

GRIME + GENTRIFICATION

In London the streets have a voice, multiple actually, afro beats, drill, Lily Allen, the sounds of the city are just as diverse but unapologetically London as the people who live here, but my sound runs at 140 bpm. When I close my eyes and imagine London I see tower blocks, the concrete isn't harsh, it's warm from the sun bouncing off it, almost comforting, council estates are a community, I hear grime, it's not the prettiest of sounds but when you've been raised on it, it's home.

"Grime is not garage

Grime is not jungle

Grime is not hip-hop and Grime is not ragga.

Grime is a mix between all of these with strong, hard hitting lyrics. It's the inner city music scene of London.

And is also a lot to do with representing the place you live or have grown up in." - Olly Thakes, Urban Dictionary

Or at least that's what Urban Dictionary user Olly Thake had to say on the matter back in 2006, and honestly, I couldn't have put it better myself. Although I personally trust a geezer off of Urban Dictionary more than an out of touch journalist or Good Morning Britain to define what grime is, I understand that Urban Dictionary may not be the most reliable source due to its liberal attitude to users uploading their own definitions with very little screening and that Mr Thake's definition may also leave you with more questions than answers about what grime actually is and how it came to be. So what is grime? The most simplified answer is that grime is a British genre of underground electronic music (although that underground label could be disputed today), like garage or jungle, in fact, grime owes its roots to the UK garage scene, although it's more often mistaken for hip-hop, which in fact can also be credited as one of the sounds major influences, as well as ragga, dancehall and many other aspects of Jamaican culture. But grime is more than a musical genre, it's a culture in the UK, especially in London where it was conceived. At the turn of the century in grimy (no pun intended) Bow, a group of kids from one of the most underprivileged areas in London wanted something, to represent them, they didn't want garage or hip-hop, they wanted something to call their own, borrowing from all the cultures and sounds around them, grime was born and in turn, so was what could be called 'tracksuit culture', working-class youths rapping about working-class experiences, and among them was a lad many would call the Godfather of Grime, MC Wiley.

"Garage?

I don't care about garage

Listen to this - it don't sound like garage

Who told you that I make garage?

Wiley Kat'z got his own style but it's not garage

Make it in the studio but not in the garage

Here in London there's a sound called garage

But this is my sound, it sure ain't garage

I heard they don't like me in garage

*Cause I use their scene but make my own sound*Turn

The Eskimo sound is mine recognise this it's mine - 'Wot Do U Call It', Wiley

So that's grime, so what's this gentrification thing? The word alone sounds pretty sticking with our theme of brutally oversimplifying things for you, gentrification is when a poorer, less developed area undergoes a large change and becomes a richer, more developed one, the term was first coined in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass who wrote,

"One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes - upper and lower. Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed" - Ruth Glass, Aspects of Change

But what does this actually mean, as in for those areas and the people living there, is this a good thing? In Spike Lee's 2014 rant against the gentrification of his native New York City, documented by *Intelligencer*, he asked "I grew up here in New York. It's changed. And why does it take an influx of white New Yorkers in the south Bronx, in Harlem, in Bed Stuy, in Crown Heights for the facilities to get better?". Spike Lee, a native New Yorker who was raised in 1970's Brooklyn, historically a ghetto for working-class minorities, has witnessed how gentrification has changed the county of kings and followed its trajectory as he became an acclaimed Hollywood director, from forty ounces in the projects to champagne in the penthouses, having experienced both ends of NYC's economic spectrum over the past 60 years, he is most likely one of the most qualified to speak about how gentrification has changed his home and who it has affected. The main problem with gentrification that Mr Lee presents is that the gentrification or 'development', or 'regeneration' of an area is more often than not only occurs when, richer, typically whiter, people to show interest in an area for any kind of positive 'regeneration' to take place. Gentrification often signifies displacement of the poor, mostly people of colour, but in the twenty-first century, the flow of gentrification is less so controlled by the tastes of bohemians and creatives and more by that of suits in city hall looking to turn cheap land into the next Hudson Yards or perhaps more aptly, Canary Wharf. "WHAT DOES GENTRIFICATION IN NEW YORK HAVE TO DO WITH GRIME (other than being the birthplace of hip-hop, an obvious predecessor of grime)", you may be yelling at your screen right now, probably not but you might, and if you are one of those smart-arses, great question! Not much is the answer, not much at all but I thought it'd be a good example for you, but we both know that this article isn't about New York, it's about London and two of the most London-iest things in the world, in fact, our friend from earlier Professor Ruth Glass was actually talking about what she had witnessed herself in London during the 1960s, more specifically the areas of Notting Hill and Islington. Nowadays people would hear Notting Hill or Islington and their minds would instantly rush to thoughts of the height of privilege in London, but it wasn't always like this, both these parts of London were traditionally blue-collar neighbourhoods that were "discovered" by young families and artists, becoming trendy for a new generation of Londoners, driving demand in the areas up along with the house prices, and no less like New York, the original working-class inhabitants were displaced. Places like Islington have now seemingly moved past hipsters on fixie bikes to yuppies on those foldable ones, the southernmost parts of the borough are long gone, as North London reached the peak of its urban-suburb family-friendly appeal, the tortured artists and eccentric bohemians needed a new chic home, they were refugees like the working-class families before them, they turned their sights East.

When people think about grime, they think about East London, they think about tower blocks in Hackney, home to the pirate radio stations that nurtured the genre in its early years, so why when people think about gentrification in London, they think about the same Hackney? Very few places have

undergone such a drastic change in character over the past two decades as the London Borough of Hackney. Directly adjacent to the Borough of Islington, Hackney could be seen as its edgy little brother, where people who live in Islington go to have fun. Growing up in London when I did you'd hear horror stories about Hackney, a place where supposedly everyone and their auntie were in a gang, and rightly so formerly it had one of the highest murder rates in the country at the turn of the century and it was the frontlines of the 2011 riots. But to a kid born in London in the past ten years, Hackney would mean something very different, it might conjure up thoughts of organic food, overpriced thrift stores or hordes of young professionals on bikes. In the 80s you could bag a five-bedroom gaff in Clapton for no more than £20,000, whereas today the average cost of a flat in Hackney can exceed £500k, don't get me wrong, it's nothing but a good thing that the stretch between Upper and Lower Clapton isn't 'Murder Mile' anymore, but when you stroll through town now and see all the shops you knew as a kid closed up or replaced outright by a patisserie or whatever, it makes you think at what cost. Among the damage was countless tower blocks, the kind used in the early days of grime to broadcast pirate radio, it may not seem like much today due to the prevalence of streaming, but back in the early noughties, finding the right height tower block and broadcasting a signal was instrumental in the success of MCs, many of whom are household names today. Hackney is now rated as one of the most desirable places to live in the UK, and it has been for a while now, yet it still manages to retain its "slightly gritty, up and coming" appearance in marketing the area, which is part of a new phenomenon I've noticed in the city called appropriating the working-class, exploiting the fact that most of the capital including Hackney, is now home to great inequality just one walk up Mare Street and you'll see it, two worlds, existing side by side but never really touching.

The idea of two separate worlds is a massive part of grime's DNA, the us versus them mentality was completely evident on both sides in the past the genre and those who made have been slated nationwide as thuggish, violent and crude, the scene could take that though, many MCs embraced it, what they couldn't take though was Form 696, a risk assessment form the Met Police required venues and promoters to fill out with the genre of music and expected ethnic makeup of the audience, not only is this blatantly racist, but it was almost used specifically to target grime shows, and it became a regular occurrence for most upcoming shows and later even entire tours to be cancelled due to the risk assessment. This and a multitude of other policies and methods made it extremely difficult for grime artists to make money or even music. Grime was always inner-city music, whether people understood it or not it was their reality, but the powers that be had a different idea of what London was, instead of homes they saw a goldmine, and they manifested destiny in the form of Canary Wharf, and what a goldmine it is. But before Canary Wharf there was Poplar, and without Poplar, we wouldn't have the likes of Wiley, Dizzee Rascal, Tinchy Stryder and the rest of the Ruff Squad or Roll Deep, and by the looks of those names, we might not even have grime at all. As the new business district flourished, the surrounding area suffered and the already impoverished estates continued to decline and as if that wasn't bad enough almost anyone living in the local area quite literally had to live in its shadow, dwarfed by the wharf, a constant stain of gentrification over peoples lives as Tinchy Stryder put it, it felt like somewhere "we weren't supposed to be".

But nowadays grime is more often cited as a powerful sound of protest, so what happened? What changed? A lot, unsurprisingly a lot happened between the days of the mandem sitting on the wall in E3 and today. Namely, a lot of new people have started to tune into grime, including me, most of us being inducted in with the class of 'That's Not Me' or 'German Whip', possibly two of the most important grime records of all time. After what was generally considered quite an embarrassing period for the scene between '09 and '13, consisting of a lot of artists trying to pander to a wider mainstream

audience, Skepta's Jme assisted 'That's Not Me' and Meridian Dan's 'German Whip' blew up, and not only were they huge, but they were straight grime, no pop shit, in fact, Skepta even went as far as to renounce all his designer clobber in almost Buddha-like fashion, ushering in the age of the tracksuit mafia. It proved to other MCs that they didn't need to conform to achieve anything, and simultaneously introduced listeners everywhere to real grime, and they ate it up. However, it can't be denied that the crowds at Skepta shows after this point looked considerably more middle class than before, which could be seen as evidence that gentrification positively affects the music industry, which is fair, the number of independent musicians and record labels is growing in recent years, especially in trendy areas, and a lot of "regeneration" schemes across the city aim to bolster the size of the creative arts industry even further, but some feel the reasons behind the second grime golden age might not be as just, is it possible for grime itself to become gentrified? Can you gentrify a sound? Can you gentrify a culture? Technically not because of the dictionary definition, but they can be exploited as a resource for money. An anonymous article written for gal-dem magazine, expressed their disdain for a Nike advert that appeared to be oversaturated with black faces, specifically grime MCs and other urban UK music artists, to sell the company "Nike has profited off blackness for a number of years due to high profile sporting stars" she writes. Grime comes from historically black communities and draws a lot of its influence from African and Caribbean culture, and now post the 2016 resurgence of the genre thanks to the likes of Skepta and Stormzy it appears that "grime stars are the next in line to be commodified. Our blackness is exciting and cool as long as it's raking it in".

A decade and a bit after its conception, highs, and lows, MOBOs, Brit Awards, international recognition, Chip releasing 'Champion' with Chris Brown...Grime appears to be changing every day, but is it developing as every musical genre should over time when it appears to be that it's changing to fit a mould for commercial success and the taste of a new, middle-class audience. Almost like the gentrification of a sound, the 2010s have become the age of Good Morning Britain-grime, acts like Stormzy have garnered huge mainstream success, Ghetts and Wretch have all but fallen off the face of the earth, and Wiley's lost his mind, possibly even a crackhead, that one's still up in the air. Grime has reached new heights and progressively lower lows, the genre has experienced just as turbulent times as the city that bred it in its twenty-year existence. Power has been disputed just as much as the house of commons in recent years and in the current Stormzy fuelled resurgence shots are being sent from across the postcodes to grasp onto this fleeting wave of relevance. Grime says so much about London, no matter what's going on around it, grime always finds, or it tries to make its own.