

SOUNDS LIKE LONDON

100 Years of
Black Music
in the Capital

Lloyd Bradley

SOUNDS LIKE LONDON

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Why Sounds Like London needed writing

by Jazzie B

I was born and brought up in Hornsey, north London, and I remember music from a really early age because I was always interested in the Blue Spot gram we had sitting in the front room. It wasn't just the glowing lights; one of the things that attracted me to it as a young kid was the smell. The gram would go on at maybe seven o'clock in the morning, and wouldn't go off until midnight or one the next morning, so those valves used to get very, very warm, almost part of the central heating system, then they'd give off a certain smell!

So you could say I grew up fully immersed in the music. I was about seven or eight then, but subconsciously I was becoming aware of how important music was to the lives of the immigrant communities – not just from the Caribbean, but also the Irish and the Greek communities that were all around us. We were all working-class people, out all day, and the ultimate prize once you owned your own house or your own room was to get some entertainment in there. For black people in London in the fifties and sixties, the Blue Spot gram came a long way before the telly. It became the central piece of furniture, and a showing of your wealth.

Critical to all this, though, was the music – the software, if you like – which was the link back to the Caribbean, as it became a story of what was going on back home, and kept people in touch with who they were. Then, moving on a few years, for us that was born here, a lot of the reggae music we listened to in the seventies, we lived our life by it, listening to people like Big Youth or Brigadier Jerry articulating about life. The difference between what my parents listened to – there was calypso and ska, but country & western was massive, and then there was Engelbert Humperdinck – and what my generation listened to, was that my parents were trying to adapt, but we were trying to make our own way. All of this was reflected in the music we were listening to before we were making any of our own, and as we took the lyrics of this story-telling music seriously the messages were coming through.

Not that our relationship with our music was always so serious. One of the greatest things about having our own music was that it could be like our own private world in the middle of London. Take the calypsonians. Everyone was so coy and conservative in their attitudes *outside*, but these records were very explicit and that was our own world. It was particularly fun for us young people, because we knew they were covering things we shouldn't know about, so we'd make up our own lyrics. It was only years later we discovered *that* was what they were singing about.

I got into sound systems early. All my older brothers owned sound systems, so I was born into it and it was synonymous with us as young black men coming up at the time – we didn't go to the pub and we had our own style and culture. I must stress that this wasn't so much a black and white thing among my generation, it was a working-class thing, and so many white kids were genuinely interested in experiencing our culture. I lived the sound-system life through my brothers, and the white and the Greek kids in our area all knew all about the sound systems and the music.

The importance of the sound systems was far more than just playing music, it was your connection with people in the Caribbean, with each other here. It was a refuge from



At the Soul II Soul clothing launch, Jazze B and Lloyd Bradley show Frank and Dino how it should be done.

everything that went on during your week at work, where you could be around like-minded people or where you could meet people, and it was how you expressed yourself. For the operator too, it was a business opportunity, and there were others that made money from around the sound systems, so it was a fusion of music, business and life, and something we were in control of for ourselves – in our Sunday football league there were a load of sound systems that put out football teams.

The music was absolutely key to how we lived in London. It helped to relax us, it helped to educate us, it helped us to enjoy ourselves, and the sound systems were always central to that music's success. They provided the platform for the music we were making to get heard, and they also kept it under the radar, meaning this story of London's black music is something that hasn't been talked about much in the regular media. Mostly that's been a good thing, because it's allowed the various genres to thrive, away from influences that might have turned them around a bit. It's a story that

shouldn't remain hidden, though, for future generations and people now who want to know about what went on before you saw the Dizzee Rascals and the Tinie Tempahs. It's a story that needed to be told by somebody who really cares about it, and the most important thing about this book is Lloyd Bradley. The reason this story of London's black music hasn't been told before is because we haven't had a Lloyd Bradley before, and up until now he wasn't ready to write it.

I first met Lloyd when he wrote a press release for us about twenty years ago. As I got to know him, I realised that during my years in the music business I'd never really met anybody who had his level of knowledge or experience of this music, and had such a passion for it – he's as much a part of it as anybody else. Lloyd's one of the few people out there who have dug as deep as he has to build up a real genuine knowledge, and then been dedicated enough and smart enough to take on this role as historian. You've only got to look back to some of the things he's done in the past, like his book about reggae, *Bass Culture*, or his writings in *Mojo* or the newspapers, to see the depth of his interest in those arts, how he understands the power and the passion of all of this black music, and, most importantly, how he looks into the truth of it all.

Lloydie loves London too. He went to school just up the road there in Hornsey, he's a lifelong Gooner, and knows exactly how this music is such an essential part of London and why it couldn't happen anywhere else. Which all comes through in the book, as it puts London as probably the most important city in black music history worldwide, because it wasn't just one style that started here, it's been years of different movements. Lloyd is aware of all of that, and he's seen so much of it happen around him.

Personally, I've been inspired and been informed by a lot of the stuff he's written over the last few years, and now I'm proud to say I'm a friend of his, meaning I'm one of the select bunch of people who knows just how good the lemon meringue pie he makes is.

Introduction

STAND FOR LONG ENOUGH on any street corner in London, and you'll hear music. Chances are, these days, it'll be black music of some description – dubstep, hip hop, grime, reggae, R&B ... It's been like that for a while, at least since cars had cassette players and 'portable' stereos evolved to the size of suitcases. The difference between then and now, though, is that the black music you'll be hearing will probably have been written and recorded within a few miles of wherever it's disturbing the peace.

British black music has never been so prominent. Indeed, it's at the point now where artists such as Labrinth, Tinie Tempah and Dizzee Rascal are bona fide pop stars, with a young mainstream audience that accepts them in the same way as they would anybody else. Just as hip-hop stars like Jay-Z or Beyoncé have across-the-board acceptance in the US and beyond.

The brilliant thing – sorry, the *most* brilliant thing – about the current state of British black music is not so much that it has come so far in a mere fifty years (less than three generations), but that it has done so almost entirely by itself. Unlike the Americans cited above, who for the most part benefited from the full might of a global entertainment industry, our guys have very often succeeded *in spite* of the UK music business rather than because of it. In almost every case, enduring stylistic advances have been the result of intuitive and inspired individuals nurturing their ideas away

from the lure of the mainstream. In fact, as the story unfolds, it's when black music has opted to put itself in the hands of the regular music business that progress has fallen apart. Mostly, though, and in true immigrant style, it's been shrewd self-sufficiency and a work ethic that's never scared to learn or look for opportunity that have powered this astonishing trajectory. 'Doing a t'ing' as it used to be called, is now all over the British charts.

Sounds Like London is a tribute to the many single-minded characters who have trusted judgements honed by years of servicing black audiences that were never slow to let them know if something wasn't up to scratch. A Saturday-night crowd in a Harlesden dancehall will be far more informative than any amount of focus groups. Furthermore, when the mainstream punters are presented with the genuine article, it's usually far better received than anything specially tailored for them.

Sounds Like London also documents how the city's black music has made a steady transition from being viewed as something that came from abroad, and therefore didn't need to be taken seriously, to a music that so completely *has* to be that the BBC have devoted a digital channel to it. Attitudes towards the musicians themselves have similarly shifted. As the music has evolved from calypso and jazz to dubstep and grime, so the people making it have gone from being clearly identifiable as immigrants to being second-generation Londoners, blurring geographical backgrounds to the point that British is all they could possibly be. Despite what certain aspects of the media continue to think.

It's an arc that leads from Lord Kitchener coming down the gangplank of the *Windrush* singing 'London is the place for me ...' to Tinie Tempah sitting on the Breakfast TV sofa giving advice about what tea is best to use with London's hard water (Yorkshire Gold, he reckons). And in between those two points, large numbers of black people have arrived in London, mixed it up with their new neighbours, done pretty well regardless of establishment attitudes, and now, for better and for worse, are part and parcel of