

# 'I write all my poems with a quill by candlelight': John Cooper Clarke on the joy of life without tech

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Back in the day, I used to feel a degree of sympathy for those who had been compelled to become computer literate. I would see these guys in the city, struggling home with a rucksack loaded with technology, ruining the line of their Hugo Boss suit. It looked like a ball and chain to me. So I stayed away. Whenever anyone mentioned computers, I would say: "What do I need a computer for? I'm a poet." Later, when mobile phones came out, I was sitting on public transport next to two girls when I heard one of them say to the other: "My boss has just bought me a new mobile phone." I thought, yeah, I bet he has. If he'd put an iron collar around your neck, would you be happy about that, too? The adoption of mobile phones is probably the moment I truly drifted away from technology. At first people said they admired me, as though it was some sort of principled position I was taking. I thought, yeah, you're admiring me now, but further down the line it's going to be, "Who the fuck do you think you are to not have a mobile phone?" And so it proved. Their love soon turned to hate. The last piece of technology I got involved with was a DVD player. After that, I decided I didn't need any more machinery in my life. I write all my poems with a quill – a beautiful thing with a calligrapher's nib – and parchment by candlelight. The quill was originally a prop for a photoshoot I was doing, but they let me keep it, along with a pot of ink. I don't have a typewriter or a computer, I don't own a mobile phone, and it's not possible to send me an email. If someone needs me, they can call my landline. I'm usually in the house anyway – it's not as if I'm living off-grid. When I was a teenager, I quite liked the idea of being the next Mickey Spillane, the great American crime writer. But I've had to abandon that idea. If I tried to write a detective story set in the modern day, people would be like, "What's he running up there for? Why didn't he just text him? What's he going in a phone booth for? Why didn't he Google him on his Skype?" Not all change is for the better. Progress is great, but I often want to say, "You can stop there now." That's the nature of progress, isn't it? It always goes on longer than it's needed. Who on earth asked for controls on everything to be touch sensitive? Most of my music is on cassette tape now, because the best place to listen to music is in the car. I've got a ghetto blaster in every room at home. I've also got a TV, a VHS player and a spare VHS player in the shed. I've got three large chests of drawers containing all the videos that I've recorded, along with some stuff I forgot to return to Blockbuster in 1989 such as The Terminator. Staying away from technological development was never a political decision, or even a conscious one. I'm not convinced I made the right choice, because I suffer the thousand daily punishments visited upon the analogue community. Every day it's, "Go to our app!" or, "Visit our website!" At my time of life, you have to deal with the medical authorities regularly and just you try talking to a flesh-and-blood person. It's impossible. I don't like the "cashless society", either. I spent 40 years trying to make some money from this poetry lark, and the minute I get any,

suddenly nobody wants it. Even my bank has moved to another town. I have to get a cab there, a 70-quid round trip, just to get my own money. But I won't bank online. You hear horror stories about large sums of money going missing. When you get money it's supposed to be the end of your worries, not the beginning of a whole new set of worse ones. I'd hate for anyone to go running away with the idea that I'm some sort of social justice warrior, but technology seems to have a detrimental effect on those struggling in society. How does it impinge on the mendicants, for instance? If nobody has any spare change, how does your regular fella living in a cardboard box get by? Another thing I don't like to see is the checkout workers at Tesco being rendered unemployed by those do-it-yourself tills. People talk about the speed of technology, but what has it actually sped up? Back in the day, if there was a queue at the newsagent and you were on your way to work, you could grab your paper, run to the front of the queue and leave your ninepence on the counter: "Daily Guardian, mate, there it is." Now you've got to stand in line while someone takes 20 minutes to self-scan every single item. I'm glad people live longer these days, because there are so many more things that you have to waste your time doing. For me, it's always been a case of computer or career. I'd never get any work done! I know this because my daughter has a computer. I didn't want to get her one, but at the same time you never want to foist your prejudices on your child. She'd have been the only person in her class at school without one. Anyway, when she got this computer she said, "You should get one, too, Dad, you'd really like it." I said, "I know I would – that's the problem." I wanted to see how good they really were, so I said to her, "Can you get me Dion and the Belmonts? Let's see how long that takes you." Three seconds later and Runaround Sue's playing. That's why I can't have a computer. It would be too easy to get distracted. You'd find me dead six weeks later, buried under a pile of pizza boxes. I'm bad enough with the TV. I've never really gotten over the television, if I'm being honest. We've got Freeview and you've got about 800 channels. I like those shows: Bangers & Cash or Wheeler Dealers. And I like Portillo's Great British Railway Journeys and Great American Railroad Journeys. You learn more in half an hour with that guy than you do with 10 years at school. (An amazing reinvention of a person, Portillo.) I hear some people pay a lot of money these days to go "off-grid". I imagine it as some kind of retreat that's got a religious, Zen Buddhist vibe about it; a step in another dimension for a little while. I'm not like that. I'm a big fan of electricity, for example. I enjoy a brief power cut, just to remind those gung-ho environmental fanatics what life without electricity would be like. If you abolished electricity, millions of people would die immediately. So 10 minutes without power is a healthy lesson for everybody. There are lots of other things about the modern world I like. They'd just discovered streptomycin when I was a sick kid with tuberculosis. And when I was younger, I really liked electric guitars; I used to play bass in a band. So I'm not one of these people who wishes I'd lived 200 years ago. People's natural skills have started to atrophy due to technology. I get asked, "What do you do when you're out of the house without a mobile phone and you get lost?" Well, I don't get lost. As long as you've got a tongue in your head, you'll find your way. People have stopped talking to other people. Anyway, the only time I'm out of the house alone is when I ride my bike. Even that's old school: a 1959 Hercules. I cycle to the bookies. There's a lot of technology involved with betting now, but I prefer it as it used to be – knee-deep in cigarette ends and full of losers. My first job was as a bookies runner and so I was exposed, at a very early age, to the world of the degenerate gambler. I think that sort of protected me against becoming one. That's a problem with technology – you stop interacting with the real world. It gets rid of something we used to call a social life. Knocking on people's doors. Meeting up in pubs. They go on a lot today about responsible drinking, but neighbourhood pubs used to enforce that. There'd be a pal of your dad's in there saying, "You've had a few too many, kid, steady on – it's still three hours till closing time." Just subtle stuff like that – low-level checks that stopped you from becoming a housebound booze hound, sitting alone having a nervous breakdown while drinking hyper-potent cheap lager in front of a pornographic movie. People worry about technology in these grand, sci-fi terms, thinking that it could end the world. But there's no point in looking towards a dystopian future. Just look around you. The nightmare is already upon us. • As told to Tim Jonze. What, the new poetry collection from John Cooper Clarke, is out now, priced £16.99 (Picador). To support the Guardian and Observer, order your copy from [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply. Cooper Clarke tours his new show, *Get Him While He's Still Alive*, around the UK from 5 March to 28 June.