“The night our eyes changed”

Five musical responses to the Grenfell Tower inferno

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The June 14 inferno at Grenfell Tower has had a profound political impact. The death of at least 80 people was a cruel exposure of the reality of social relations between the classes and has laid the basis for developing a socialist political orientation among broad masses of workers and youth.

The tragedy has already triggered an artistic response from musicians. Music mogul Simon Cowell brought together a number of high-profile figures for a cover of Simon and Garfunkel’s *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, but a far more powerful and politically interesting response has come from local artists on the urban music scene.

Where Cowell’s record was an attempt to soothe and calm, the reaction of local performers has been marked by anger and an insistence on justice and naming the guilty parties. They express the need for the victims of capitalism to speak with their own voice. These tracks sometimes make for difficult listening, but indicate a growing politicisation of the grime scene.

Grime is an eclectic and innovative form of rap music, described by one commentator as “an amalgamation of UK garage with a bit of drum & bass, a splash of punk,” that has firmly established itself on the British urban music scene. Its descriptions of urban life have not always got beyond the gritty and everyday, but this gives it the potential to comment directly on immediate events and makes it well placed to make more directly political comment. Indeed it is no accident that the strongest part of Cowell’s charity single was the introductory verse by grime artist Stormzy.

Lowkey’s *Ghosts of Grenfell* is the most accomplished of the tracks to date. Like the other performers, Lowkey watched the horror unfolding on what he describes here as “The night our eyes changed.” He recounts the events he saw, the accounts of survivors and he names the victims.

There is a fine poetry in Lowkey’s words, his testament to those killed in “Rooms where both the extraordinary and the mundane were lived.” “Now it’s flowers for the dead and printing posters for the missing” is a powerful line.

Like the other tracks, *Ghosts* demands a community response, with Mia Khalil singing a chorus “Did they die or us? Did they die for us?” It identifies the forces behind the blaze, declaiming, “Oh you political class, so servile to corporate power”, and confronts them directly with their victims. At the end of the video survivors and locals hold up “Missing” posters under the Westway. They name the victims, asking the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council directly where they are, before warning, “The blood is on your hands … Like a phoenix we will rise.”

It is a heart-wrenching moment—difficult to watch because of the tragedy it conveys so well, but also an inspiring call for defiance.

Lowkey is an articulate performer with a history of political activity. Long involved with the Stop the War Coalition and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, he endorsed Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn at the recent General Election.

Other local artists have also supported Corbyn. In an interview with the *Guardian*, grime artist AJ Tracey said his endorsement was based on the question of council housing. Others have identified with his empathy. As Shocka put it in his *Grenfell Tribute*, “He’s white, I’m black, Colour don’t change jack,

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Whenever something happens he's there that's a fact."

That is in line with the basic human empathy expressed by all of the artists to the fire.

However, these artists are also responding to something that is not within Corbyn's political scope or intention. There is a growing recognition that the situation facing working people and youth is worsening, demanding different, revolutionary responses. Shocka is explicit on this: drawing attention to sickle cell sufferers and mental health patients, he says, "Life's getting tough for us, but you've got to keep fighting," and later, "Even though there's so much problems in the world, it's kind of funny that the problems got us all uniting," before stating quite bluntly that the smell of "revolution's in the air, you just gotta take a whiff."

In part this is because of the failure of all of the political forces "so servile to corporate power," in Lowkey's words. In the *Guardian* interview, AJ Tracey's brother, Mickey, noted that there had been "no central government response, no local government response" to Grenfell Tower. While both brothers advised against rioting as an expression of anger (because it allows the ruling class simply to disregard its causes), they recognised its root in a frustration caused by peaceful protests being ignored or dismissed.

This brings out explicitly the question of class forces. Flow's *Grenfell Tower Tribute (Raise Your Head)* opens with a rejection of talking about the authorities, addressing itself explicitly to the victims, "not the government." Again, the social realities of class difference are recognised ("If the government starts thinking 'bout the money less, maybe we'll wonder how to identify bodies less.") The song's call that this must not happen again prompts the urgent demand that "We need changes."

The recognition of class differences and working class community cohesion is common to many of the tracks. *Grenfell Tower Tribute* by Big Zuu, one of AJ Tracey's collaborators, points to the rich sitting uncomprehending while the poor are struggling with the realities of daily life, and says "No wonder why there's people there displaying rage." Again, he draws a sharp distinction between "Community, the people power" and government: "this city's ours."

The song closes by insisting that the people died because they were poor in one of the richest cities in the world.

Probably the angriest response so far is *Grenfell Tower's Burnin* by El Nino and Cx4.

Its video opens with a banner declaring, "The Royal Murderers of Kensington and Chelsea."

Masked, as ever, they appeal to their local street community for determination and defiance: "LA/LBG [Latimer/Ladbroke Grove], we ain't ever gonna back down." But the appeal is confined to the immediate community ("Love my hood to the death. RIP to the rest.") Nevertheless it does draw the line between victims and perpetrators.

El Nino describes the song as "the UK's first conscious drill tune." Like the other artists they recognise the widening gulf of inequality ("the poor getting poor while the rich getting richer"), the policies of social cleansing on behalf of the ruling elite ("Government want us out, 'cos they wanna make way for the rich"), the council's corrupt implementation of that policy through housing lists, the media's role in covering up such manoeuvres, and the devastatingly vicious character of such a programme—"So many lives, so many little kids, Can't imagine what they had to go through."

These songs should be made known to as broad an audience as possible.

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