British cars of varying reliability.

He bought his first motor, a Ford Anglia, at 18. "It cost £40. I'd drive it five miles and have to fill it up with water because the radiator had a leak." He sold it and bought a second-hand Mini, but "one day I filled it up with petrol and it never started again".

Despite his initial bad luck with British cars, his third motor, a second-hand Triumph GT6 — based on the popular Triumph Spitfire convertible — did him proud for a couple of years. "That was a wonderful car," he sighs. It was followed by a second-hand Triumph TR6, "which had a lovely wooden interior" even if it was "a bit of a poor man's sports car".

In the 1990s he went one better, buying a second-hand white TR7

to impress his girlfriend. He was not alone in being a fan of the 1970s sports car. "One day someone flashed me on the motorway, so I pulled over and a guy in a Roller pulled up and said: 'I love your car, will you sell it to me?'" Despite being offered "silly money", Zephaniah declined.

A year later he traded up to a "more modern" TR7, which he has owned for the past 27 years, though it's only insured to drive 5,000 miles a year. He has since stripped it down, fitted a 4.6-litre V8 engine, upgraded the brakes and had the interior reupholstered. "People under 35 are always coming up to me and saying, 'What the hell is this?'"

After hundreds of hours spent under the bonnet, "there's very little of the original TR7 left, and despite its age, it moves like a modern car and is just as reliable". In fact, he wishes more people would follow his example: "I think we do something for the country by restoring [classic cars] rather than scrapping them."

Despite his love of British cars, Zephaniah dreams of a more distinctive motor: the Batmobile. "I love the shape and the fire that comes out of the back. Although mine would have to be electric." ■

Interview by York Membery
*Benjamin Zephaniah's rereleased album *Revolutionary Minds* is out now (benjaminzephaniah.com)*

Driving



MY LIFE IN CARS

1976

Ford Anglia



1977

Triumph GT6



1979

Triumph TR5



1980

Triumph TR6



1992

TR7



1993

TR7

(main picture)

MY DREAM CAR

Batmobile (electric)

