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CUTS #6

The Business of Grime

Joy White

CAMEo Cuts

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The Business of Grime

Joy White

This sixth edition of *CAMEo Cuts* focusses on the emerging economy of Grime music. The music industry is a significant economic sector that ought to provide earning opportunities for a wide variety of young people who have the necessary skills, interests and talents. And yet, this sector has some of the lowest diversity rates in terms of ethnicity and class. By contrast, Grime, and the wider urban music economy, can offer a multiplicity of routes into the creative and cultural industries for diverse and disadvantaged groups. From its London origins, Grime has expanded regionally through the *Eskimo Dance* and *Sidewinder* events, and from *Lord of the Mics* MC clashes to the nascent *Grime Originals* events, the Grime economy has a national (UK) and international reach. This *Cuts* explores how young people from less advantaged backgrounds use their passion for Grime music to create work within a music industry that is otherwise dominated by socially-privileged groups.



About the author

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The Business of Grime

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I have been researching, and writing about, Grime for 10 years. My book, *Urban Music and Entrepreneurship: Beats, Rhymes and Young People's Enterprise* (2016), is the first to foreground the socio-economic significance of the UK urban music economy, with particular reference to Grime music.

In 2007, at the start of my journey into Grime, it was predominantly an 'underground' genre. There was little taste for it in academic circles. In the early days, I was challenged more than once as to whether Grime was a suitable subject for scholarly enquiry. By 2011, however, I was asked to present a conference paper on Grime at Stanford University¹. Grime now appears to be woven into the fabric of mainstream popular culture, moving from an 'underground scene' that constituted the epitome of anti-establishment, to performance in some of the most mainstream arenas². The advertising tie-ups and sponsorship deals between Grime MCs and commerce continue apace, for example; Lethal Bizzle and KFC, Maxsta and Oasis Drinks, Stormzy and Adidas, Skepta with Nike Air Max and Uniqlo, Kano and Mercedes, Rude Kid and Ghetts with Relentless.

Speaking in 2016, Chris Price, the head of music at BBC Radio 1 and 1Xtra, suggested that Grime had the potential to be the UK's biggest cultural export (Khomami, 2016). Furthermore, in 2017, Ticketmaster published *State of Play: Grime*, a report that included the following key findings³:

- Tickets sold to Grime events quadrupled in the period from 2010 – 2017

- Streams of Grime music on Spotify have more than doubled in the last year, rising from 89 million streams in 2016 to 206 million streams in 2017.
- According to BPI data, for the year between 2016 and 2017, physical and digital album sales for Grime grew by 93%.
- The three most streamed Grime artists are Stormzy, Skepta and Dizzee Rascal.

A decade on, it would appear that the music industry has finally woken up to the economic significance of Grime.

Setting the scene: looking up, taking notice

In 2007, as a business owner based in East London, I often had young people placed with me for their mandatory one week of work experience. The borough I lived and worked in is extremely diverse and the young people who came for work placement reflected the multicultural nature of the area. No matter their gender or cultural heritage, the majority of the students had the same type of music stored on their phone – Grime.

Andrew⁴ was one of the young people on placement at my office. During his time at work, Andrew divulged that he was an MC, performing as an individual and also as part of a Grime crew. He spent some of his time with us updating MySpace with his new music. Andrew brought in flyers and other promotional material from events that he had taken part in, including an appearance on BBC 1Xtra. He created and distributed mixtapes to promote his music – sometimes charging a small fee.

Curiosity got the better of me, and the musical milieu of East London's fifteen year olds became my entry point to five years of ethnographic research into the urban music economy generally, and the Grime scene in particular.

Defining Grime

Grime is part of the 'urban music economy', a term I use to describe a grassroots and informal economic community of interacting music-making individuals, organisations and consumers. Solidly underpinned by a DIY ethic, these individuals and organisations provide goods and services that are allied to black musical practice. Collaborative working is a prominent feature in this economy. It is a complex fabric containing a multiplicity of roles and practitioners operating within and across the sector as artists and as entrepreneurs. I am aware that 'urban' is a contested category, nevertheless it serves as a useful shorthand to denote UK black musical expression such as Hip-Hop, Bassline, Garage, Dubstep, RnB, Drum and Bass, UK Funky, Dancehall, Afrobeats and of course, Grime.

Grime music emerged from East London in the early part of this century (Mason, 2008; Hampson, 2009; Hancox, 2013). As a largely young, male and black creative expression, Grime sounds like where it is from, the street corners and council estates of East London – it could not have come out of a leafy suburb. Using a rapid flow and regional accents, MCs will rap over a sparse 140BPM beat. For many, it is also a space where creative practice and commerce come together.

The Grime scene is an integral part of an ecosystem that comprises, among other components; live performance, staging of events, the production and sale of mixtapes, music downloads and streaming, and

merchandise such as clothing and DVDs, sale of studio time and the creation and distribution of publicity and marketing materials. All of these products and services are exchanged for cash, recognition and knowledge. At its core are the MCs, DJs, producers, and promoters. It may appear from a distance that the Grime scene comprises a chaotic collection of individuals creating a niche genre for a specific, hyper local audience, however, the act of creating Grime music propels its practitioners out into the world and away from 'the ends' or local (usually) urban, neighbourhoods.

For my research, I interviewed 40 people, the majority of whom were involved in the urban music economy⁵. It soon became apparent that although my respondents were grounded in East London, they had a reach that went far beyond their local area, performing and/or having fan bases in places as diverse as Cyprus, Holland and Croatia. While some of the respondents did not work as performers within this musical genre, they did occupy positions within the same economic community, for example, as club DJs or DJs on pirate radio stations, music video directors or event promoters.

In the UK, there was a growing demand (and opportunity) for live Grime performance outside of London. This market had been created partly as an unintended consequence of the lockdown of the London Grime scene (White, 2016). As a further example of a long history of the state policing of black music events, Form 696 (ostensibly a risk assessment form but in reality a draconian measure that could result in a jail term of up to six months or a £20,000 fine) had been used to curtail or shut down live Grime events in London (Hancox, 2010). Grime began to move beyond the capital city.

In the last century, performers in the urban music economy relied on flyers, pirate radio and word of mouth to publicise their events. Over the last decade, Grime has benefited from advances in technology. Social media and accessible platforms such as YouTube and Channel AKA (formerly Channel U) – the digital TV channel brought Grime to new audiences in the London suburbs, then across the UK to Europe and North America⁶ disseminating participants activities in locations that were far removed from its London core. In Swindon and Bristol, for example, the Sidewinder events provided a platform for MCs and DJs (Sidewinder, 2006, 2007)⁷. In Watford, Eskimo Dance events became sought after occasions (NothingSorted.com, 2006). At the same time, Rinse FM, a pirate radio station that had championed Garage and then Grime – became legal (rinsefm, 2012a, 2012b) making it possible for Grime and other emerging urban music genres to be accessed by a wider audience.

The urban music economy is a repository for a multiplicity of interconnected activities. Grime continues to operate for the most part in DIY mode. It is entirely possible for independent recording artists such as JME to dispense with recording industry intermediaries and establish an audience, a fan base and a viable business, (Boy Better Know, 2011; ManBetterKnow, 2011; Patterson, 2014). Musical output can be offered directly on a free or paid for basis.

The sonic genealogy of Grime⁸ can be traced back to the Jamaican and UK Sound systems that promoted their own events and distributed their own music and merchandise. This is evident with the 'crew' (a group of like minded individuals sharing an interest in music), the 'clash' (an adversarial, lyrical battle) and of course the enterprise. The business

aspect may take many forms as young people work to develop their creative expertise and to build a brand. Perhaps one of the most well known examples is Jamal Edwards, who was sixteen years old when started SBTV in 2006, as a YouTube outlet to show the Grime music videos that he created. Edwards has turned SBTV into a global brand (Edwards, 2013, p. 151; Smale, 2013). Since then, a number of other channels been established, such as Link up TV, an online youth channel founded in 2009 by 17 year old Rashid Kasirye, and GRM Daily, an online music and news channel set up in 2009. These are just three examples of how enterprise and creative practice come together out of a space that is not traditionally recognised and has little value, except as a source of new talent for the music recording industry (Campion, 2004; Collins, 2004; Hancox, 2009).

The Business of Grime



Figure 1: Grime Merchandise

Back: L to R: rare green Nasty by Nature Tee Shirt (2012), LowBudget TV DVD (circa 2010), Sidewinder Tape Pack (2006) sold at events and online, Sun City Promotional Tee Shirt for Vibes event in Ayia Napa (2009)⁹

Front: L to R: No Hats No Hoods CD: Edition 1 DJ Magic (2009), Grime Originals Tee Shirt (2017), Baseman Promotional CD (circa 2009)

(Photograph by Karis Duncan)

As we have already seen, Grime is an increasingly valuable component of the UK music industry - however it is worth exploring further how the Grime economy first emerged. Throughout the last ten years, I have collected, collated and amassed music, ephemera and merchandise that relate to the business of the Grime in East London and beyond. As well as the phenomenal success of SBTV, there are many more examples of grassroots and local Grime enterprise that has arisen to provide creative and commercial opportunity for young black and working-class musicians, and it is worth summarising some of the more well-known examples:

- *Eskimo Dance*

In 2002, Wiley, the self-styled 'Godfather of Grime' wanted to put on a rave and so Eskimo Dance came about. Launched in Watford, the event ran until 2005 and became legendary. Eskimo Dance was one of the first opportunities for fans to experience a live Grime event. After a few quiet years, during which time it appeared that Grime was on the wane, Eskimo Dance returned in 2012 as a series of events around the UK showcasing existing and emerging talent.

- *Sidewinder*

In 2004, Paul Spruce created Sidewinder, another legendary club night that started out as a UK Garage event and then progressed into live Grime performances in Northampton, Swindon and Bristol. Sidewinder brought together a myriad of MCs and DJs in one location. The events were recorded and filmed, with the merchandise offered for sale in person and online. The available merchandise included the sale of tape packs and CDs.

- *Nasty By Nature/Nasty FM*

N.A.S.T.Y (is an acronym for Natural Artistic Sounds Touching You) was one of the original Grime crews. Many members have gone on to achieve individual success (Kano, Ghetts, D Double E) or like Jammer, joined other crews. At one time or another, N.A.S.T.Y included four brothers: Marcus Ramsay (DJ Marcus Nasty), Nathaniel Ramsay (DJ Mak 10), Theo Ramsay (Lil Nasty) and Joshua Ramsay (Griminal). The Nasty By Nature brand is not currently active but it has been a home for some of the business pursuits of the four Ramsay brothers. As well as an online radio station N.A.S.T.Y FM with DJs from around the world, Nasty By Nature sold merchandise (snapbacks, beanie, hoodies, T shirts) and put on live events.

- *Dench*

Dench is Grime MC Lethal Bizzle's brand. A veteran in the Grime scene, he recorded the iconic track 'Pow' in 2004. Lethal Bizzle even persuaded actor Judi Dench to wear one of his snapbacks. The Dench brand recently released a fragrance that is available for sale from its online store. Other merchandise includes Tee shirts, sliders, snapbacks, hoodies, and bags. Activities include university tours and live events.

- *Floor Sixxx*

Backed by Deezer (an internet based streaming service), Floor Sixxx is a relative newcomer. It was founded in 2017 by BBC Radio 1Xtra DJ Sian Anderson and Jason Black, who DJs under the name J2K. The company is a record label that aims to release new music once a month. It also runs a music academy. J2K is a member of Grime crew, BBK (Boy Better Know) and in 2015 he launched *Crep Protect* a spray to protect trainers from water damage.

• *Grime Originals*

This is another new platform, however it but draws on the years of experience of its founder. Founded by MC Sharky Major, formerly of N.A.S.T.Y Crew and a pioneer in the Grime scene. Grime Originals is a club night which has grown rapidly in 2017. The free event in September boasted old school MCs President T, Gods Gift, Maxwell D, Riko Dan, Discarda, Stormin, Sharky Major, Manga, Flirta D, Trilla, Ozzie B, Face, Saskilla, So Large, Lioness, the New Generation: Splurgeboys x P.A.P, Mez, Reece West, Ghstly, Black Steve, Irah, DJ Kirby T, Olos and DJs: Maximum, Rude Kid, Sian Anderson and Big Mikee.

Grime Originals events have included impromptu live performance from Skepta and Wiley as well as up and coming artists in the scene. It has instinctively tapped into an audience desire for an 'old school' Grime event with live clashes rather than simply performing to a backing track. As always, merchandise (Tees, hoodies, tracksuits and snapbacks) is available for sale online.

• *Lord of the Mics (LOTM)*

As well as being a producer and an MC, Jammer is the founder of Lord of the Mics – an annual Grime MC clash. Jammer is formerly of N.A.S.T.Y crew and is now a member of BBK. DVDs of the events are sold online. Classic clashes include Kano v Wiley (LOTM 1), Skepta v Devilman (LOTM 2) and Lil Nasty v Maxsta (LOTM 5). LOTM also has an online clothing store.

As a musical practice, Grime draws on, and is informed by, the cultural intermezzo of inner city London. Sonically and lyrically, Grime has a broad appeal among young people across the UK, in Europe and North America. Due to advances in technology, and a widespread

use of social media, it is highly accessible and the sound has generated fan bases in different locations. For example, Danish MCs B-Grillzz, Zultan & Magnum97¹⁰ (ObiEsDK 2012) and Tre Mission, a Canadian MC (SBTV: Music 2016) spit lyrics and adopt the gesture, swagger and pose of the Grime genre.

Exporting Grime

It is therefore worth noting that the reach of Grime and the wider urban music economy extends beyond the UK. Music travels, and makes people travel, and there is evidence to support how young people make choices for holidays abroad based on music consumption. For many years, the holiday resort of Ayia Napa in Cyprus was a site for the performance of UK Garage, Grime and then UK Funky. I carried out field research there in 2009, and it was clear that music enterprise was underpinning the holiday experience. As well as MCs and DJs being paid to perform at club nights, there were allied businesses in situ, such as event promotion, catering and barbershop services. Lionel, from West London, went to Ayia Napa one year as a holidaymaker and subsequently realised there was a demand for the familiar barbershop experience and services, 'fades and shape ups' especially for the young men who spent several weeks working in Ayia Napa. The following year, Lionel set up a barbershop for the summer season. Describing himself as an entrepreneur, he had set up shop next to the Caribbean takeaway and was now 'cutting everybody's hair', including all the 'top DJs'.

Although the Ayia Napa scene has waned, Grime continues to travel. It is nourished by connections with the Caribbean, particularly Jamaican dancehall - see *Every Gal*, Chipmunk's track with Mavado as an example. In 2012, Skepta went to Jamaica to prepare

for the Red Bull Culture Clash. In December 2015, JME and Skepta performed for the Beat FM Christmas concert in Lagos with Stormzy, Krept and Konan (Casyo Johnson and Karl Wilson respectively) alongside Nigerian artists Falz, Phyno and Olamide¹¹. In April 2016, East London Grime MC D Double E toured Australia and New Zealand¹² and the annual Fresh Island Festival in Croatia continues to host a number of Grime acts¹³.

Conclusion: Grime and Enterprise

Most people start out in the music business doing what they love and then find a way to get paid for it (Williams, 2006; Albert and Couture, 2013). While an agreed definition of entrepreneurship remains elusive, it has been suggested that individual traits attributed to entrepreneurs might include; the need for independence; a desire for status and achievement; the ability to take risks and live with uncertainty; and being innovative and self-motivated (Williams, 2006, p. 18). These traits are in abundant evidence amongst participants in Grime and the urban music economy. Grime enterprise can provide opportunities for work and employment particularly in the creative and cultural sector where entry points for young people from marginalised communities are scarce. Economic endeavour, in this context is often a collaborative and communitarian activity as well as an individual one. Self-employment or micro-business activity in Grime can offer an alternative to minimum (or no) wage work that offers creative and economic opportunity, and maintains integrity.

My respondents had not had any formal business training, so how did they learn the rules of the game? Sometimes, emerging artists are mentored by an 'old hand' and this may be through crew membership, or

by just having a go. For budding business owners, existing organisations in the sector provide a template for setting up. The urban music economy allows young people to carve out a space in the business world, and to develop marketable skills in the creative and cultural sector. The business world that they operate in is still, however, largely informal and invisible, perhaps because it is obscured by stereotypical narratives that render young black men (predominantly) as troubled and troublesome. Perhaps it is because the wider business world has reproduced the concept of the entrepreneur in its own image and is therefore not able to recognise entrepreneurs in the urban music economy. If they do, it is seen as an exception – such as Jamal Edwards – rather than the norm.

Young people in the urban music economy have applied their knowledge of their customer base in a pragmatic way, offering goods and services either for no cost or at a minimal charge, to build a reputation. These artist/entrepreneurs have a tacit and detailed knowledge of their audience and innovative use of technology has enabled them to turn their output into a commodity, without the need for an intermediary such as a record company. At the same time, audio and video production technology has become less expensive and therefore more accessible. This creates a juncture where micro business could be created in the urban music industry, embodying what Ilan calls the 'respectable trope of the educated entrepreneur' that enables some to step outside the boundaries of marginalisation (Ilan, 2012). It is evident that these business activities and networks, while founded in the UK, now have a global reach that cannot and should not be ignored.

Notes

- ¹ 'From Rhythm and Blues to Grime: Black Atlantic Exchanges and the Performance of Identity' was presented at the Stanford Forum for African Studies
<https://stanfordfas.wordpress.com/2011/10/15/sfas-2011-conference-program/#comments>
- ² In October 2017, Grime MC Stormzy performed on the ITV television show 'The X Factor'. Prior to that, some weeks earlier, he had taken part in the Judge's Houses segment on the show.
- ³ The full report can be found here: <http://blog.ticketmaster.co.uk/stateofplay/Grime.pdf>
- ⁴ To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for the respondents in my research sample
- ⁵ In my thesis Grime music is used as a lens through which to explore and analyse the nature of entrepreneurship within the urban music sector. East London, a site of poverty, movement and migration is the geographical starting point for the project. Over a five-year period from 2007 – 2012, I carried out ethnographic field research in London and Ayia Napa, Cyprus. I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with participants in the sector. In addition, I undertook participant observation in various settings including pirate radio stations, nightclubs and music video shoots. The urban music sector has a global reach and a significant socio-economic impact. Practitioners utilise advances in technology as well as innovative business practice to create opportunities for self-employment on a local, national and international scale. Grime music and its related enterprise culture is a mechanism for social and economic mobility particularly for those from ethnically stigmatised communities. My findings disrupt existing strategies to deal with youth unemployment.
- ⁶ See for example, the 2012 line up for the Outlook Festival in Croatia which included D Double E – a Grime MC (SBTV: Music, 2012), Wiley's regular performances in Toronto (ninkyrooz, 2013), a Grime blog from Japan (Grime JP, 2014) and the annual Ayia Napa events (NSCProductions, 2009)
- ⁷ MCs and DJs from London who performed at these events include in Swindon: Cameo, Mac 10, Marcus Nasty, Logan Sama, Heartless Crew. Hyper Fen, Stormin, Ghetto, Scorcher, Ultra, Cheeky, Bearman, Viper, Wiley, Skepta, Donaeo, JME. In Bristol; Cameo, Snakeyman, Semtex, Ras Kwame, Broke 'n' English, Doctor, L.Man, Hypa Fenn & Marcie Phonix, Wiley, JME, Skepta, Faith SFX
- ⁸ I explore the sonic genealogy of Grime in more detail here: <https://reggaenetwork.wordpress.com/2017/02/03/joy-white-Grime/>
- ⁹ This Tee Shirt was a promotional giveaway from a UK event promoter who ran club nights over the Summer season in Ayia Napa .
- ¹⁰ One MC wears a Slew Dem Tee Shirt. Slew Dem are an East London Grime crew.
- ¹¹ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/how-skepta-krept-konan-olamide-rocked-beat-fm-xmas-concert/>.
- ¹² <http://handsometours.com/tours/d-double-e/>.
- ¹³ <http://www.ukgrime.com/fresh-island-2017-set-light-croatia/>

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