The anniversary of Grenfell Tower: Some musical reappraisals

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The first anniversary of the June 14, 2017, fire at Grenfell Tower that killed 72 people inspired reflection on the events of that night and the callous response of the ruling elite.

More than 13 months later, not one person responsible has been charged or even arrested. The ongoing official inquiry has repeatedly tried to shift the onus of responsibility onto those who tried to tackle the blaze.

Local musicians who responded at the time, and have been following events since, have also had to make their own appraisals.

Local grime and drill artists responded powerfully. This urban dance music intersected with political realities: their tracks gave a voice to capitalism's victims, but they also began drawing lessons, naming the perpetrators and identifying class forces.

Some of those artists have also responded to the anniversary, revealing much about what has happened in the meanwhile.

The rawness has not diminished. One of the most emotional anniversary releases, *Fire in Grenfell*, was written three days after the fire by 13-year-old Yousra Cherbika and Johara Menacer as a tribute to their friends, Firdaws Hashim and Nur Huda El-Wahabi, who died. It was written to Emeli Sande and Professor Green's *Read All About It*, which Firdaws had sung in a school talent show.

Sande and Green allowed use of their track, reflecting broader artistic sympathy. London-born singer Adele has been supportive locally and publicly.

Yousra's family, who lived at the foot of Grenfell Tower, were temporarily relocated after the fire into hotel accommodation. A year later, they are still there, along with the many other Grenfell families still in temporary accommodation.

Like the other songs written immediately after the fire, *Fire in Grenfell* is a demand to hear the voices of the victims. "I heard them scream and I heard them shout/I watched Grenfell Tower burn down/So put it in all of the papers/Even though we're in pain." While media attention focused on the singers' age and the fire's impact on children, Yousra and Johara were also aware of bigger political issues: "I wish that you were still here/Why did you have to die?/Why did they care about money/Before my best friend's life?" They were unsparing in their insistence that "They killed innocent people they're the ones to take the blame."

Yousra and Johara have said releasing the track helped "because our voices were heard," but there is a wide recognition that this is not enough in itself.

Singer-songwriter Carl Leroy, from Enfield, and local resident Liliana Martins wrote *Grenfell (We Won't Fall)* as a fundraiser. Its smooth tone perhaps reflects the hope they drew from their experiences with local community relief efforts—after the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council (RBKC) and government did nothing to assist in the immediate aftermath—but there is undisguised anger at its heart:

"Was their destiny
Life lost to austerity
Anger rages are we free
When greed overshadows responsibility
Whispers they send shivers
Who took the heat? It wasn't me.
System's bad decisions
Cover blown
All can see."

In an interview, Leroy asked "One year on…who's gone to prison?" Martins wondered, "What justice is going to be there?," saying the song asked whether we are free to find out the truth. The refusal of the ruling elite to pursue the real guilty parties contrasts starkly with their campaigns against anyone trying to establish the truth about the events.

The community, they say, must be able to "stand tall": they have been ignored, but the cover is blown of those who did not listen. This is not unimportant but is something of a rear-guard action given official heel-dragging over the last year.

The two strongest anniversary recordings are from artists whose tracks were, in my opinion, the outstanding contributions last year. Both have reflected on what has not happened since their earlier recordings.

Like last year, the angriest response is from grime artist El Nino Cartel, collaborating this time with Atlas X on *Manslaughter, Gentrification*.

El Nino Cartel told the World Socialist Web Site about his previous track, *Grenfell Tower's Burning*, "It's about what's going on in the world. The rich getting richer, the poor getting poorer"

If anything, that fury has intensified. Atlas X dedicates the track to Yasin El-Wahabi, who died on the 21st floor, before the mounting tension erupts, tellingly, with the words "Still waiting. …" Atlas has forgotten nothing here: "Still waiting/Manslaughter gentrification/Ten mil[lion] for the regeneration/No sprinklers there for the renovation."

Atlas connects deaths in police custody with the eradication of

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London's working-class districts by gentrification. He repeatedly opposes "Our truth against the cowards' words."

This recognition of class differences is vital, but its implications have barely begun to be explored. Atlas (who also made the documentary *Five Days of Grenfell*) says, "We need leaders here not artists": this is a resistance to the arrival of middle class artists with gentrification, but inadvertently does a disservice to those local working class youth who are attempting to explore artistic questions—among them Atlas X and El Nino Cartel themselves.

El Nino Cartel's contribution is more subdued than *Grenfell Tower's Burning*, but he is just as direct in attributing the destruction to financial interests ("So many victims now, just for a couple of pounds"). He remains clear on the class distinctions ("I don't care about none of them, they don't care about none of us"), but is evidently still dealing with the horror of what he saw: "I swear my heart is scarred."

The video ends with silence for the victims, and for "those who continue to be failed by the safety net" funded by their taxes. This struggle to get to grips with the situation should be encouraged.

Last year, El Nino discussed the impact of the fire on him as an artist, forcing a level of consciousness on him. It is to his credit that he remains aware of this, even if he is struggling to work out what to say. Between the Grenfell tracks, he also produced *Secrets and Conspiracies*. Described by El Nino as "conscious rap," it moves from a sample of Martin Luther King to considering the gulf between the elite and the working class internationally. As he says, "There's all the money in world, there's still poverty," with the track hinging on a call for working class unity against an elite operating solely in its own interests:

"All my black people around the world/All my white people around the world/Need to come together and show the elite." El Nino returns again to the gulf between those who suffered at Grenfell and those trying to cover up their role in the social murder:

"Grenfell people lost their homes and families/I'm wondering what the government's doing about that/I bet they're round there trying to clean up their tracks/But there's so many people out there with no flats."

Lowkey's anniversary track, *Ghosts of Grenfell 2*, featuring Kaia, updating last year's track, offers the most articulately thoughtful appraisal of a situation that went from "Black snow on a summer's night" to "Cold shoulders on a summer's day," when "Invisible violence becomes visible."

Lowkey also begins by observing that after a year there have been no arrests: "Been waiting 12 months for answers and we can't have 'em." Although confident in the community, he fears "a whitewash is the endgame." The song is moving in dealing with a political anger even while managing the complex trauma of having lived through the fire, of going from a national sympathy to some hard questions about responsibility.

Lowkey describes the blaze as a "the most tragic of vindications" of the Grenfell Action Group's repeated warnings and demands an end to "big business fiddling regulations." There has been a "corporate hijack of regulations" and their erosion to the point where buildings are "combustible and still legal." Across the country, people are "sleeping in death traps."

Lowkey is definitely calling for continued agitation. Last summer, media mogul Simon Cowell organised a charity cover of *Bridge over Troubled Water*. We noted at the time that it was "an attempt to soothe and calm." Lowkey says sardonically, "No disrespect intended, *Troubled Water* wasn't our anthem," and praises grime artist Stormzy, who made the best contribution to Cowell's single and who has repeatedly attacked the government publicly over Grenfell.

Lowkey is clear that the fire was political ("Neo-liberalism kills people"). He resolutely points the finger, highlighting the relationship between Mark Allen (of Saint-Gobain, the company that owns cladding manufacturer Celotex) and Sajid Javid, now Tory home secretary and formerly the minister responsible for dismantling building regulations.

The video ends with powerful shots of survivors and local residents holding banners demanding answers from the companies responsible for manufacturing and overseeing the fitting of the tower's flammable cladding (Rydon, Celotex, Arconic), from RBKC and their Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation—responsible for authorising the cladding—and the now-privatised Building Research Establishment, whose tests reported the cladding safe to use.

This is positive, but Lowkey also notes the relentless pressure of being treated like idiots by officialdom and the "slow creep of bureaucratic violence." People despair and break down, and the political mountain "seems insurmountable."

Lowkey perhaps provides the clearest insight into the challenges being faced. "They say that after every storm there is a dawn" may be more aspiration than programme as yet, but it does raise the question of how to achieve it.

The conditions that led to the Grenfell fire are known, that knowledge has not vanished, and the official response—from the police investigation to the government inquiry—is to prevent at all costs these issues being addressed. The anger remains palpable. The question remains of how to bring that anger to bear so as to change those conditions. That is a question of political programme.

The Grenfell Fire Forum, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, will be discussing these issues and those around the Whitstable and Grenfell fires at its next meeting on Saturday, July 28, at the Maxilla Social Club in North Kensington, London. All are welcome to attend.

Grenfell Fire Forum meeting
Saturday, July 28, 4 p.m.
Maxilla Social Club, 2 Maxilla Walk
London, W10 6SW (nearest tube: Latimer Road)
For further details visit facebook.com/Grenfellforum

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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