

Ian Stanton

(This is the preliminary draft of an obituary for the disabled activist, writer and musician, Ian Stanton, that appeared in the Guardian Newspaper in November 1998).

Tom Shakespeare

With the death on November 26th of Ian Stanton, after a short illness, the British disability movement has lost its premier singer-songwriter and best-loved activist. His ironic lyrics encapsulated the humour as well as the anger underlying the civil rights struggle of disabled people, and his songs enlivened the public demonstrations of the Direct Action Network in town centres across England. While the disability movement is not immune from the petty rivalries and ego conflicts which besett the rest of politics, Ian was one person who was universally respected and admired for his integrity, commitment and passion.

Ian Stanton was born in Oldham in 1951, and educated at the local Grammar School. The first signs of his rebellious spirit came when he ran away to Blackpool with a friend at the age of 15. His earliest ambition was to be a printer, and he pursued this occupation until developing Berger's Disease in the 1970s, which led to the loss of both his legs. Later on he was to compare himself to a more famous amputee in a song which starts with the lines:

When it seems life's getting harder I remember Douglas Bader
Cos that's what my doctor said to do.
Said 'overcome those negative feelings
You will find yourself revealing
Sides of you you never even knew'.

The same song contains the memorable couplet

I am sad, yes I'm pathetic,
I'm a fan of Oldham Athletic...

Of course, Ian was never pathetic for a moment: sent to the Queen Elizabeth Rehabilitation College, he became the first disabled person to be expelled, for producing a samizdat newsletter exposing bad practices at the institution. His journalistic career continued at Oldham Day Centre, with another users' newsheet attacking paternalism, and when Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People was formed in 1983, Ian was the obvious candidate to edit the journal, *Coalition*, which rapidly became required reading for disabled activists across the country.

His musical career took off after a course at Northern College taught by Richard Stilgoe. He started singing at clubs around Oldham and Ashton and subsequently went on to perform in day centres, disability arts cabarets, rallies and at mainstream events. Appearances at the Glastonbury Festival, headlining at Belfast's Lyric Theatre as part of the Queen's Festival, a performance on the main stage at the Vancouver Folk Music Festival in 1992, a visit to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and an appearance at the Cambridge Folk Festival in 1996 are some of the performances which earned him the sobriquet of 'the Bob Dylan of the Disability Arts Movement'. Using a mixture of music and jokes, Ian poked fun at the prejudice that disabled people face, and songs such as 'Tragic but brave' and 'Chip on your shoulder' have become anthems for the disability movement.

Despite the success, Ian Stanton never really believed that he was as good as everyone else thought. His was a self-deprecating wit, which won him friends wherever he travelled or performed. However his health was becoming steadily more uncertain: his marriage was brought forward in 1993, because doctors had given him only 24 hours to live. He rallied round then with his usual indomitable stubbornness, and in his final years found great happiness with Audrey, the love of his life, and his step-son, Brett.

Ian was the born rebel: his campaigning had started in support of Oldham Campaign for Homosexual Equality in the 1970s, and continued until his final days in hospital. Denied alcohol by the doctors, he swigged mouthwash instead, showing in his death the same determination which had served him so well throughout his life. His last message to colleagues at the Greater Manchester Coalition was to apologise that their journal was going to be late. Resuscitated after his heart had stopped, he survived long enough to watch the Manchester United match and say a proper goodbye to Audrey and his friends.

His biggest ambition was to act on mainstream television, which was recently fulfilled when he played the part of a 40-something dope-smoking disabled rebel on the BBC's *Casualty* spin-off. To be broadcast in January, this final appearance is a fairly accurate portrait of the man himself, but his lasting memorial will be the major contribution his music made to the civil rights struggle of disabled people. As Ian wrote in the song 'Rolling Thunder':

"You feel a rumblin', It's comin' thru the land
You get to feel your time is comin'
You can touch it with your hand.
We are advancing, dancing on the way."