

**LUKE THOMAS, ASSIGNMENT 1,
PRESENTING WORLD MUSIC ON RADIO, 2019-20 –
GRIME ROUTES**

1. Luke link

Welcome to Grime Routes, with me, Luke Thomas – where we're taking a pitstop tour through the evolution of grime music.

How did sound systems jump from 1960s Jamaica,
to a London subculture at the turn of the century,
to the grime juggernaut exported around the globe today?

Grime is indigenous music in precisely the ways it's not world music, and vice versa. Certainly, on these shores, grime is the quintessential indigenous sound of the 21st century. But like any music, any art, any-thing, its derivative form protrudes from the roots of its ancestors. And grime is - *at minimum* – a dual heritage child. On one side, garage. Drawn from Chicago house, which falls along a long lineage of disco, soul, jazz, blues, much more beyond. On the other side, are its predecessors through jungle, drum and bass, and dancehall. Sound system culture imported from the Caribbean.

You see; indigenous world music.

So naturally we're kicking things off in Lewisham, south London, 1984...

2. Music

Music: MP3

Artists: Papa Levi

Track: *Mi God Mi King*

Label: Bad Breed (re-released on Level Vibes)

Producer: Maxi Priest & Paul 'Barry Boom' Robinson

Year: 1984

Riddim: Heavenless

Duration of excerpt: 24 seconds

3. Luke link

Papa Levi's *Mi God Mi King*, 1984 release on Bad Breed. Papa Levi was a first generation British-Caribbean lad who joined the famed Saxon Sound System in Lewisham, south London. Sound system groups popped up across the UK as a result of the mass Jamaican migration through the 60s and 70s, and they brought this set up of DJ, selector, and MC to street parties and warehouses countrywide. It began with reggae and by the 80s also evolved into this bass heavy,

max volume dancehall music. With this release, Papa Levi became the first UK performer to have a Jamaican number one with Jamaican music.

These sound systems partly came about out of community necessity, as Caribbean immigrants were being excluded from pubs and clubs (Sword, 2016).

So, there's a lineage at play when today a grime MC like **Kano** raps about being the:

“only blacks in Canning Town flats/walking to school was an everyday scrap”

or

not partying at DSTRKT nightclub in the Westend because of their ‘no blacks’ policy.

So, reggae, to dancehall, to? Jungle.

4. Music

Music: MP3

Artists: SL2

Track: *On A Ragga Tip*

Label: XL

Producer: Matthew ‘Slipmatt’ Nelson, John ‘Lime’ Fernandez

Year: 1992

Duration of excerpt: 24 seconds

5. Luke link

That was **SL2** with *On A Ragga Tip*, 1992 release on XL that peaked at #2 in the charts. Faster, harder, just a little bit grimmer than its dancehall forefather.

It's also right around this time that UK rappers like **Tricky** in the Bristolian **Massive Attack** were beginning to find commercial and critical success by embracing their Britishness AS WELL as paying homage to Caribbean roots. This was building on the influence of artists like **Smiley Culture** and that man before, **Papa Levi. Rodney P**, who's one half of **London Posse**, called it “a UK thing. It's hip hop and it's reggae and we do reggae – and those Americans don't know about that”. It definitely took them a minute to cotton on to the accents – he's not wrong.

6. Music

Music: MP3

Artists: Pay As U Go

Track: *Champagne Dance*

Label: Sony, INCredible

Producer: Pay As U Go Cartel

Year: 2001

Duration of excerpt: 32 seconds

7. Luke link

Pay As U Go with *Champagne Dance* – a 2001 release on INCredible that went on to chart at #13. That verse was from **Wiley** – the self-styled godfather of grime. And despite being a UK garage track, fellow grime legend **Kano** ranked that as his favourite grime verse of all time.

It's a prime example of how grime is not simply some hip-hop derivative. Groups like Pay As U Go and **Heartless** and **So Solid Crew**, took off around this time. It was Pay As U Go's only top 40 hit before the group disbanded – with some members going on to form the pioneering grime crew **Roll Deep**.

And then...

The grime explosion.

8. Music

Music: MP3

Artists: Kano

Track: *P's and Q's*

Label: Parlophone

Producer: DaVinChe

Year: 2004

Duration of excerpt: 55 seconds

9. Luke link

The one of a kind, **Kano**. *P's and Q's* was released as the lead single from his 2005 debut album, *Home Sweet Home*. 140 beats per minute. Syncopated breakbeats. Scratchy. Awkward. Jolting. Jarring. Twitchy. If neurodevelopmental disorders had soundtracks, Tourette's' would be grime.

I remember first hearing grime growing up in Gloucestershire – and for somewhere so far removed it felt like a portal into young London. I'd never been to the place but knew every borough by its MCs. And footy teams. Part of the genius of the scene was its marketing – with no label support these guys were booking shows, building online platforms, selling all kinds of merch. One group, **Boy Better Know**, set up their own phone network! You could buy your data bundles from a bunch of MCs!

In fact, it's blown up so big now that the term can lose its meaning. Your average Guardian journalist struggles to hear any UK rap without categorising it as grime music. **Stormzy** or **Little Simz** – they reach far broader notes than *strict*, run of the mill, 140 bpm grime. The musicians have grown so the sound has too. Grime has become a string to a bow.

Next up, another step-in grime's progression with another **Kano** track, 2019's *Trouble*, released on Parlophone – this *Hoodies All Summer* album featured brass bands, Jamaican steel drums, and choir sung gospel choruses. The lyricism is as mature as the musicality.

10. Music

Music: MP3

Artists: Kano

Track: *Trouble*

Label: Parlophone

Producer: DaVinChe

Year: 2019

Duration of excerpt: 35 seconds

11. Luke link

These stories of sonic lineage need telling. And for those in the scene too. In 2008, young grime MC **Dot Rotten** was on the come up. He began sharing a home and studio with none other than **Dennis Rowe**, co-founder of **Saxon Sounds** back in the day. Dot didn't have a scooby doo who he was or how their sounds fell from the same tree. A year later in 2009, Dot Rotten released a single called *Boom* with **Papa Levi**, the Saxon Sound artist who had released *Mi God Mi King* in 1984.

So, it's no surprise once these musical histories are known, MCs pay homage to them.

Because grime's roots,

are Roots.

That's all from me, Luke Thomas, on SOAS Radio. It's been a treat.

Luke - Addendum

- Reggae historian John Masouri said that, seeing "Jamaican DJs and MCs being forced onto the back foot and then taking on styles that had originated in the UK" became a real point of pride for UK fans of roots music back then (Sword, 2016).
- Mandeep Samra is the curator of a one-off Sound System Culture exhibition. She says "these systems initially came out of a need for a community focus" because "first- and second-generation Caribbean immigrants were often excluded from pubs and clubs".

- “if they can spray paint ***** on LeBron James’ crib / that means a black card ain’t shit when that’s the same shade your face is / so basically, we’re Kunta Kintes in some Cuban links / the Balenciagas didn’t blend us in”.
- There’s a nod to the social commentary and messages of harmony that were commonplace in older roots music.
- On his 2016 album, *Made in the Manor*, **Kano** spoke on materialism in poor communities – how those who don’t see successful representations of people like them in the media often feel compelled to flaunt it when they have it. His understandings are never justifications, and he locates nuances. It’s social commentary - without preaching, and all with a nod to the messages of harmony that are commonplace with older roots music.
- As Tricky put it on Massive Attack’s *Blue Lines*, “English upbringing, background Caribbean”.
- **Ghetts** also broke barriers for artists like **Stormzy** in speaking on religious beliefs.
- There is some degree of cross pollination between these influencing strands too. For example the 150bpm breakbeats sampled from hip-hop in jungle, while hip hop was independently a direct influence upon grime lyricism. Ragga jungle featuring an MC with dancehall style lyrics.
- Same types of equipment: samplers, drum machines, microphones, and sequencers
- The ‘Amen break’ snare and drum sequence from *Amen, Brother*, a B-side released by U.S funk band The Winstons in 1969 – sampled and sliced up heavily in jungle and hip hop, but also by David Bowie and Oasis. Perhaps the most sampled drumbeat in history and it shows the common roots shared by seemingly disparate sounds.
- It became the punk music of its time by tapping into young audiences and putting on the rowdiest, most electric live shows. And that’s inherited from sound system culture; that competitiveness at shows. They’d fight for the mic, clash against different crews at events like **Eskimo Dance**, count who got the most wheel ups (that’s when the crowd force a DJ to reload the track and start all over). Just like dancehall, it was a sport as much as an art.
- It’s absurd to think these people had the belief it could go on to be what it is now.
- *“it has meant so many different things to so many different people that unless you’re talking about a specific time and place, it is virtually meaningless. Part of the reason for this confusion (aside from various journalistic misunderstandings and industry misappropriations) is that the range of music played at the garage was so broad. The music we now call ‘garage’ has evolved from only a small part of the club’s wildly eclectic soundtrack.”*
—Frank Broughton/Bill Brewster in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*
- I’d pick out **Ghetts** 2014 album *Rebel Without a Cause* as a key moment for artists broadening the sound off their own back rather than to dilute grime for chart success – since then artists have drawn on all sorts of influences with much more live instrumentation.
- The story of grime isn’t so much disputed origins as disputed parenthood. Kind of like nit-picky claims to cutting the ribbon on its grand opening. The title of creator was once fought for amongst a handful of artists – like Wiley, Dizzee and Pay As U Go. It even flares up beef between veterans and new stars today. All good stories have a beginning and an end, so it goes. And it would be cute and amenable for there to be one author of that one song to bridge the precipice between sonic predecessors and anthems of a new era. But whichever tracks slipped the discs in our musical backbones, grime is indisputably the story of a scene. Claims to the crown blow with the wind. But a dozen princes really made it what it is. A community driven by the fierce will of a few exceptional talents.

References

- Soul Jazz Records., 2008. *An England Story: The Culture of the MC in the UK*. [CD]
Available at: <https://soundsoftheuniverse.com/sjr/product/an-england-story-the-culture-of-the-mc-in-the-uk-1984-2008>
[Accessed 8 February 2020]
- Eden, John., 2005. *Uncarved*. [Online]
Available at: <http://www.uncarved.org/blog/2005/07/papa-levi-1/>
[Accessed 8 February 2020]
- Sword, H., 2016. *Vice*. [Online]
Available at: https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/zng9y8/british-sound-system-culture-092
[Accessed 8 February 2020].
- Brumfitt, Stuart., 2018. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.anothermanmag.com/life-culture/10370/a-brief-history-of-grime-as-told-by-dj-target>
[Accessed 10 February 2020].
- Clark, Martin., 2008. *Blackdown*. [Online]
Available at: <http://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com/2008/09/dot-dot-dot-smash.html>
[Accessed 8 February 2020].
- Corporate., 2013. *BBC*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-23128810>
[Accessed 8 February 2020].
- Joseph, D., 2018. *Grime Kids: The Inside Story of the Global Grime Takeover*. [Book]
Publisher: Hachette UK
[Accessed 8 February 2020].
- Abiade, Yemi., 2016. *Trench*. [Online]
Available at: <https://trenchtrenchtrench.com/features/pay-as-u-go-cartel-crawled-so-that-grime-could-walk>
[Accessed 12 February 2020].