Note to Editors

Artist contributions are not anonymised. Slang terms are qualified by a bracketed contribution adjacent to the slang term on its first occurrence. A supplementary glossary has been sent to editors upon request. All pirate radio recordings utilized are referenced in the Discography. These should be hosted online, and available to access for readers through a hyperlink in the article. All references to recordings within the article are qualified with a timestamp for reference. Indented lyrics are italicised, indented quotations are not.

'<u>Let us know you're locked</u>': pirate radio recordings as historical and musical artefact

Abstract

Pirate radio is one of the pillars of grime music. This arena acts as both a communal and artistic space for musicians to coalesce and create on a regular basis. Its recordings, however, are rarely utilized as part of musical and historical enquiry. Prior investigation has principally focused on studio recordings, specifically the album. This paper makes the case for listening again to pirate radio, demonstrating how these artefacts act as a historical and musical referent.

This is achieved through the analysis of recordings from 2001-2005 alongside ethnographic interviews with practitioners, examining the intense locational claustrophobia, communal conviviality, and entrepreneurial spirit possessed by these artists and their listenership. Pirate radio captures music as process and—unlike static recordings—is a medium that allows for long form extemporisation and extra-musical assertions, consequently offering an unparalleled insight into the sociohistorical state of play in London at the turn of the millennium.

Keywords: Grime music; pirate radio; musical artefacts; ephemerality; London; youth studies

Introduction

'Anyone can go in a studio and manipulate a tune, but what have you got on the radio? There's no "takes" here. On the radio you can't hide' (Personal Communication, June 2017). In this statement, MC Hitman Tiga speaks to grime artists' perceptions of the direct and unrestricted domain of pirate radio. Whereas artists might polish and perfect their songs in the recording studio, pirate radio places performers front and centre. For grime MCs, in particular, this is a space where you can express yourself, set the record straight, and speak directly to an audience of avid listeners.

Grime music originates from London. It emerged in the early 2000s, with correlate scenes soon developing in most of the United Kingdom's major cities. Its practitioner base was predominantly black and overwhelmingly male. Influenced principally by Jamaican sound system culture and US Hip-Hop, its emergence was facilitated by the pirate radio sphere that had similarly incubated happy hardcore, jungle, drum 'n' bass and UK garage. Dan Hancox (2018: 81) wrote that 'pirate radio was the lifeblood of grime music in its embryonic period', and this unregulated territory acted as a critical ground for artists to coalesce and create on a regular basis. This sphere's importance, however, has been elided in favour of studio recordings: East London MC Dizzee Rascal's debut album *Boy In Da Corner* from 2003 is widely seen as grime's foundational document, while North London MC Skepta's 2016 album *Konnichiwa* saw him credited as 'an architect of grime's commercial resurgence' (Rymajdo 2015: 84; Petridis 2016). A fixation on albums, while valuable resources in their own right, signals an attentiveness to commercial releases that is both complicit with historical prioritisation of the musical work 'object' or ürtext and dismissive of the everyday.

This article makes the case for listening again to pirate radio recordings. In doing so, it questions the ontological value of musical recordings and their role for historical understanding. Rather than structuring enquiry around commercially released products, it demonstrates how intangible—yet fundamentally live—pirate radio recordings capture culture in transit and moments

of becoming. These unpolished artefacts offer extra-musical commentary of substantial historical value, both for their specificity as a resource and for their rolling sonic documentation of craft and lived experience.

It argues not just for popular music's role as a historical source, but for an appraisal of the process of live popular music making as historical referent. Pirate radio is not an epiphenomenon. Rather, this article will show its fundamentality for understanding working-class social histories and quotidian experiences of black Londoners. As such, this article is observant of the very composition of pirate radio (its materiality, social fabric, functionality), and how this has facilitated creative practice and provided a platform for social commentary.

Three key themes will then be attended to. Firstly, it will consider what these recordings can tell us about the hyper-localized experiences of inner-city youth at the turn of the millennium, and the sense of community engendered between artists and their listeners. Secondly, it will look to the role of the pirate radio as a news outlet. Antecedent uses of music as a mouthpiece for current affairs are well documented— from the provocative *picong* of Trinidad's Mighty Sparrow to rap's role as the "black CNN" in post-Reaganomics America—and its communicative role is similarly important in grime (Goldman 2018; Jazzie B 2010). Censoring of grime performance and visual content meant that pirate radio was often the only channel through which to disseminate ideas and convey lived experiences.

Finally, this article will examine the DIY and entrepreneurial aesthetic of the pirate radio setting, which is profoundly audible on recordings of live transmissions. The self-sufficient business modelling of these stations, assembled by teams of inventive volunteers who accrued revenue through advertising for dances and raves and evaded police attention through installing transmitters in hidden locations, is part of a 'multimodal' framework that helped grime music survive outside the corporate and racialized strictures of mainstream enterprise (White 2017: 6). And while pirate radio was still heavily policed, this very impermanence and instability of both transmissions and their documentation raises further pertinent questions about pirate radio's role as a historical resource.

This intangibility is in fact evidential of the precarious means by which artists were living and creating during a tumultuous period in London's recent history.

Methodology

This re-rendering of live radio as historical resource is achieved through analysis of London-based pirate radio 'sets'[1] from 2001 to 2005, and ethnographic interviews with participants in the London grime scene. This particular time period was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, it covers grime's initial emergence and dissemination. While the naming of 'grime' is contested, the varying sonorities that became subsumed under this umbrella term were being experimented with in 2001 by groups such as Pay As U Go and More Fire Crew. By 2005 the form was fully established. *Boy in Da Corner*—mentioned above—was released in 2003, while East London MC Wiley's crew Roll Deep were invited to perform on Top of the Pops in July 2005. This study therefore coincides with the codification of the form, much of which was conducted and played out on the radio circuit.

This period also covers Tony Blair's second term as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. During this time, aspects of domestic policy were stringent. In particular, ASBOs (Anti Social Behaviour Orders) 'isolate[d] the very people who were aiming to reintegrate with society', such as precarious workers and the unemployed (Heer 2007: 291). Grime DJ Slimzee, for example, was issued with an ASBO for 'erecting broadcast equipment' on tower blocks (Sanchez 2005). And in May 2002 David Blunkett announced that, whilst police officers' powers to indiscriminately 'stop and search' people who they suspected had committed an offence were declining, 'the number of black people being stopped and searched had increased by 4 per cent' (Beynon and Kushnick 2004: 233). These conditions were tough, particularly for the inner-city youth, many of whom made music that spoke to the situation at hand.

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[1] Live radio performances with MCs and DJs.

Access to facilities and the dissemination of material was also a key consideration. By the end of 2005, 61% of houses in the United Kingdom still did not have Broadband internet access. This was magnified in deprived areas (OFCOM 2007: 6). In terms of visual dissemination, urban music platform Channel U was launched in 2003, but viewing necessitated a cable subscription (Adegoke 2018). Radio, however, was—and is still—essentially free at the point of access. All you needed was an FM radio or car stereo. This was highly pertinent for both artists and listeners. For artists, radio was one of the few spaces where their voices could be heard, while its live broadcast allowed listeners both free access and means to interact with performers through texting or ringing the live phone line (Fuller 2005: 50). As a consequence, an examination of this material enables insight into quotidian experiences of these practitioners and their (often participatory) listenership that has yet to be properly documented.

Pirate radio as popular music process

Throughout popular music history, the studio recording has held a privileged position over live musical practice. Richard Middleton (2000: 59) wrote that 'pop practice [is placed] in opposition to the apparently quasi-religious inventory of iconic classical objects', while the very 'commerciality' of popular music has naturally led towards an anchoring of critical study in the investigation of its commercial products (Frith 2007: 102). Leo Treitler's (1993: 484) examination of the musical work's ontology sees lesser music decreed as such since 'they are not works that have been cast once and for all by a composer in a final form that is represented in a score and presented unchanged in performances'. This leaves performance, particularly improvisatory performance, in a precarious position. Performances that value process work in opposition to the very fixity of a studio recording, and Treitler's denotation is compounded by the strengthening of copyright laws and the attribution of a recording to a singular artist or band (Middleton 2000: 77).

This is a familiar concern for artists working within Afrodiasporic forms that often feature intricate acts of 'signifying', through reference to prior performances, other artists' work and associated contexts (Gates Jr 1988: 67). While a study by von Appen and Doehring (2006: 24) showed how The Beatles' 'classic albums' were almost universally lauded by mainstream music critics—the majority of whom were white and male—the practice of African-American and Black British musicians, in comparison, barely rendered across thirty-eight charts compiled from 1985–2004. Reggae, hip-hop and other Afrodiasporic forms that value the presence of multiple voices (heteroglossia) are often dismissed as noise down below, highlighting the ways in which antiphony, improvisation and collective performance do not readily sit alongside a canon of classic albums (Bakhtin 1994: 76).

Peculiar alignments between acts of creative process and physical outputs do exist, and these signal a number of ways in which Afrodiasporic artists' are canonized in a manner akin to Western Art Music and rock. In 2014, for example, drum 'n' bass artist Goldie— mentioned in Middleton's piece—cemented his legacy through an orchestral performance of his album *Timeless* at London's Royal Festival Hall with Jules Buckley's aptly named Heritage Orchestra (Khal, 2014). With this gesture, Goldie's mercurial experimentation in drum 'n' bass raves during the 1990s is supplanted by violinists playing the theme to 'Inner City Life'.

Anthony Harrison (2006: 290) attends to these questions of value and legitimacy in his study of the Bay Area hip-hop scene and its main cultural artefact: the underground tape. These tapes, that typically include lo-fi home recordings and off-the-dome freestyles, are crudely assembled. Their haphazard appearance (many without stickers or track listings) provides them with little to no economic commodity value outside of the community. Nor do they conform to a stereotypical understanding of a musical work. And while these tapes possess scant commodity value, they are of significant subcultural worth for its network of artists and listeners. Artists foreground an 'ad hoc culture of music production…oriented towards attempting to capture the moment' (ibid: 293). These

tapes are intended to document creative process, offering moments that are cherished as part of Bay Area hip-hop's 'regime of value' (Appadurai 1986: 3).

This sense of the everyday is similarly prized in grime music and its pirate radio performances. For East London MC Kraze, 'it [was] that rawness. A lot of times when you're hearing a radio set is where you'll hear peoples' new bars (lyrics)' (Personal Communication, June 2017). Typically most pirate radio shows would last for two hours. This long-form structure meant that artists could tentatively experiment with new techniques and lyrical patterns. Mistakes would be broadcast, in addition to any extra-musical happenings that might occur.

Dynamic engagement with listenership was encouraged through an active phone line. In 2005, East London DJ Sir Spyro asked his audience for '50 missed calls' in order to 'reload' the track (spin back and restart from the beginning) playing on his Rinse FM residency. While the reload in the live environment is typically instigated following a substantial audience response, in this case Rinse FM's displaced radio listenership actively made their presence heard through jamming the phone line. In 2016 sublow producer Dread D and East London MC Jammz released a track entitled '10 Missed Calls' to honour this participatory aspect of pirate radio performance.

The listenership also played a role in the archival process. Many pirate radio shows were recorded by the listenership, either for personal use or redistribution among fans outside the range of the station's aerial transmissions. This is well evidenced in Rollo Jackson's 2018 documentary *Tape Crackers*, where an avid collector speaks about his relationship to the pirate radio scene, and his complete lack of commercial (and to an extent authorial) interest in the sound: 'This is the only tape I've got [this tune] on. I don't think I've heard it at any rave. I can't tell you who made this tune, I can't tell you who the DJ is. It was just about the music' (2018: 05:30). The transitory nature of these performances, and the chance to hear new ideas that may never get commercially released— as mentioned by Kraze— ascribed these shows with huge importance for their community of practitioners and listeners.

Value, here, is therefore located in the process rather than the product. Julian Henriques (2011: 34) wrote of 'interdependence and flow between what are often considered as sequential elements such as production and consumption' in sound system culture. This flow is at work in pirate radio practice. There exists a refusal and resistance of 'cultural industry appropriation', with fresh creative practice and critical commentary valued over the presentation of already existing musical songs (Harrison 2006: 285). This ascription of value to process, and a marked affront to commercial imperative, has contributed to the lack of attention these recordings have received. However, pirate radio's readily accessible and 'bottom-up model' of participation fostered a fervent community whose creative practice acts as an important musical and historical document (Moyo 2011: 6). The next section will demonstrate how the specifics of locale and community captured in the process of pirate radio performance offer insight into the hyper-localized realities of grime performers, and London's young people more generally.

'South did not like East': Articulations of Locality and Community

Locality matters for grime artists. Particularly for those who lived and worked in London in the early 2000s. Murray Forman wrote that rap music's 'obsessive preoccupation with place and locality…identif[ies] and explores the ways in which these spaces are inhabited and made meaningful' (2012: 268). The same is true for grime music. When faced with external pressures and an uninviting cityscape, a home locale—or the 'ends'—can acquire huge significance. Joy White's (2018: 259) study of grime in Newham, for example, documents 'postcodes and poverty corralling young black lives into ever smaller spaces'.

In grime, these spaces of alterity are varied. Richard Bramwell (2015: 19) has written on the heightened importance of 'corridors' and 'playgrounds as centres for performance' of grime music in schools. Pirate radio stations were another space for expression, although these performances were broadcast live. Importantly for this study, local ties and communal affiliations were directly played

out over the airwaves. This section looks at how specific pirate radio recordings capture both

interplay between close knit crews of performers, and aggressive posturing towards rival entities

from different 'ends'.

In the early 2000s, OnTop FM was seen as the premier station in South London for grime

music. It was based in and around Croydon, but—like many other pirate stations—moved location

regularly to avoid being raided by the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry). According to North

London MC Krucial, 'OnTop back then was like *the thing* in South. I don't even know any other

station in South. But I knew OnTop. OnTop was big' (Personal Communication, June 2017).

Because of OnTop FM's high standing, MCs from further afield would often try to attend

sets. However, this always came at a risk. Tensions between South and East London, for example,

were strong in the early 2000s, as mentioned by Stockwell MC Nyke: 'In our times it was beef

(animosity). South didn't work with East' (Allstar 2017b). This was also captured by Kraze:

> South did not like East. East and North had a love and hate type relationship but it wasn't
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> that bad. We always used to roll with a few people…That sort of time in ends the beef was
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> strong. But there were [moments] when we got caught up in fights (Personal
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> Communication, June 2017).

One particular recording captures Lewisham crew South Soldiers' weekly residency on the station.[2]

Hosted by MC Desperado with DJ Big Jim on the decks, a number of guests 'passed through' to

perform. One of these guests was Clipper, an MC from East London crew Fire Camp, who had

ventured southwards following an invitation from Desperado.

As the recording begins, Clipper takes over from Desperado and defiantly enters with his

first lyrical contribution: 'Yeah. And I'll spit (rap) for the crew. Fire Camp man will never get slewed.

Cause I'm killing it spilling it drilling it and feeling it too, and I'll draw for the two two (.22 calibre

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[2] DJ Big Jim with Kapz, Ryder, Krucial, Clipper, Roadside Gs, South Soldiers, Fire Camp: OnTopFM, London: May 17 2005.

firearm) and merk[3] (kill) you' (00:48). For the next fifteen minutes Clipper continued to engage in interplay with the other MCs present (Ryder, Kapz, Krucial, Spokeman). However, the assertion of Clipper's crew affiliation was heard on the live broadcast by Brixton collective Roadside Gs. Their arrival at the set signified a change in mood: Dan Diggerz took the mic and promised to 'hold no mercy', while his MCing partner Alan B wanted to address a specific issue.

Paul Gilroy (2002: 292) has written on the importance of 'naming' in black expressive culture, with artists 'taking new names which are specific to their underground cultural networks'. The large majority of MCs and DJs in grime work with pseudonyms. In this instance, Alan B, also known as Alan Bizzle or Bizzle, was battling for autonomous ownership of this nickname with Clipper's Fire Camp associate Lethal Bizzle. This contestation, augmented by the perceived audacity of Clipper venturing into South London, caused Alan B to take decisive action. Upon taking the microphone, Alan B entered with 'It's Bizzle', repeating the phrase with varied extemporisation. This characteristic pitch contour from high-to-low clearly announced both Alan B and the issue he was seeking to resolve. It was not only a name at stake, but also a sonic signature and reputation. Following this, Alan B issued an unflinching musical provocation:

> *How can you be cold when everybody knows that you got slapped?*
>
> *You're not a general, kick back before the Gat (Air Pistol) aims above your six pack.*
>
> *Fuck Lethal B, you're not lethal to me* (16:21).

Alan B ordered for the track to be reloaded by Big Jim, before directly addressing Clipper:

> Hear what I'm saying…It's my name rudeboy. Don't come on the mic and talk about no Fire Camp. Don't come on the mic and talk about no Fire Camp! Yeah. Big Jim on the decks. Roadside Gs. Southside Soldiers. Alan B. Alan B! Brixton! (16:30).

Soon afterwards, the instrumental had to be stopped again. Alan B's provocation had derailed the performance's trajectory, which entered into physical—rather than musical—territory. For the next

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[3] 'Merk' is a truncated form of the word mercenary.

five minutes the dispute goes off mic, with the confrontation played out in the back of the room. Quieter passages reveal the argument (19:10), and the phone line quickly becomes inundated with calls and texts—as attested to by Alan B a minute earlier— the listenership bearing witness to a live confrontation, or 'clash'—a lyrical battle between MCs—as it unfolded in real time.

This confrontation was brought forth in the moment, demonstrating both the medium's capacity to capture live process and elucidate these hyperlocal and creative tensions. There are many records that have captured rivalry, such as Nyke's 'Southside Riddim' released as a provocation to East London MCs (see Discography). However, the immediacy shown here— exemplified by Roadside G's real-time arrival to state their claim—is not readily preserved on a studio recording. This set also attends directly to the non-commercial, yet highly symbolic, regimes of value that pervade grime music and its practice. The ownership of 'Bizzle' is not about money or commercial releases, but about autonomy and locality.[4] Gilroy (2002: 292) writes that naming is at the centre of 'elaborate rituals in which MCs and rappers establish their right to speak before doing so and connect collective identity to community territory'. Dan Diggerz, Alan B—and later MC R.A— arrived to perform and defend their collective reputation. Alan B asserted the right to his name, and his area (South London). Clipper, meanwhile, through his affiliation to Fire Camp and East London, was unwelcome.

This dialectical tension between intense collective togetherness and bitter local rivalry is captured on other OnTop FM recordings. Brixton-based collective NAA, for example, hosted a residency laced with tension in 2004.[5] Throughout their fifteen-minute set, there are moments wherein the energy in the room is so strong that the performance has to be temporarily abandoned. This ineffable and intangible quality, obtained through collective acts of creativity that exceed the cumulative input of individual artists, results in gestalt moments of climax that are only available in a

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[4] A similarly fraught encounter in 2009 between a number of East London MCs (Jammer, Ghetts, Tempa T, Griminal) occurred over the ownership of the phrase 'It's A Lot'.
[5] NAA, OnTopFM, London: 2004.

live group setting. As such, they are readily captured on pirate radio in a way that is not afforded to the recorded studio release (de Lacey 2020: 334).

Allusions to locality also permeate the performance. Six minutes in MC Solo grabbed the mic to declare: 'Draw for your bad bandana. Draw for your bad bandana and rep your manor!' (06:20). Elsewhere, the powerful arrival of MC Big Narstie was matched by an entire room of guests (male and female) singing along, many of whom had made the seven-mile pilgrimage to Croydon from Brixton to support their local crew (01:20). And while it was NAA's residency, there were distinct underlying tensions between the security present and NAA's extended affiliates:

> Mandem, yeah. It's N double-A you know how we get down. But it's Croydon innit. It's Croydon. They're not guna have it. Tuggs dem you know how we get down. If we was top boy, you know what time it would be. But it's Croydon, security ain't feeling it at all. So mandem, let's calm it down a little (02:51).

This vocal acknowledgement of tensions between the Brixton-based crew and the security at a Croydon radio studio, combined with the intensity of the performance, clearly articulates both the creative urgency and meaning of this radio show for the crew, and the meta-musical elements that this medium can capture for historical inquiry. Nearly every lyric performed by an MC is shouted back with vigour, creating a multidirectional and dynamic relationship between crowd, DJ and mic controller (Fikentscher 2000: 8). Rather than engaging with the commodity form via individualized listening, this set captures the 'distinctively social relations of consumption' that are a crucial element of both grime music and performance of black expressive cultures (Gilroy 2002: 283).

This process, complete with moments of rupture and derailment, then, foregrounds the importance of the radio set for these artists, and the means by which they were willing to get their voices heard. White (2018: 224) writes that grime offers 'emancipatory disruption for marginalized communities' and this ground provided space for expression and was critical for the crew's development. NAA fully 'inhabited'— to the point of taking over— OnTop FM's studio in order to perform their latest lyrics (Forman 2012: 268). Despite working within a contested sphere, the artists

and audience embraced the opportunity to share a collective moment of conviviality, even when faced with a physical threat from the venue's security. Locational pride, creative fervour and the precarity of being young in the city are all present in this recording, and this is something that pirate radio as a medium specifically affords.

Both these examples provide access to moments of dialectical tension, between intense communality and bitter rivalry, that offer historical insight into inner-city London in the early 2000s. South Soldiers' set—despite the on-air confrontations—finished with DJ Big Jim reading out the substantial number of text messages received while on air, demonstrating a wider obligation to their community of listeners: 'Oi texters, hold tight the texters…Big up to Christopher' (45:22). For NAA, their set was similarly fractious while demonstrating substantial togetherness. The crowd's relationship with the crew so striking that they became 'active participants in [the] collective process' (Gilroy 2002: 290).

This juxtaposition of stark animosity and communal catharsis readily speaks to the 'meaning' making at play in the musical processes captured on these two recordings. Locality, listenership and community are a prevailing concern and with closeness comes hostility. This 'coralling' into ever smaller spaces is therefore manifest in the fraught and intense pirate radio environment and exemplified through the dense creative interplay and fiery exchanges between rival collectives (White 2018: 224).

'Man's ting was violent': Pirate radio as lived experience

These locational tensions and the struggle for autonomous spaces to perform are closely tied to the precarity that artists were experiencing day-to-day. Even the pirate radio environment itself was insecure, as exemplified by Desperado twelve minutes into South Soldiers' set: 'Live set big up the

taping crew. (Knock). Oi, that better not be the DTI or I'm jumping out the window' (11:52).[6]

However, while pirate radio was monitored by the DTI, the sheer volume of transmissions—and the doggedness of each station's team to continually move transmitters and station studios—meant that these spaces became viable oppositional sites where hardships could be directly expressed. This offers contrast to the live sphere, where Form 696—a risk assessment form issued by the Metropolitan Police—regularly enforced the cancellation of live events (Riley 2017: 59).

In Zimbabwe, pirate radio stations were founded in response to the 'stringent broadcasting environment' of the white minority led Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation, acting as a 'source of information for citizens' (Moyo 2011: 4). For grime artists whose live shows were consistently cancelled, radio was a similarly critical public sphere for imparting knowledge and reporting on street happenings. According to Krucial, 'no-one wanted to hear it from the outside and people that was hearing it from the outside was trying to shut it down' (Personal Communication, June 2017).

Roadside Gs in particular faced censorship from a variety of channels. Their video for single 'Come 2 Da Roadside' was banned from Channel U, following an alleged order from the Metropolitan Police's 'specialist gang violence unit, Operation Trident' (Hancox 2017). Performances were similarly scarce. MC Den Den attributed their commercial struggles to the overt violent content that reflected their surroundings:

> I'm guna tell em straight. Man's ting was violent, the music was violent. Our ting came with a lot of violence you get what I'm saying. Street politics. And at the end of the day, it ended up in handcuffs (Allstar 2017a).

As a consequence, their residency on OnTop FM was an important space to tell these tales.[7] The domain not only allowed their contributions to be uncensored, but also offered scope for extemporisation alongside (often graphic) storytelling:

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[6] DJ Big Jim with Kapz, Ryder, Krucial, Clipper, Roadside Gs, South Soldiers, Fire Camp: OnTopFM, London: May 17 2005.

[7] DJ Gumbo with Roadside Gs: OnTopFM, London, July 21 2005.

Top of my shank (knife), sharp ridged. R.A holds more food (drugs) than a fridge. I'll break your nose bridge…I'll put you in the grave, dig and dig. Dressed in black, I've got the .38 snub (gun). Reload the Gat like a music dub…You can't live the life I live the way I live my life is hard, I was in jail with mandem facing life behind bars, I put my life on pause (03:44).

On this recording—captured a few months after the dispute with Clipper—MC R.A raps of a life balanced between the roads and prison. The instrumental track underneath employs a gunshot as a musical device, reaffirming this interstitial existence between street and cell. R.A also relates music directly to the means by which he survives, likening the reload of a Gat Air Pistol to the musical reloading[8] of an instrumental track.

Later in the recording, MC Trips' contribution affirms local affiliation but also touches on life living in poverty:

I'm in the h, double o, d. Pricks can't walk through the h double o, d. Shot food on the strip, I'm low key. You don't know me. I've got the food on the line they phone me. Grind on the strip it ain't cosy, I'm hungry like starving kids…There's no doubting the kid, I'll flip your lid. I'll put a shank to your ribs. I'm from the south of the bridge (19:32).

Trips' interjections throughout the recording document personal struggle and harsh realities of the street. At the time of recording, there was a sharp rise in the incarceration of people of colour in England and Wales. According to Home Office reports 'black people comprised 9 percent [of the prison population], a 7 percent increase from the 2001 to 2002 arrest figures', with the national average at 2.8 percent (Home Office 2004; Kalunta-Crumpton 2006: 2). While lyrics are often associated with the glamourizing of a certain lifestyle, there is a decided criminalization of black youth in the United Kingdom (Savage 2019). For Kraze, performance actually offered a way out of this violent, hyperlocal existence:

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[8] See definition above.

It weren't the fact that grime was violent. Even if we weren't spitting, there would still be

violence. But the media like to blame it on something. They don't like to blame it on the

environment, they want to blame it on something. Since grime was new and they realised

that all the young kids were in it, they tried to shut it down straight way. They started closing

raves down everywhere (Personal Communication, June 2017).

In a recording from 2005, Kraze directly refers to the microphone as a means to disseminate

information on his experiences. After being passed the mic by MC D Dark he responds with 'D Dark

please pass me the tool (weapon)'.[9] This metaphor for the microphone weaponizes its potential as a

means to offer critique. hooks (1995: 211) wrote of the voice as a democratic tool that 'could be

used by everyone, in any location'. Here, it is amplified and disseminated across the airwaves.

Whereas censorship in the audiovisual and live domain delegitimizes the struggle of artists

and disavows their opportunity to express their everyday experiences, these recordings are able to

capture a climate of criminalisation, increased incarceration, and the means by which these artists

survive.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that MCs' reportage is multidimensional, varying in

subject matter and intentions. While Roadside Gs and Kraze's contributions confront violence, pirate

radio shows' weekly transmissions allow for the foregrounding of everyday concerns. In Richard

Bramwell's (2015: 26) research on grime practice, he found that artists regularly work within a

'grounded aesthetics'. Likening the everyday to a quasi-London rap habitus, the MCs Bramwell

interviewed placed substantial value on 'quotidian detail': '[Klayze's] comments demonstrate how

the activity within the circle produces a perceptive scheme that gives priority to the everyday,

through the collective affirmation of shared experiences'. These concerns shared by Klayze are

readily mapped across radio performance.

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[9] DJ Capa, 'Kraze, Royal Triple Threat, S Kid and Hoodlum', Unknown Station, London: 2005.

MC Ryder on South Soldiers' show, for example, cuts through Clipper and Roadside G's braggadocio with a moment of poignancy. Repeating the phrase 'I'm trying to teach the learners, the ends is hot like Bunsen burners', he then moves into a more cutting passage: 'Life's a bitch. I shot (sell) drugs but I'm still not rich. Still got the same old shit, still got the same old Nike kicks'[10] (11:37). The repeated utterance encourages the listener to acknowledge the state of his area, while his struggles are reduced to not being able to afford a new pair of trainers. A 2018 article from The National reported on the effect of 'poverty shaming' in non-uniform days at schools (Kathleen Nutt 2018). Here, Ryder locates his challenges through a similar concern.

Similarly to Lez Henry's (2018) work on yard tapes (from Jamaica) that argued for their 'capture [of] an intimate and unrehearsed commentary that spoke unswervingly to the Windrush Generation', the musical and extra-musical nature of these pirate radio recordings offers a level of 'quotidian detail' that allowed artists (and their listenership) to share experiences of restricted space, poverty and violence. Despite 'hostile surveillance by the police' that led to the closure of dances and the censorship of videos, the radio domain acted as a critical medium for expression (Gilroy 2002: 284). Retrospective and considered listening to these artefacts therefore offers rich historical insight into the state of play at the turn of the millennium in inner-city London.

Reclamation of agency: Grime's DIY and entrepreneurial aesthetic

This final section examines what these recordings can tell us about grime artists' creative agency. Many prior readings have debased grime music, seeing it as socially symptomatic. Campion (2004), for example, wrote that grime was produced by the 'bastard sons of Blair's Britain'. And while this distinctly colours artists' content, as seen above, there is a decidedly entrepreneurial edge to grime practice, which can be audibly heard on these pirate radio sets. For Mykaell Riley, success in spite of

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[10] DJ Big Jim with Kapz, Ryder, Krucial, Clipper, Roadside Gs, South Soldiers, Fire Camp: OnTopFM, London: May 17 2005.

adversity readily aligns grime with punk, 'continu[ally] defy[ing] industry assessments of its potential' (Riley 2017b). Grime music production, especially at its outset, formed part of an informal cityscape of DIY and self-sustaining economic practice. An examination of these recordings offers a tangible insight into the functionality of this model.

This notion of creative and economic autonomy is built out of grime's position as oppositional practice. Pirate radio stations were set up out of necessity. Investment in deprived areas and regeneration projects rarely aligns with the people who need it most. For Foord and Ginsburg (2004: 287), there is a decided level of 'hidden social capital in poor areas…often isolated from wider power structures'. The impetus to create infrastructure within an informal cityscape is exemplified by the pirate radio environment and its performance circuit. For Joy White (2017: 47), these musicians acted as 'artist entrepreneurs', or those who 'reside in "the ends" or poor neighbourhoods, with very few resources' but who create work for themselves or others or both'. According to DJ Logan Sama, it was 'any way. Any which way in which you could string up a pair of decks and some speakers' (KeepinItGrimy 2019).

This entrepreneurial thrust is captured in a recording of Meridian Crew, a group from Tottenham, whose regular show on Heat FM was popular with listeners, especially in North London.[11] The means by which they put the show together speaks to Sama's pragmatic assertion, and the self-sustenance of their creative method. Following an abrupt curtailment of a 170bpm drum 'n' bass break—left running from the previous DJ—one of their MCs, JME, immediately takes the microphone and announces their presence:

> Yeah Meridian Crew inside. 07950 123 432. This tune yeah Birdie, yeah. Birdie productions, standard. Hold tight Birdie for this one. Birdie riddim yeah (00:04).

While JME is speaking, their DJ Skepta lines up an instrumental produced by Meridian's Bossman Birdie. JME foregrounds this, emphasising the resolutely in-house nature of their practice. The

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[11] Meridian Crew: Heat FM, London, 2002.

track's isolated snare and kick drum is built upon by a quiet hi-hat pattern and an eerie synth stab ostinato. Bossman Birdie then takes the microphone and proceeds to spit lyrics over his own instrumental for 32 bars. Amidst his performance, microphone feedback interrupts his clarity, with audible surface noise from the record on the turntable acting as a bed for the transmission.

There is a moment seven minutes in to the set where one of the instrumentals keeps skipping and adjusting its own tempo. Here, either the condition of the vinyl, the needle, or the turntable set-up directly affects the flow of the performance. JME, however, is resilient, continuing to perform over the top and adjusting his own tempo to match with the inconsistencies of the underlying track. Despite these setbacks, the consequent hour-long set offers a full roster of MCs—including artists from local crew Wood Green Mob—alongside new productions and creative work from DJ Skepta. Skepta regularly 'chops in'[12] the instrumentals, cutting them in and out of focus, and the interplay between artists is notable. Technological difficulties continue to arise—such as a ten second passage of silence 27 minutes in—but the MCs hold resolute.

The recording of this set audibly captures the makeshift nature of the pirate radio environment, but also the adeptness with which the artists respond and react in order to produce a coherent radio show disseminated live to their listeners. Importantly, too, is the self-sufficiency of the collective. A large majority of the instrumentals are in-house productions, either from JME, Skepta or Bossman Birdie. These tracks are often debuted on the radio as 'dubplates'[13] before later being released as a commercial product. JME's unfettered engagement with the listenership, shouting out Heat FM's telephone number numerous times during the recording, builds a strong relationship that is consequently translated into record sales upon release.

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[12] Chopping and cutting are DJ techniques, where the DJ quickly pulls the channel faders up and down, bringing instrumentals in and out of the mix. They can choose to chop a new track in or cut between two instrumentals.

[13] A test pressing or acetate of an unreleased track.

This practice was spoken to in interview by DJ Eastwood, who used try out new tracks before pressing them up into releases:

I remember having one CDJ (CD turntable) so when I'm in my house doing sets I can play my dubplates. Cause what I used to do, when I was making tunes, the best way to work out if it's good is to fling it in a set. If I was to drop 'em in a set, [and] the vibe kind of goes down [I knew not to play it again]. So that's all I used to do. I used to have loads of sets with all the MCs and just drop them in there. The ones that sound good, just press 'em up (Personal Communication, May 2017).

Some, of course, were never released, and this both added to the excitement of listening live to the radio broadcast and foregrounds the radio set's historical importance for documenting transient moments in the genre's history. South Soldiers' DJ Big Jim, for example, used the final ten minutes of their OnTop FM show (from Section Two) to debut new tracks from affiliated producer Young Dot. This engagement with—and the use of—dubplates once again highlights pirate radio's confounding of production and consumption through live process. Henriques' (2011: 34) 'interdependence and flow' is clear to see in these instances, with artists employing innovative means to premiere material alongside asserting a sense of exclusivity. For Meridian crew, specifically, this practice, their self-sufficient set-up—and the rough and ready environs of Heat FM—offered a hebdomadal space where they could foster new ideas and develop infrastructure around their crew and their various enterprises. For JME and Skepta, in particular, this DIY aesthetic endured for over fifteen years. JME's training as a graphic designer, producer and MC means that he can enter a studio with a laptop and leave with a fully recorded project with artwork. Skepta's 2017 and 2019 albums *Konnichiwa* and *Ignorance is Bliss* were released independently through their label Boy Better Know. Both reached Number 2 in the UK charts.[14]

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[14] https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/5188/skepta/. Accessed June 20 2019.

This attentiveness to creative and economic autonomy readily confers to White's (2017: 47) notion of the 'artist-entrepreneur'. According to government statistics, in the early 2000s over 13% of the UK's economically active Black population were unemployed. This is compared with a White British average of 4% (Ethnicity Facts and Figures 2018). For JME, Skepta and Meridian Crew, self-sufficient business modelling made their creative practice viable, in light of a challenging and racialized labour market. For Dan Hancox (2018: 81), this engagement with the 'informal city' allowed artists to be 'truly autonomous…autonomous in the sense that it is possible to make a living from it, without the approval or profit extraction from white, wealthier established British cultural institutions'. While pirate radio is one of many mediums in which these artists operated, its role as a central fulcrum for creative practice demonstrates how grime artists reclaimed agency and engaged in entrepreneurial (musical) activity during a period where substantial unemployment and racialized government policy offered significant obstacles to young black men. And while we can look to commercial releases as evidence for these artists' self-sufficiency, the kernel of their craft is captured in these pirate radio recordings, their sonic rendering of this arena's impermanence and the innovative means by which artists fashioned a legitimate business model out of live process and exclusivity.

Conclusion

This article has made the case for listening again to pirate radio recordings. Specifically, it has looked at early recordings of grime music that provide an insight both into musical practice, and the wider sociohistorical context of their production. It has shown how pirate radio's very functionality facilitates creative practice and quotidian insight in a way that is not afforded by static musical products. The medium provides a distinct sense of the everyday with its long-form broadcasts providing space for extra-musical assertions.

Its communal role was explored. Paul Gilroy (2002: 292) has written of a 'dialogic process that unites performers and crowds' in black expressive culture. Here, radio stations such as OnTop FM and Heat FM act not only as communal centres, but also a public interface with an active and participatory listenership. These broadcasts provide insight into the hyperlocal tensions that are juxtaposed with the strong articulations of community. Real-time conflict is captured, while the claustrophobic experience of inner-city London life is adeptly explored by artists in their lyrics, and in their commentary. These commentaries were often uncensored, and this was made permissible through pirate radio's position as an oppositional space for critique and expression.

Pirate radio's very alterity also provided opportunities for disenfranchised artists and musicians working within the informal cityscape. High unemployment and oppressive policing, particularly in the early 2000s, made engagement with public space challenging (Reynolds 2013: 484). The radio domain, however, offered a reclamation of creative and economic agency. An attentiveness to these recordings offers an insight into its role as part of a wider network of enterprise, where artists promote new material, while developing their creative practice across weekly sessions.

Systemic devaluing of musical process in favour of musical products, such as studio releases, has resulted in a lack of attention towards these resources. In an earlier edition of *Popular Music History* Paul Oliver (2004: 16) issued a warning: 'the history of popular music is an ever-present challenge as the music of the present slips rapidly beyond our grasp…until it is too late to recover the necessary information through firsthand experience, oral history or the collection of ephemera'. As a consequence of this investigation, it is important to consider the importance of these materials and the need for their preservation. While studio recordings are diligently archived, these vital pieces of ephemera are being lost. Pirate radio recordings are both valuable musical and historical artefacts, and their preservation is necessary to provide critical insight for generations to come.

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