

## Articles

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Pirate mentality

### Pirate mentality: How London radio has shaped creative practice in grime music

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#### Abstract

Grime music is an Afrodiasporic performance form originating in London. While artists such as Stormzy and Skepta are now international stars, its gestation took place within a

grounded network of record shops, radio stations and raves. This article argues for grime pirate radio's role as both an oppositional channel and site of creative practice. Based on empirical work undertaken from 2017 to 2019 in London's grime scene, it demonstrates how artists harness radio's communicative power to engender a Black counterpublic, before outlining a framework for creative agency: afforded by a network of stations and practitioners; made meaningful through its community of listeners; and realized through improvisatory practice. Existing studies focusing on pirate radio often present these fora as domains for dissemination. In grime, however, its creative function highlights the potentiality of radio as a performance medium: a space for quotidian belonging and co-presence, but also for musical development and grassroots practice.

#### Keywords:

co-presence

collective intimacy

counterpublics

creativity

grime

hype

improvisation

pirate radio

## Introduction

In grime music, the radio performance environment is a special space. Once you arrive at a radio station everyone is immediately aware of your presence. There is no hiding at the back of the room. For MCs, this could be your one shot to show your worth to an

audience of avid listeners. For DJs, it is time to show what you can really do with two decks and a mixer. Whereas most genres of music tend to gestate in practice rooms, grime radio – similarly to jazz cutting sessions – provides almost no room for failure. For West London grime MC Hitman Tiga: ‘there’s no takes here. On radio sets you can’t hide. Definitely. There’s no hiding’.<sup>1</sup>

Grime is a Black British musical genre that emerged in the early 2000s and really thrived on the airwaves. It takes much of its influence from hip hop and Jamaican sound system culture, but it also shares stylistic commonalities with hardcore, jungle and UK garage: three forms that developed in the 1990s in Britain that were also oriented around an oppositional sphere of illegal broadcasts, independent record shops and raves. For grime specifically, radio is its lifeblood. It acts as a meeting place, an interface between artists and audience, and a site of creative practice. Once MCs and DJs have earned their stripes performing on the school playground, and at local youth centres, radio is the first place where they can get their voices heard on a public stage. MCs exchange lyrics at a rapid rate over a constantly shifting sonic canvas provided by the DJ. The phone line is inundated with calls and texts from eager listeners ‘locked in’ from the local area. As soon as the station goes live, the sense of co-presence heightens tension and anticipation. This level of intensity within a performance-based medium stimulates creative expression, resulting in new musical ideas, developed in situ and *collectively* as part of an improvising community of MCs, DJs and listeners.

This article argues for the creative function of pirate radio in grime music. It shows how grime artists harness the communicative power of the radio domain to engender a Black subaltern sphere that acts in opposition to dominant channels, before

demarcating the ways in which it builds on these foundations to offer a novel, tripartite creative formulation: afforded by a vast network of stations and practitioners; made meaningful through a community of listeners; and realized through improvisatory practice. It builds upon existing work by Larisa Mann, Malcolm James, Monique Charles, Julian Henriques and others, to show how radio in grime is not just a site of 'synchronous listening', but also a space for synchronous creation: MCs fashion fresh lyrical passages in the moment; DJs build off the energy in the room, and from the phone line, to reach new heights (Mann 2019: 393). Erstwhile studies of Black diasporic pirate radio practice in the United Kingdom often underplay the creative labour involved in radio practice. In particular, Matthew Fuller writes of MCs in jungle as mere combinatorial elements within a wider media ecology, underselling human agency to align more closely with anxieties around fully automated society (2004: 37). Instead, grime's vibrant musical ecology includes human and non-human actors in concert as part of a 'techno-social' formulation (Henry 2006: 151). For Alexander Weheliye, there exists an 'enculturation [...] of informational technologies in [Black] cultural practices' rather than technological dominance (2002: 33). This article argues, then, that the radio network in grime music provides a platform for, rather than dominating, creative acts instigated by artists and augmented by active listeners.

It is split into two sections. Firstly, it outlines grime music's development in marginal spaces, highlighting the importance of community and togetherness – what Mann has theorized as 'collective intimacy' – afforded by the radio sphere, which acts in opposition to structural subordination, and censorship from dominant channels. Grime artists work within an informal cityscape, and the network of practitioners and listeners

work together to constitute a subaltern site of creative practice – a Black counterpublic, or more accurately an ‘enclave’ (Squire 2002: 457) – within a country that excessively polices this community’s very right to existence and expression.

It then lays out a critical framework for creative agency within the radio sphere, demonstrating grime’s indebtedness to a long history of Afrodiasporic collective practice that thrives off interactivity and hype, before drawing attention to the specificities of the radio domain for its actuation. As Mann has noted in her work on ‘Ethnic Radio’, the medium is not just a fora for ‘individuated private listening in the home’, but a site for ‘collective experience’ (Mann 2019: 395, 393). Grime’s radio network – and its multiplicity of artists and listeners – channel this collectiveness towards creative work, in addition to its functionality as a communicative channel.

The second half of the article presents empirical work, undertaken from 2017 to 2019 in London’s grime scene. It maps participation across a capital-wide network of stations – that acts as the bedrock for creative endeavour in the informal cityscape – before exhibiting a focus on one central London station. Two DJ residencies on this station are explored, owing to their importance for the sustenance of this creative network. Finally, the article focuses on pirate radio as a ‘constructive enterprise’, demonstrating how artists – and their wider collectives – harness the potentialities of the domain to foster new work (Stengers 2010). This closing subsection examines the practice of one MC performing in two different environments, a stable residency by his crew’s DJ and a performance in unchartered territory, demonstrating how both regularity and novelty can encourage new musical ideas in grime’s pirate radio sphere.

**Grime music: Marginality, creativity and community**

Grime music is practiced primarily by MCs and DJs, who orient around collectives known as crews. These social units are vital for both quotidian belonging and for developing musically. Cultural historian Joy White writes that ‘a crew is a space that provides an opportunity to learn your craft and develop tacit knowledge about the scene and how it operates’ (2017: 4). These crews regularly frequent pirate radio to coalesce, create and share ideas with a clued-in community of listeners. This community functions as an *enclave*, as per Catherine Squires’ definition, as a particular counter ideological formation that works to operate outside of the strictures and structural discrimination of – in grime’s case – mainstream British society (2002: 448).

Grime’s rise to prominence at the turn of the millennium coincided with a period of political upheaval, and dominant channels simply were not afforded to young Black Londoners. In fact, they were expressly litigated against. Regressive domestic policies put into place by Prime minister Tony Blair resulted in highly restrictive implications. The introduction of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) in 1998 gave new powers to police, enabling them to disperse gatherings, prevent people from accessing certain areas, or restrict the consumption of alcohol. These measures were often employed against young people. A United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child from 2008 criticized the ‘inappropriate use of punitive pre-emptive interventions (such as Anti Social Behaviour Orders)’ and called for ‘improved transparency’ in matters where children were being put into custody (Goldson and Muncie 2006: 52). Further to this, heightened ‘stop-and-search’ methods<sup>2</sup> were shown to discriminate adversely towards Black individuals (Beynon and Kushnick 2003: 233). This meant that being young, Black and living in London was highly fractious.

An increasing sense of marginality augmented the importance of liminal spaces for social coalescing and creative production. Through consistent ‘violence and disrespect from state and dominant publics’, grime artists moved away from hegemonic channels towards grassroots practice (Squires 2002: 458). The development and proliferation of grime’s performance network over time acted in opposition to wider regulation. Particularly at its outset, grime’s fora for dissemination were often subject to discriminatory practices and excessive policing, leaving underground domains as the most realistic route for survival. Mykaell Riley’s study of grime practice found Form 696 – a document issued by the Metropolitan Police to assess the safety of events – to be used punitively against grime events, meaning that scope for physical public communion was threatened with erasure via bureaucratic means (Riley 2017: 59). Other dominant channels were also cut off from participants. FM radio licences are often expensive and difficult to obtain – London is also in ‘Population Category A’ meaning tariffs fall into the highest bracket – and dominant media in the United Kingdom, aside from BBC Radio 1Xtra set up in 2002, does not cater for Black audiences (Ofcom 2019). Mann observed similar issues in New York, which caused pirate radio to become an attractive proposition for minority groups, since ‘major media conglomerates that dominate legal broadcasting have seen little value in minority-language or minority-culture audiences’ (2019: 388). Owing to this, grime’s public ‘enclave[d] itself’ and broadcast principally through pirate radio ‘in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate [...] planning’ and creative work (Squires 2002: 448).

Despite taking these steps, it is important to note that erasure was also a constant threat for pirate radio. Through broadcasting illegally, grime radio stations were regularly

subject to raids by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) – rebranded as the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in 2003 – and their sustenance required a team of highly skilled individuals who would place aerials and transmitters in hard-to-find places: tower block roofs, lift shafts and ventilation units. If the station was temporarily stopped from broadcasting, the swift acquisition of turntables and a mixer meant the station could get back on air from a different location, with its means of dissemination remaining intact. In the early 2000s, DJ Slimzee, a co-founder of the popular East London radio station Rinse FM, was issued with an ASBO for affixing broadcast material. This had an adverse effect on his career. Through ‘blurring the boundaries between civil and criminal law’, ASBOs rendered Slimzee a criminal pariah, rather than a young man trying to get a radio station’s message out to its listeners (Bradshaw 2015).

## Co-presence and collective intimacy in Afrodiasporic practice

This fervent radio network, while plagued by ephemerality, is central for creative production and community building. Stations possess huge importance for their listenership, and this is facilitated by the alternative means by which the material is distributed. For Larisa Mann, ‘communities that exist in a relatively hostile cultural landscape’ can produce ‘collective intimacy’ through ‘synchronous listening’ to radio broadcasts (2019: 385). This ‘democratic accessibility’ and opportunity to collectively listen is also key to both grime and antecedent Afrodiasporic dance music forms that used radio as a means of dissemination for their creative practice (Mann 2019: 390).

Malcolm James’ book *Sonic Intimacy* explores collective intimacy in public space, arguing that intimacy’s a priori inscription as private is tied to ‘the textual, visual and racial regimes of Eurocentric capitalist modernity’ that denied public assembly to



Black subjects, and upheld individual reflection as a preserve of the elite (2020: 30). He looks to Jamaican Sound System culture and its challenge to ‘bourgeois intimacy’, with dances instead functioning as a ‘community’s heartbeat’ (James 2020: 11; Bradley 2000: 4), and the ways in which newer Afrodiasporic forms – such as UK garage and jungle – utilize the radio as a means to collectively coalesce. This reading challenges McLuhan’s dominant positioning of radio as a private medium (1994: 299), and foregrounds radio as a collective endeavour that can ‘reknit the cultural fabric of a particular location’, for listeners and performers (Mann 2019: 394).

In jungle particularly, an important precursor to grime that features MCs rapping over fast-paced instrumental tracks, its radio scene functions as a ‘micro-massive’, which ‘extended the intimate presence of the dance floor to thousands of bedrooms and cars across the city, providing a common presence between otherwise isolated micro environments [...] the junglist “massive” whose co-presence unfolded through the airwaves’ (James 2020: 65). This form of ‘co-presence’ is key for understanding grime pirate radio. Through listening and responding in real time, artists and listeners alike build rapport, and foster excitement around the performance at hand; inculcating community and providing shared experience away from the purview of the authorities.<sup>3</sup>

Grime pirate radio is therefore able to bypass the strictures of hegemonic public space through aerial transmission, communicating with its own ‘micro-massive’ within reach of its transmissions. For Grime scholar Monique Charles, ‘the sense of community provided by pirate radio transcended the ethereal Black Public Sphere into the materiality of real London Colonial life’ (2016: 192). This assertion by Charles captures the changing basis of Black Counterpublic, from a generalized sphere of activity to a

grounded reality. Without scope for alignment with a wider political movement, activity turns inwards. In the American context Dawson points to the removal of the ‘single common goal’ (Dawson 1995: 214) in the form of Jim Crow. For grime artists, this manifests itself in the complete lack of representation and consideration for Black citizens within a punitive New Labour-led government. As a result, there exists a need to refocus grassroots endeavour.

Grime radio’s very alterity therefore offers two things. Firstly, space to coalesce and communicate lived experience outside of heavily policed dominant channels. Secondly, and most importantly for this article, it provides a creative interface for MCs, DJs and listeners to be co-present and creatively innovate, in a highly fertile radio environment. The next section will focus on historical precedents for this practice, outline the particularities of the grime pirate radio domain and what it affords, and more concretely address the creative agency harnessed in these oppositional studio sites.¶

## Radio and creative agency: Hype, sites and rites

As alluded to above by James, there exists a long history of Black oppositional practice that focuses on co-presence, collective intimacy, but also creative agency. Collaborative interchange, be it in the dance or on the radio, involves improvisatory interactions that build collective energy, often resulting in the development of new material in situ. Sound system practice is vital for grime, owing to both stylistic commonalities, and shared ancestry. Jamaican music has had a prevailing influence on artistry in the United Kingdom since the Second World War – a burgeoning West Indian population were encouraged to move to Britain to help rebuild its depleted workforce – and the practice of

'toasting', which involves holding court, introducing tracks and improvising lyrically over the instrumental track, remains a key tenet of grime (Banton 1953: 10).

Reggae historian and documentary filmmaker Julian Henriques has written on the irruptive potential of interactivity in these collectively co-present settings. For Henriques, there exists a number of auditory transductions that excite and feedback into the performance process in the dance. This could be the audience entering into dyadic interplay with the deejay, or the 'bashment gal''s dance moves heightening in intensity as a result of the deejay's selections. For Henriques, interchange between dancer and sound reflects the 'patterning of signal, wave or disturbance in one medium [being] translated into another medium. The bashment gal hearing a rhythm in her ears and over her body and transforming this into a dance move would be a biomechanical example' (2014: 77). In these instances, then, a performance is augmented by interaction between dancers, DJs and auditory output.

Henriques' study of Jamaican sound system Stone Love also highlights the importance of actors whose involvement transcends the immediacy of the performance itself, such as the maintenance crew, or 'boxmen'. For Henriques, this reaffirms a need for 'the widest possible definition of what constitutes performance' and an appreciation of 'every necessity required for the performance to take place rather than only those on stage in front of the audience' (2011: 45).

This acknowledgement of the wider performance ecology is reminiscent of Christopher Small's landmark study of *Musicking*, but it also speaks to the collective intent that underpins grassroots Black media ecologies, or what Lez Henry has described as 'techno-social collectives' (2006: 151), that are fundamentally communal yet actuated

through oppositional media channels and technologies: be it the sound system session, or the pirate radio broadcast. Artists and audience members are ‘in the mix’ with – not beholden to – ‘technologies and public spaces’ to enact creative work in concert with community (Weheliye 2005: 89).

Grime music has strong roots in community practice, and its own interconnected community of pirate radio engineers, DJs, MCs, rave promoters, videographers, and – very importantly – radio listeners, all contribute towards the field of performance. Furthermore, they also within a highly vibrant oppositional domain as detailed above. In order to create and listen collectively, subaltern channels had to be used to facilitate this process. New tracks were pressed to white label vinyl and sold out of the back of cars, DJs would take up weekly residencies on pirate radio, and invited MCs were allowed space to debut fresh lyrics on the airwaves to this community of listeners.

These interconnected elements therefore excite and add energy to the field of performance. Matthew Fuller’s work on pirate radio practice offers two points, precisely relating to the actuation of ‘hype’ in this network, through the iterative building of energy through creative encounter. Fuller, like James, examines radio interplay in jungle indicating how these interactions between listeners, artists and the wider field of oppositional channels possesses a particular dynamism. This dynamism helps build energy and ‘hype’ through ‘mutual excitation’ (2004: 35, 37). Secondly, he affirms the medium’s very reliance on the community of listeners, who build into a sense of technological antiphony, through leaving notes of approval: ‘voice [calls], texts and rings’. These notes signal collective co-presence but also indicate ‘hype about a certain

track, and [build into] a system of feedback and production towards intensifying it' (Fuller 2004: 50).

What is envisioned here, then, is a re-spatializing of the soundsystem session, and its 'techno-social' character, over subaltern airwaves. Whereas Henriques 'bashment gal' provides energy to the dance through her biomechanics responses to the DJ's selections, the collective 'micro massive' engages in 'synchronous listening', but *also* participation through contributing and feeding back via texts and calls. There are many meaningful benefits to the 'synchronous experience' of listening together, as highlighted by Mann, which include the 'ability to reclaim space' (2019: 393). But what we see with grime is not only this renewed autonomy shared amongst a 'micro-massive' locked in through oppositional channels, but also a densely interactive sphere of musical interaction that moves beyond listening towards creative agency.

## Researching grime's pirate radio network

The remaining three subsections of this article will demonstrate how grime pirate radio builds upon these acts of mutual excitation in Soundsystem culture and on jungle pirate radio, towards new creative work. This is owing to what I have determined to be a tripartite system of improvising practitioners, active listenership, and interconnected performance network, which functions as a 'techno-social' collective. Grime performance is distinctive, since it not only takes place within this wider network of oppositional practice, but the performances themselves are pregnant with multidirectional interplay and improvisatory negotiation between crew members. In Fuller's reading of jungle, he often negates the potentialities of MCs, who are nestled within a wider network, often as another combinatoric. The antiphonal relationship between MC and

listener may build hype, but for Fuller the MCs' responses are 'cretinously predictable' (2004: 28). This is not the case for grime, which works with crew structures that feature multiple MCs working and improvising together, and in concert with the wider listenership on the airwaves. Furthermore, the economically and socially precarious nature of grime – detailed above – offers its own intensity, and sense of intense togetherness within an enclave of artists and listeners across a vast network of stations, that not only listen together, but *create* together too.

To demonstrate these particularities, I documented grime's performance circuit throughout 2017. Although some aspects have changed since grime's initial period – wherein many stations broadcasted illegally through FM, such as Rinse which now broadcasts legally – much of the attitude and approach has remained. These stations are typically housed on the margins, with their whereabouts concealed from outsiders. Most stations require artists to pay subs (subscription fees) and studio locations often change owing to issues with rental agreements, noise complaints, and other such measures that continue to police and blight the informal cityscape.

From May to November of 2017, I listened to and logged every grime show that aired on radio – detailing each MC and DJ that was present – and attended every event advertised in London. I also attended many radio performances, in addition to my own radio residencies, which I have been conducting since 2012 across a number of London-based (pirate and non-pirate) radio stations. A number of artists were interviewed, many of whom I have worked with during my time on the London radio circuit. All interviews were recorded, and assent was obtained for their inclusion.

Through firstly detailing the results of the Radio Network study, attention will be turned to the interconnections at Stardom Radio, a now-defunct station that was based in Central London, before focusing on the practice of one MC across the London-wide network, that presents radio performance as constructive enterprise. It will therefore show how both grime's network of radio sites acts as a catalyst for creative work, but also how this is fully realized by artists improvising and creating together – expressing collective intimacy and creativity, amongst grime's community of practitioners and listeners.

### The radio network: May to November 2017

The radio stations included in this study were BBC Radio 1Xtra, Stardom Radio, Westside Radio, Mode FM, NTS, Rinse FM, DejaVu FM, Rezzent and Don City Radio.<sup>5</sup> All broadcast via the internet, with Radio 1Xtra and Rezzent also available on digital radio. Shows that were included required a live element, which meant either live MCing and/or live mixing from a DJ and they had to primarily be playing music broadly defined as grime music. Live shows that took place within Greater London – delimited by the M25 motorway orbital that surrounds the capital – were also documented. The data collected infers that grime's key hubs are radio stations. In the period covered I documented 108 radio shows as opposed to 23 live shows, with live shows therefore accounting for 18 per cent of overall output.

To try and offer an overview of this network, I took the same week of each month over a five-month period and documented all the radio output that matched the above criteria. While I found that the DJs' shows largely remained consistent on radio – this is in keeping with the notion of DJ's having weekly residencies on radio stations – the MC roster was highly changeable. MC combinations were similarly vast. [Figure 1](#)

demonstrates this variability, with MC appearances month-to-month ranging from 33 to 61, averaging at 44. DJ appearances were less markedly spread in terms of numbers but more pronounced in terms of percentage, offering a range of 21 to 42 with an average of 30. [Figure 2](#) presents a DJ and MC per show ratio. This chart, in contrast, is more stable, ranging between 2.81 and 5 artists per show. This means artists have a rough level of expectation for the number of guests before attending a radio set.

[Figure 1: Radio case study: Chart of DJ and MC appearances.](#)

[Figure 2: Radio case study: Chart of expected appearances.](#)

Another aspect I noticed was that although the roster was interchangeable, the total number of MCs and DJs actively performing – defined here as having performed more than once during this period – did not exceed 100, thus demonstrating a close-knit community of artists involved on the radio circuit. This means that although the scope for interplay is always substantial, there are common threads that artists can draw upon. Nonetheless, this eclectic composition of performers across shows relies upon an astute ability to manage uncertainty once you enter the radio studio and enter communion with other performers and the avid listenership, or ‘micro-massive’ across the airwaves.

I spoke to J River, an MC from London grime crew Over The Edge, about his first experience attending a radio set.

When we first went to radio, there’s elements of spitting [performing lyrics] that are specific to radio. You’re spitting in front of people that you might not know, and it gives you a level of nervousness when you’re performing if you’re not used to it. Even though I was confident in my own levels and abilities – since we’d be practicing for ages – it was an experience that we had to adapt to. But we did it as much as we could, and we got good quickly.<sup>6</sup>



This data and J River's testimonial demonstrates that a substantial roster of artists are active on the radio circuit and that their attendance at sets is variegated. While there is an expectation of how many artists might be on set, the complete roster of artists who end up performing is never really secured. This uncertainty is ripe for innovation and offers scope for reaching new ground as a collective but requires astute coping mechanisms from the artists involved. For Benjamin Brinner, a theorist of creative practice in gamelan ensembles, artists engaged in improvisatory communities must develop a specialized musical 'competence' to respond to this 'microcosm of connections, activities and possibilities' (Brinner 1995: 5). Once developed, new work can be fostered in the live radio setting.

One way to conceptualize artists' management of radio performance is to move beyond raw data and look towards the specifics of the radio performance network and the MCs and DJs involved in it. The next subsection firstly looks at how the very liveness and multidirectionality of the radio domain provides scope for conflict and confrontation, before outlining how different crews interrelate, and fashion enduring performance relationships.

## Stardom Radio

During 2017, central London station Stardom Radio was a critical space to 'touch down' and show your worth as an MC. In particular, South London DJ Argue and Essex-based DJ Kirby T offered ground for new artists to explore and experiment on their weekly residencies. The radio set often operates similarly to a jazz cutting session, since artists are vying for pride of place with competition coming from all angles. Failure to perform convincingly may result in an artist not being invited back, or publicly shunned. Tom

Perchard wrote of the ‘very public nature’ of correlate cutting competitions in jazz: ‘victories could be won or face lost in front of a city’s worth of jazz set peers’ (2006: 31; 38). This is a palpable fear and motivation that grips grime artists in this environment. But radio’s prevalence means that it is a sphere that artists cannot ignore, since it functions as a principal oppositional site, with many other routes censored and ‘attack[ed] by state and dominant publics’ (Squires 2002: 462). And while MCs may not be asked to play the notoriously challenging jazz standard Cherokee in the key of B Major at a blistering tempo, there are multiple tactics that DJs and MCs can utilize to both challenge newcomers and heighten a performance’s intensity.

As a consequence, radio stations are a bustling, vehemently creative, yet potentially hostile ground. This ‘public nature’ of these performances, which are disseminated to the community of listeners,<sup>7</sup> results in a variety of outcomes, particularly when the listenership, or ‘micro-massive’, are actively responding to events as they unfold. There are even moments where impromptu clashes – lyrical battles between artists – can arise. This is well evidenced on a radio set from May 2017, where Kirby T hosted 26 MCs across a 30-minute segment on his radio show. The need to perform for an audience, combined with latent antagonisms saw a ferocious clash between MC Big John of the collective Heat Gang and Blaydes of 3ird Degree take centre stage, consequently eclipsing many of the other artists’ contributions (Kirby 2017). Of the 26 MCs who performed that day, half of them had retired from music within twelve months of its transmission: highlighting both the ephemerality and high stakes of radio as a site of performance.

While competition and rivalry are apparent factors in radio performance, there are other more communal elements at play, which are critical for fashioning a legitimate realm for counterpublic practice. The performance itself can of course be fraught but developing relationships with other artists is key. There is every likelihood that an artist might bump into any number of MCs or DJs at a particular radio set, as shown by the study above. An awareness of other artists, their style, and their expectations of you as an artist, is necessary for cohesive practice. [Figure 3](#) maps (part of) the extensive interconnectivity of the scene, paying close attention to the artists engaged in creative practice at Stardom Radio (where Kirby T and Argue were based) during the five-month period documented in the radio case study. Dashed edges denote having performed together on one of these shows, while solid edges – or hyper-edges – indicate a shared performance and group membership. For example, the line between Boss Renz and Squintz demonstrates that they performed together in this period, and that they were both members of a crew, Mob Set, at this time. Lady Shocker and Scrivs, however, simply performed together on a radio show. It does not present all exchange for time immemorial, nor does it express ties that were not articulated in the radio sphere.

[Figure 3: Artistic relations at Stardom Radio, June to October 2017.](#)

The fact that this diagram is still so entwined is a testament to the interconnectivity, and consequent potentialities for new practice ([Newman 2003](#): 172).

One calculation that can be deduced is the vertex degree, or the number of connections to any one artist. Of the 47 MCs and 19 DJs, it is Logan from the Otherside who stands apart with twenty connections. This means he performed with twenty different artists in this period, including five DJs and fifteen MCs. Kirby T was the most

connected DJ, having performed with thirteen MCs. Kirby T has since gone on to develop the Westside Sessions platform – along with DJ Olos and Rebecca Judd, latterly of Apple Music – while Logan became a regular on a number of radio shows, and has collaborated with The Bug, and LCY of all-female bass collective 6 Figure Gang.

These connections and match fitness accrued working within this sphere are vital, not only for articulating community, but also for transitioning into the live arena, when events are able to occur. I spoke with South London MC Jabz about the radio sphere, its benefits, both musically and socially, and the distinction between going to sets with just your own crew members as opposed to branching out.

I feel like when you're around MCs that you're always around it's just practice. It's the same as fighters when they're in the boxing ring. When you're in the dojo with your guys fighting, that's your guy so you're practicing. When you're around other MCs, though, you've got to show that you know what you're doing. It's a challenge, but it's a good way to meet new people as well.<sup>8</sup>

MCing or DJing regularly on radio allows artists to refine their craft, accrue knowledge of the performance sphere as a whole and make connections with the artists within it and their wider listenership. A working knowledge of this interconnectivity within the network, then, is a critical part of a grime artists' performance practice and it is through the radio domain that much of this creative work is undertaken.

### Pirate radio as constructive enterprise

The multitude of performers engaged in pirate radio practice means that they are more than simply another combinatorial element in a wider network of creative production. Artists are part of a 'larger mix that combines DJs, audiences, musics, technologies and public spaces', but their performative utterances matter: both for the 'micro-massive' and

for fashioning new creative work (Weheliye 2005: 89). Radio features performers with agency who have to negotiate uncertainty and collaborate with a wide variety of artists. For Jabz, radio offers both a challenge and the need to work at your highest level, especially when performing with other MCs. However, new ideas can also be harnessed in a comparatively stable group setting, through attending the regular residency of a particular DJ over a long period of time. In these instances, the stable crew unit can act as a springboard for innovation achieved through group improvisation. This section looks more closely at this practice in action, focusing on the work of Jabz and his crew, The Collective.

Jabz joined The Collective in 2014. This ten-strong crew of nine MCs and a DJ were primarily based out of South East London but had members from across the capital. Jabz knew two of the fellow MCs from school, and the crew came together following regular attendance at radio sets and cyphers. As a testament to the potentialities of radio's wider network, it is important to acknowledge that they met their DJ Charisma at Stardom Radio.

By 2016, The Collective were involved in a period of intense activity, working together regularly and improvising at a high level. This activity was focused primarily around DJ Charisma's weekly residency on North London station Mode FM, which took place every Sunday evening. These radio shows were bolstered by regular bookings across London. Let's turn our attention to one particular set from September 2016, which captures the Collective in full force. Recalling this performance, Jabz spoke specifically of his close-knit relationship with DJ Charisma and how this was facilitated in the radio setting:

I think it's learning the way the DJs mix and then matching it. When it's in sync it's perfect. When we were with Charisma, I know how Charisma mixes from the times we've done sets. So when he comes with an idea, I knew it was going to come [before it arrived]. It's like you match your energy with the instrumental, then you do a madness. You have to clock [work out] patterns in the way DJs mix.

An example from this performance, or set, captures Charisma and Jabz in action.

Following a 32-bar passage from Jabz over a rhythmically challenging instrumental track, Jabz starts to build, with falling lyrical figures towards an end-line rhyme. He uses a clear flow pattern to counterbalance the intensity of the musical accompaniment. This lyrical passage, when performed live, typically builds into one of Jabz's most renowned lyrics. In most instances, arrival at this lyric necessitates a 'reload', where the DJ rewinds the instrumental track and plays it from the beginning.<sup>9</sup> Here, though, Charisma holds off: wanting to see how far he can push Jabz. Jabz remains unperturbed, looping this lyrical passage instead of moving forwards. At the same instant Charisma brings in a new instrumental track. Jabz knows what is coming. Starting with calm tones, he builds with a gradual crescendo arriving at a point of convergence and climax. Here the two instrumental tracks and Jabz' vocal at the height of his powers combine exponentially to fashion a clear moment of 'hype' and the high point of the set ([Charisma 2016](#)).

This passage of collaborative interplay demonstrates how Jabz and Charisma have developed new ways to perform, with an attenuated understanding of each other, and a capacity to deal with uncertainty brought forth in the radio domain. Jabz's development of an almost modular lyric structure – where he can repurpose, develop and repeat small passages depending on circumstance – allows him flexibility to react in the moment. This

enables him to make ‘micro adjustments through active listening’ and appropriately build towards the climax (Borgo 2005: 61).

Of course, sculpting fresh ideas is magnified in new settings. This interconnectivity of the radio sphere means artists, such as Jabz, work with a vast array of DJs. Recall here, for example, Logan’s work with twenty different artists during the period of the radio study.

Ten months after Jabz’s appearance with Charisma on Mode, he performed on Rinse FM with DJ Slimzee, mentioned at this article’s outset. I asked Jabz about this set, and whether he was tentative about performing with a notable figure in the scene.

Author: Do you worry about what MCs and DJs are going to turn up or who might be there?

Jabz: Nah. I assume that I’d probably go more in if there were massive MCs and DJs there as I want to show how hype I can be. More time I just don’t care, especially since I’ve come to do my thing and gas it up [enliven] with hype on the set.

Instead of being wary, Jabz exudes confidence when we speak about the prospect of performing in new domains. He has to demonstrate aptitude both for a new array of performers, and also a different listenership. Rinse FM was afforded an FM licence in 2011, after over a decade broadcasting illegally.<sup>[10]</sup> As such, its reach is larger than his regular show on Mode FM.

This translated into the show itself, where Jabz performed alongside two other MCs with Slimzee on the decks (DJing). Ten minutes into the performance, Jabz enters over a deeply abrasive instrumental track: stripped-back square wave rumbles, a snare

drum hit with infinite decay and a high-pitched triangle. His sixteen-bar passage carries similar venom. Following this, Slimzee starts to bring in a new instrumental, while Jabz pursues an intricate multisyllabic passage. As he anticipates the ‘drop’ – or entry – of the new instrumental, Jabz calms down his delivery and lowers his tone in anticipation.

When the track arrives, Jabz then employs his signature ‘reload’ lyric. This passage combines with the irascible, brooding bass of the new production. Instead of garnering a ‘reload’, however, Slimzee holds resolute, and the track continues. Rather than falter, though, Jabz flourishes. He persists, continuing with the lyric with power and purpose. After ten bars Slimzee acknowledges Jabz’s contribution and reloads the track:

Obviously I didn’t really know their style of mixing well. I had to work bare [very] hard for that reload. It’s mad. There were certain bars that weren’t getting a reload and I thought ‘errrr’. But it wasn’t really that deep. They mix differently to Charisma and to be honest I wasn’t sure if I was going to get that reload. [...] But they’re not DJs that wheel it [reload] on a regular basis. You’ve got to transform your energy over a long period. You’re not even sure you’re going to get the wheel, especially when I heard it coming. It was a late wheel, too, so I really wasn’t expecting it at that point.

(Slimzee 2017)

When Jabz speaks about transforming his energy, he indicates a need to maintain the power and purpose of his delivery, even when a vast amount has been expended performing over the track’s ‘drop’. His ‘late wheel’ had greater effect, despite being uncertain initially. Following its enactment, Jabz reflected on how he had earned the wheel saying it was ‘more deserved’ when it finally came through.

These two contrasting examples from Jabz capture the potentialities of radio in both stable and more febrile settings. The relative regularity of his radio show with Charisma meant they could craft and perfect their performances, and in instances where



the energy was building Charisma could push Jabz to reach a higher level. Later with Slimzee, while Jabz was unfamiliar with the DJ's mixing style, the uncertainty and newness of the interaction resulted in a moment that would not otherwise have happened. The artists reached a higher plane through collaborative, and competitive, practice.

Thinking and practicing otherwise, and outside of convention, is something captured in the work of Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers. Stengers argues for a reconsideration of science as a 'constructive enterprise', and a departure from expected practice (Stengers 2010). In grime this signals a move away from re-performing previously put together routines. Since the ways in which we see the world are shaped by process and interaction, Stengers sees potential in science, through the irruptive capabilities of collaboration in scientific enquiry. Her article 'An ecology of practice' bears considerable relevance here, since it adeptly captures how groups of actors – in this case, physicists – might venture towards new frontiers outside of the domination of their own discipline. Stengers looks at how to 'actualise the power of the situation' and depart from habit towards 'new propositions' (2013: 185). The interconnectivity of pirate radio in grime, and the Black media ecology that grime functions within more widely, is such that the accumulation of momentum and ideas from multiple actors can similarly bring forth irruptive, new moments: be it through crews of MCs fashioning new lyrical units out of collaborative interplay; DJs discovering new combinations of instrumental; or the combined energy of artists who have not worked together before.

With Jabz and Slimzee, 'new propositions' were forged over the airwaves. Uncertainty over how Slimzee might perform provided excitement and heightened energy. Jabz reacted to this energy, meaning they both reached a new collaborative space,

which was only made possible in the radio environment. Furthermore, it was the very interconnectivity of the network itself that found Jabz at Rinse FM's studio, through being active across this vast array of stations. Finally, it is important to note that without this array of stations, Jabz's crew The Collective would not exist. As mentioned above, The Collective formed after coming into contact with each other at sets and shows.

Radio, then, is much more than a means of dissemination. It acts as a creative fulcrum for this tripartite system of practice within grime music. Jabz and Slimzee work as improvising practitioners, who have to perform for Rinse FM's active listenership. Its space and set-up affords collective communion, or 'collective intimacy', between the artists and listeners. This adds a sense of occasion through co-presence with the 'micro-massive', facilitating new interactions between these artists who have not worked together before and simply have to perform for the audience. These interactions are continually enhanced by the 'hype' generated through this interconnected counter hegemonic sphere of listeners, technologies and artists, which all feed back into an iterative creative process that unfolds in real-time over the airwaves.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how grime pirate radio functions both as a communicative channel, and as a site of creative practice. Grime music's very alterity pushed the form to the margins in terms of its dissemination. This oppositional practice, harnessed within the pirate radio sphere, functions as part of a Black counterpublic that works against and outside dominant structures. These liminal grounds *make space* to create and be co-present, in a city where space is policed and prevented from young working-class Black men and women.

The interconnectivity of pirate radio and its network of performers and listeners allows room for both ‘collective intimacy’, but also collective creation, since the accumulation of momentum and ideas from multiple actors can stimulate irruptive practice (Mann 2019: 393). The case study of Jabz is just one manifestation of how creative partnerships are forged on the radio circuit, with Kirby T and DJ Argue’s shows on Stardom Radio similarly offering space to harness collective creativity in a live improvisatory setting.

This article has also argued for an acknowledgement of the interaction within these Black media ecologies that function as self-sustaining ‘techno-social’ sites of creative production (Henry 2006: 151). Black British music has learned to operate at the margins: from Sound System practice’s reliance on ‘record importers and store owners, label owners, pressing sites, cutting houses and distributors’, to grime’s own array of radio stations, raves and independent labels (James 2020: 29).

Rather than envisage a monotonous relationship of brute-level mechanistic affiliation between artists and a technological network, it has explored how the technical structure of radio and this wider sphere unites actors engaged in creative work. To return to Weheliye, ‘interpersonal relations and informational technologies [in Black creative practice are] mutually constitutive rather than antithetical foils’ (2002: 38). This network provides hype and excitation through its particular communicative function with the wider ‘micro-massive’, while affording agency for artists to improvise and create.

This was shown firstly through the centrality of communing at stations for artists, and the sheer number and combinations of artists working in this network. These new combinations – shown by artists such as Logan – and regular sites for competition – such

as Kirby T and DJ Argue's shows – resulted in new creative relationships, which subsequently developed outside the radio sphere. Grime's most famous exponents, such as Dizze Rascal – who performed at the London Olympics in 2012 – and North London's Skepta started out on pirate radio.<sup>[1]</sup> It acts as a rite of passage and a space to develop as an artist. The freneticism of radio, and this scope for new creative partnership is then further enhanced by the liveness and 'co-presence' with artists, listeners and technologies alike as part of a tripartite formulation.

Grime pirate radio's interrelated media ecology therefore 'unfolds [its] own force' towards becoming an 'active, fostering milieu' with an idiosyncratic, and counter hegemonic, social diplomacy (Stengers 2013: 195). Networks of radio stations and agents (DJs, MCs, audience members) carve out new territory on a daily basis within a fractious sphere of production. This 'inner city pressure', as coined by Dan Hancox, provides urgency and intent to these creative interactions (Hancox 2018: 3). And the iterative accumulation of hype in these group improvisatory settings pushes the envelope, which in turn excites the wider performance circuit.

What this article therefore signals is an acknowledgement of pirate radio's functionality as a space for quotidian belonging and co-presence, but also for musical development and grassroots practice. These acts of 'sonic intimacy', which possess roots in sound system culture, are remapped subversively over the airwaves (James 2020: 16). Using grime pirate radio as just one example,<sup>[2]</sup> it has demonstrated the dual role of this sphere: as a vital domain for oppositional practice, and also a critical site for creative endeavour.

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## Notes

- [1]. Personal interview conducted with H. Tiga in June 2017.
- [2]. Known as 'stop-and-frisk' in the United States.



3]. There are many other examples of oppositional pirate radio practice. Zimbabwe's 'alternative media' landscape, for example, employed a 'bottom-up model that mainstreams the participation and empowerment of audiences in the communication process' throughout the rein of Robert Mugabe (Moyo 2012: 6). And more recently, Dunbar-Hester has written on how LPFM (low-power frequency modulation) stations in and around Orange County remain vital, in spite of the supposed democratization of digital media and online platforms. While delimited to a small area or neighbourhood, owing to the strength of their radio signal, they fill a void created by commercial outlets 'that prize economies of scale' at the expense of the 'public sphere needs of democratic societies' (2019: 15). If you want to know what is actually happening, LPFMs offer trusted knowledge and accountability, rather than hiding behind a homogenous, corporatized facade.

4]. I have argued elsewhere how its very alterity affords artists working within the 'informal cityscape' means to 'reclaim creative and economic agency', through providing alternative channels of income and ingenuity (de Lacey 2020: 210). Also, see Joy White's (2017) work on entrepreneurship within grime music.

5]. Some stations continued to broadcast via FM without a licence, but the specifics are not detailed here to protect stations from prosecution.

6]. Personal interview conducted with J. River in February 2018.

7]. It is important to mention here that Stardom Radio's role as an online station meant its community of listeners was broadened, rather than restricted to the reach of broadcast transmitters.

8]. Personal interview conducted with Jabz in July 2018.

[9]. Enacted by the DJ, the reload is a technique inherited from Jamaican sound system culture. The music is curtailed, and physically spun backwards by the DJ. It is then restarted from the beginning. This is typically enacted owing to the choice of instrumental track, the MC's performance, or a mixture of the two. Sometimes the audience reaction necessitates a reload as well. For more information, see Hancox (2018: 64–68).

[10]. 'Ofcom | Community radio stations', <http://static.ofcom.org.uk/static/radiolicensing/html/radio-stations/community/cr000225ba2rinsefm.htm>. Accessed 15 January 2019.

[11]. Skepta was initially a DJ on North London radio station Heat FM (see de Lacey 2020: 208).

[12]. Further insight could be obtained through exploring UK garage or other correlate forms, such as UK funky.

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