

Great Britain: Nadia on... Rap

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Regular columnist and Labour MP for Nottingham East Nadia Whittome discusses rap...

How was your last year's Spotify Wrapped? Mine, I must admit, was dominated by the *Barbie* movie soundtrack. Wings and Depeche Mode also featured, thanks to my Forest match day playlist. But, like most years, my most listened to genre was rap: whether that's legends like Roots Manuva, younger favourites like Central Cee and Nadia Rose or Nottingham's own rising star JayaHadADream.

In 2023, rap celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Starting out as an underground movement, it has since become one of the world's biggest-selling music genres, and I'm glad to see it increasingly recognised as an artform. Rappers are headlining festivals, winning prestigious awards, inspiring fashion trends and influencing the language we use in ways we may not even realise. Nottingham's music scene would be unrecognisable without its Hip-Hop icons: from MC Spyda and Jah Diggah to newer artists such as Young T & Bugsy, Window Kid and Bru-C and DJs like Darkzy and Daseplate.

But despite being such a huge part of our culture, rap often gets a bad rep. It can still be viewed with suspicion, and associated with gangs, drugs and violence. These negative stereotypes not only put people off discovering great artists. They can be dangerous - especially when the criminal justice system is involved.

Imagine you're wrongly accused of a crime, and as "evidence", the police play a song you wrote as a teen. This is not just a hypothetical scenario - it's one that's increasingly been playing out in courtrooms across the country. In the last three years, at least 240 defendants in the UK had rap lyrics or videos used against them. The vast majority have been young Black men or teenage boys. In many cases, the songs presented as evidence didn't even mention the crime in question. Unrelated lyrics, sometimes written years earlier, have been used as proof of bad character and a disposition towards lawbreaking.

The [Art Not Evidence campaign](#), which I'm proud to be a part of, was set up to challenge this trend. Launched in November, it aims to restrict the indiscriminate use of rap lyrics and videos in court. It has attracted support from lawyers and academics, anti-racist campaigners, a growing number of MPs and figures from across the music industry.

Art has always been used to tell stories which we know not to take at face value. We don't accuse James Bond fans of being spies, or authors of murder mysteries of having committed murders themselves. Similarly, references to crime and gang culture in rap songs are not evidence of wrongdoing. Song lyrics can be a form of social commentary, a metaphor, a fantasy, or an attempt to push boundaries and cause controversy, but none of this makes them an admission of guilt.

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It's no coincidence that specifically rap is targeted in such a way, even though so many other artists, from The Killers to Taylor Swift, have referenced crime in their songs. It is, after all, a genre associated with young Black men. The misuse of rap in court relies on the same racist stereotypes that lead to Black people being disproportionately likely to be stopped and searched, or to be wrongly labelled as gang members.

Black forms of creative expression have long been viewed with suspicion, stigmatised and suppressed. A century ago, the rightwing press would publish articles demonising jazz as immoral, and councils attempted to shut down jazz balls. In the 1970s and eighties, the infamous "sus laws" - allowing the police to arbitrarily arrest people on suspicion of committing a crime - were often used to target young Black people associated with the reggae scene.

Until recently, the controversial "Form 696" risk assessment created by the Met police asked venues to provide information about the genre of music they play and the ethnicity of the clients it attracts. Many Black artists ended up having their gigs cancelled, which led to allegations of discrimination. Following campaigns, the form was amended and, in 2017, scrapped altogether. However, concerns about the disproportionate policing of Black musicians and their fans remain, of which the use of rap in court is just one example.

The misuse of songs by the police and prosecutors not only stifles freedom of expression, but also risks miscarriages of justice. That's why this year, working with Art not Evidence, I'm hoping to present a bill in Parliament that will seek to regulate the use of music in court cases - raising the threshold of admissibility to ensure that it's only considered when it's relevant and justified, and not indiscriminately.

Not only does making music not make one a criminal. By providing young people with a sense of hope, purpose and community, it can play a part in preventing youth crime. I've long been a huge fan of the Community Recording Studio in St Ann's, which has helped so many young artists from disadvantaged backgrounds develop their talents, find new ways of expressing themselves and launch music careers. Having a creative outlet can transform lives.

Whether it's stadium-filling hits or rhymes scribbled for fun on your phone's notes app, rap is a form of art. It deserves to be celebrated - not criminalised.

Nadia Whittome

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