

Interview with rapper El Nino about “Grenfell Tower’s Burning”: “We had to watch that, so why shouldn’t they have to listen to us?”

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Following our recent review of some locally produced grime tracks about the Grenfell Tower fire the *World Socialist Website* spoke to one of the artists, El Nino. Our telephone conversation revealed in a small way how the horrors of Grenfell Tower have had an effect on certain witnesses and their art.

I noted in the original review that *Grenfell Tower’s Burnin’* was the angriest of the tracks put out by artists from the area to date. The artist’s press release described the track as a “furious response” by eyewitnesses to the tragedy. This remains its greatest strength, and our discussion touched on this.

This anger is not merely an individual response, and El Nino explained that he also aimed to bring people together around the track. The song was written “like an anthem,” with the aim that people could join in and share it: “The chorus is all there, so everyone can get shouting.”

This led to him being initially concerned that the video had appeared beneath a screenshot of a banner reading “Royal Murderers of Kensington and Chelsea.” That, he said, was only “one part of the message” of the track.

It may be only one part of the track’s message, I said, but it is an important one. He and Cx4 had performed the song in front of that banner at a protest on the steps of the town hall, which was a very powerful message. I asked if people had joined in the chorus then.

“It’s all in the video. Everything you see on the video, with the protest, is real and can’t be faked.” To my comment that the track focused popular anger, he insisted, “No one else is going to bring out a tune like

that.”

For him the track is about bringing the community together around that anger, as “something that people want to stand up for... with a lot of meaning to it.”

Our conversation returned repeatedly to the distinction between the victims and the perpetrators, and their different class outlooks. Bringing the community together in the track was driven by the realisation that “Us as people, if we stand together, we can become stronger than the government, *who’s at fault*.”

Like other local residents, El Nino has seen how the survivors have been treated by the local authorities since the fire, for example, by making survivors bid against one another for properties:

“The survivors were there, and they had no support from the council or anyone. If it weren’t for the community, they would have just been left on the street like homeless people. So imagine if it happened to me, or to my family, after having to watch it happen.”

He is aware that there are limitations to an artistic response (“There’s only so much you can do”), but the song is “to bring people together and stand up for something they believe in.”

“The song’s not just about Grenfell Tower. It’s about what’s going on in the world. The rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer [a point made by Cx4 in the track]. Those type of people are from different backgrounds, they’re never going to understand. The person who’s in charge [Elizabeth Campbell, new head of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea], she’s never even been in a tower block! Completely

different backgrounds!”

“We know that with a charge of corporate manslaughter, no one really goes to jail. But had that been any one of us, ordinary people who aren’t earning loads of money—where would we be?”

The track is also “expressing the anger” that complaints and warnings from Grenfell residents were ignored for so long: “These people warned you before it happened and *you just ignored them*.”

El Nino watched the Tower burn from his window. He is uncompromising about confronting those responsible with the effects of that night. “It wasn’t soft for us to watch, so why should it be soft for them? We had to watch that, so why shouldn’t they have to listen to us? You need to empathise, and actually have feelings towards what’s going on, but they don’t.”

El Nino’s understanding that these are not uniquely local problems is significant. He was interested to hear the responses internationally to our meetings and discussions on Grenfell. He was also aware of a “very positive” response to the track from a wider audience. This may be due to the subject matter, which is strikingly different to El Nino’s usual material.

By his own admission he was “not a conscious rapper.” He is still coming to terms with that shift, commercially as well as artistically. He told me that for the first time he has started to find music platforms that will not take his track.

His description of this as the first “conscious drill tune” is a recognition of a change, and he acknowledges that it is setting him new challenges artistically. “For me, it’s just made me a bit aware about the things I say, my music. That was my first conscious tune over a drill track. I’m going to try and make something else like that, but it depends on the topic. It’s kind of hard to talk like that over that genre of music.”

This is a difficult fix for an artist who has made such a leap. He faces the challenge of “What do I do next? Do I change it up a bit? Make it into what *you* like?”

He is aware that he can reach “all different types of people if they’re going through the same situation as the majority of people in London, or wherever.” It reflects the possibilities within grime, but the strength of this track lies in its lack of calculation of target audiences and its honesty about reality. That such questions are coming up is an indication of the

beginnings of a shift in consciousness.



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