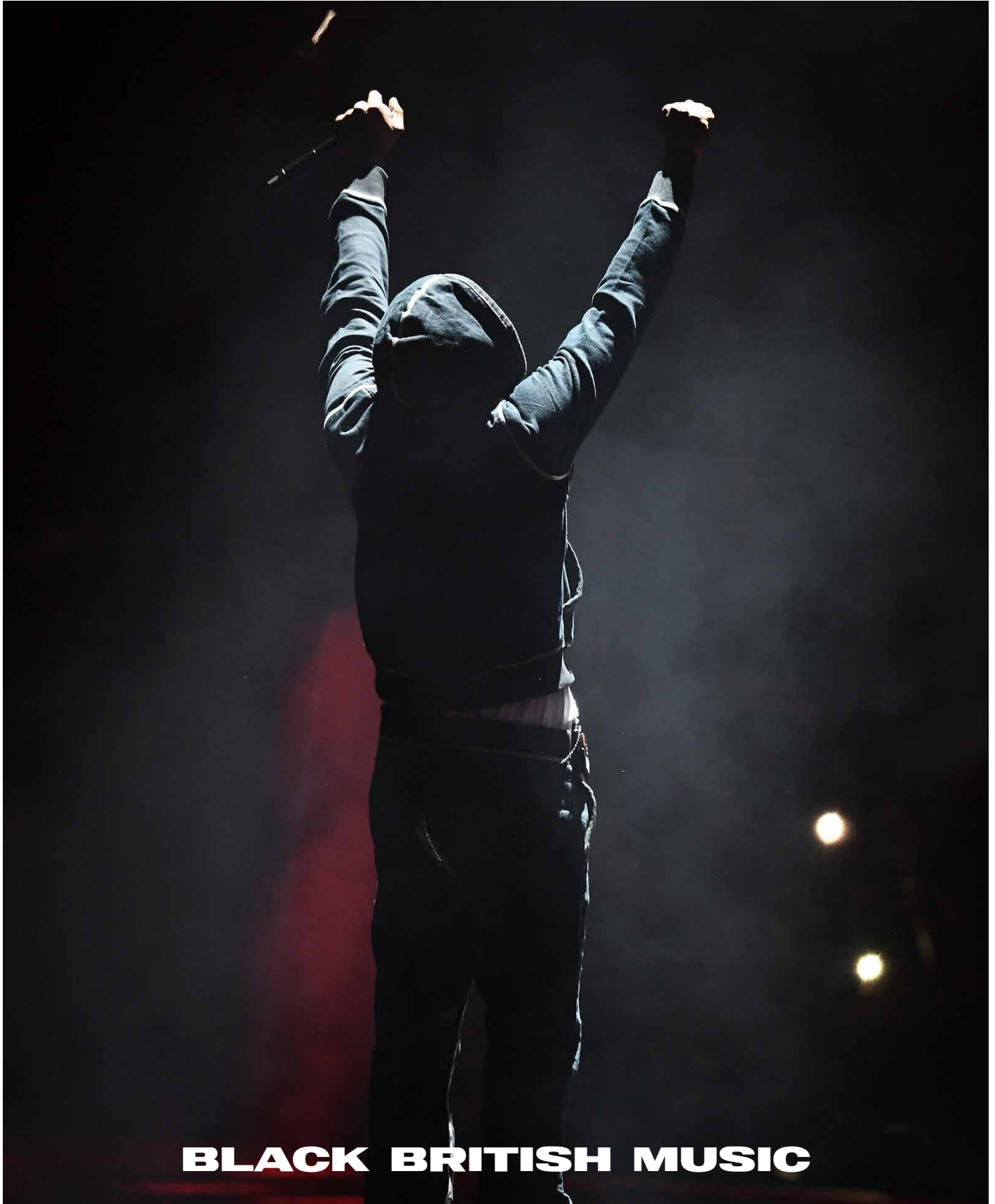


# LUSTRUM

Winter 2025

The Last Five Years



**BLACK BRITISH MUSIC**

Skeptax  
Alexandra Palace(2016)

## LUSTRUM

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In this edition, we turn our attention to the artists, scenes and stories that have defined the last half-decade of Black British music. From the rise of introspective rap to the resurgence of soul and R&B, from the imprint of the grime era to the groundbreaking work of women leading the scene forward, this issue captures the creativity, innovation and cultural force shaping the UK sound today. Across features, showcases and reflections, we highlight the voices pushing boundaries,

challenging expectations and redefining what British music looks and feels like. This is not just a celebration of success — it is a recognition of influence, resilience and the artistic power that continues to transform the nation's cultural identity.

Welcome to Lustrum: Black British Music — a snapshot of a remarkable five-year chapter, and a testament to the artists rewriting the future.



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Sound System Setup  
Notting Hill  
Carnival(2006)

## NOTTING HILL CARNIVAL

Notting Hill Carnival is a living archive of Black British music and culture. Each August, the streets of West London become a space where sound, identity and history come together, rooted in the Caribbean diaspora. Emerging in the late 1950s as a response to racial tension, Carnival used music as resistance and celebration. Early calypso and steel pan evolved into reggae and dub through Jamaican sound system culture, transforming the streets into spaces of bass-driven expression and community ownership. As Black British music developed, Carnival

reflected its changes. Lovers rock, jungle, drum and bass and grime all trace influence back to Carnival's sound systems, where MC culture and DIY creativity thrived outside the mainstream.

Today, afrobeats, dancehall, drill and amapiano sit alongside legacy sounds, showing how Black British music remains fluid and forward-looking. More than an annual event, Notting Hill Carnival continues to shape Black British music — one sound system at a time.





# BLACK BRITISH MUSIC

The last five years have marked a defining era for Black British music — a period where the creativity, storytelling and influence of Black artists have not only shaped the UK sound, but redefined what British music represents on a global scale. What was once underground or niche has become central to the country's cultural identity. Across rap, grime, drill, R&B, soul, jazz fusion and alternative genres, Black British musicians have led with innovation, honesty and a commitment to telling their truths.

This era has been characterised by artistic depth and versatility. UK rap has evolved into a space where intimate, reflective storytelling sits comfortably alongside commercial success, thanks to artists like Dave, Little Simz, J Hus and Knucks. Meanwhile, the rise of alternative R&B and neo-soul — championed by voices like Cleo Sol, Jorja Smith, Mahalia and RAYE — has reintroduced softness and emotional nuance into the mainstream. Even jazz, a genre once outside modern youth culture, has been revitalised by boundary-pushing artists such as Ezra Collective and Nubya Garcia, blending diaspora rhythms with contemporary British expression.

What makes this period remarkable is not just the diversity of sound, but the confidence behind it. Black British artists are creating without compromise, moving past the industry's old expectations and building their own lanes. Their work carries cultural weight — reflecting identity, community and lived experience — while also driving global trends, collaborations and conversations. From chart success to critical acclaim, their impact is undeniable.

These last five years have been more than a wave of success; they have been a cultural shift. Black British music isn't a movement on the margins anymore — it sits firmly at the centre of the UK's artistic identity, shaping the present and setting the tone for the future.

Red Bull Culture Clas  
(2016)





Jorja Smith  
A Colors Show(2018)

## BLACK BRITISH WOMEN

Over the last five years, Black British women have become some of the most important voices in UK music — not simply participating in the scene, but reshaping it. Their work spans rap, R&B, soul, alternative, pop and experimental sounds, yet what unites them is a refusal to compromise their identity, creativity or message. Instead of bending to the industry, they are redefining it.

Little Simz stands at the forefront of this shift. Her albums *Grey Area* and *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* didn't just raise the bar for British rap — they dismantled it, rebuilding expectations of what a rapper can express. Simz pairs vulnerability with razor precision, proving that thoughtful, layered artistry can sit comfortably beside mainstream success. Her work has opened doors for women in a genre long dominated by male voices, showing that excellence doesn't require replication — it comes from authenticity.

In the world of soul and alternative R&B, Cleo Sol has taken on a near-mythic status. Her warm, introspective sound has become a touchstone for a new generation drawn to softness and emotional depth. Artists like Jorja Smith and Mahalia have also helped re-centre British R&B on global stages, each bringing a unique perspective — Jorja with her smoky, genre-blending melancholy, and Mahalia with her diaristic writing and sharp vocal clarity.

Meanwhile, rising artists are pushing boundaries in their own ways. RAYE's evolution from overlooked pop act to chart-topping independent artist has sparked conversations about artistic ownership and industry reform. Bellah, Cat Burns and Debbie have injected nuance and storytelling back into R&B, while FLO have revived the girl-group blueprint with vocal excellence and nostalgic precision.

Together, these women are not just making great music — they are broadening what Black British artistry can look and sound like. They are rewriting narratives around femininity, confidence, introspection and success. Their presence signals a cultural shift: audiences, labels and the wider industry are being forced to recognise that Black women are no longer an afterthought in British music — they are its innovators, leaders and visionaries.

The momentum is only increasing. If the last five years have been a breakthrough, the next five will be a takeover.

**"WOMAN TO WOMAN  
I JUST WANT  
SEE YOU GO"**





Little Simz  
No Thank You Album  
Cover(2022)

OMAN,  
INA  
LOW."

## LITTLE SIMZ

Little Simz has become one of the most influential artists in modern Black British music, known for her sharp lyricism, emotional honesty and cinematic sound. Her breakthrough *Grey Area* showcased her ability to balance vulnerability with confidence, while *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert* earned her a Mercury Prize and confirmed her as a creative force. Simz's work explores identity, independence and personal growth, all delivered with a clarity that has redefined what British rap can look and feel like. With projects like *NO THANK YOU*, she continues to lead through authenticity, setting a new standard for artistic control and innovation.





Knucks  
Wonderland(2021)



## **KNUCKS**

Over the last five years, Knucks has carved out one of the most distinctive and accomplished lanes in contemporary Black British music. Where many artists chase trends, Knucks builds worlds — effortlessly merging jazz textures, intricate storytelling, and soulful UK rap into a sound that feels both nostalgic and futuristic.

**"THE JOURNEY MADE ME  
SHARPER THAN ANY  
DIAMOND I WEAR"**

Since his breakout moment with *Home* and the evolution into the critically acclaimed *Alpha Place*, Knucks has become one of the UK's most quietly influential rappers. His music sits somewhere between intimate confessional and cinematic street diary, offering a perspective rooted in lived experience but elevated by craft, control and an unmistakable sonic identity.

Rather than relying on brashness or spectacle, Knucks has refined a mood — midnight-blue, introspective, and carefully layered. His production background gives his albums a cohesive, auteur-like quality: every track feels considered, every sample meaningful, every bar threaded with intention.

Knucks' success over the last half-decade lies in his ability to grow without compromise. His rise has been steady rather than explosive, but that's the point — he's an artist building longevity, not hype. A quiet leader in the post-grime, post-trap landscape, Knucks represents a generation of artists who are reshaping UK rap into something both deeply personal and sonically luxurious.



Wiley & Dizze  
Bow(2002)

## PIONEERS

Dizze Rascal and Wiley stand at the core of grime's origin story. Dizze, with his jittery flows and explosive energy, captured the adrenaline of East London youth culture in a way no one had before. *Boy in da Corner* became the genre's defining masterpiece — a sharp, experimental and emotionally raw portrait of growing up on the margins.

Wiley, often called the "Godfather of Grime," laid the sonic foundations through his Eskibeat productions, shaping the cold, minimal, futuristic sound that became the genre's signature.

Together, they represented grime's dual spirit: Dizze as its bold, boundary-pushing storyteller, and Wiley as its architect and engineer, constantly innovating and elevating the underground. Their influence continues to echo across the scene, long after the movement first erupted.





# THE GRIME ERA

The grime era stands as one of the most defining chapters in modern Black British music. Emerging in early-2000s East London, grime fused the raw energy of garage, the urgency of jungle and the storytelling of UK rap into a sound that was completely new — fast, cold, uncompromising and unmistakably British. Built around 140 BPM beats, pirate radio clashes and DIY creativity, grime became the authentic voice of working-class Black youth across the UK.

Pioneers like Dizzee Rascal, Wiley, Kano and Skepta shaped the movement's foundations. Dizzee's *Boy in da Corner* captured the chaos, brilliance and vulnerability of inner-city life, while Wiley's *Eskibeat* productions defined the genre's icy DNA. Kano brought technical mastery and maturity, and Skepta pushed the sound from underground sets to global recognition. Collectives such as Roll Deep, Ruff Sqwad and N.A.S.T.Y Crew sharpened the culture through clashes, sets and relentless underground momentum.

The grime era was more than music — it was a movement born from limited resources, creative resilience and cultural pride. It changed how Britain sounded, how it looked and how it saw itself. And while the genre has evolved into post-grime, drill and alternative rap, its blueprint remains the backbone of the UK sound. Grime didn't just shape a generation — it transformed British culture

Skepta  
Shutdown(2015)



**"FROM PIRATE RADIO  
TO THE WORLD STAGE -  
WE MADE SOMETHING  
FROM NOTHING."**

