

Petition against UK “drill” music ban defends freedom of speech

Paul Bond
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Rap artists Krept and Konan have launched an online petition against the banning of “drill” music. The petition protests the suspended prison sentence imposed this year on drill artists Skengdo and AM for performing a song in concert.

In a preamble to their petition, Krept and Konan explain the far-reaching implications of Skengdo and AM’s conviction: “According to Index on Censorship, this is the first time in British legal history that a prison sentence has been issued for performing a song but it is the start of what we think will be a clampdown on free speech for rappers... Nobody in a free society should be imprisoned for words.”

The past 12 months have seen increased efforts to criminalise and suppress drill music. Drill videos have been taken down by YouTube under instruction from the London Metropolitan Police. The rationale given for this act of censorship was that the music videos encourage violent behaviour.

Krept and Konan’s petition points to the moral bankruptcy of state attempts to blame drill music for violence and crime:

“Young people don’t get into serious crime lightly. They do so because of serious social problems.

“Banning Drill or any type of art is problematic for a number of reasons. It deprives already disenfranchised young people of a voice, it reflects moral cowardice for failing to look straight-on at the reality of marginalised groups on inner-city estates, and it won’t tackle issues caused by poverty, racism, and classism.”

In the past two weeks, the petition has won more than 3,000 signatures. Hundreds have left messages of support. Louise Burton wrote, “Removing access to making music, criminalising creativity, blaming the victims of social injustice—all are an affront to democracy & freedom of expression.”

Mani Jackson wrote, “I’m signing because drill music reflects the reality of the community. Banning drill will not change this reality,” while Maurice asked, “What about ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’? The Government was allowing songs of violence years ago and the church to encourage killing. Freedom of expression through music should not be censored.”

Drill emerged as a subgenre of rap earlier this decade in Chicago. It is built around monotone beats and is distinguished by its lyrics. It was embraced by rappers on British council estates who face similar conditions. While much drill music takes a backward form, it is a product of growing social distress. As Brixton producer Carn Hills explained in 2017: “It’s rough, rugged, quite violent... but that’s because there is a lot of violence in the world... drill is more about issues and troubles. The hardships of growing up.”

Drill’s attention to the everyday has often focused on local gang culture, but grime and drill artists led the way in responding to the Grenfell Tower fire, for example. One of the strongest tracks to emerge in the immediate aftermath of the blaze was described by its creator, El Nino, as the first “conscious drill tune.”

Police focus on drill increased last year when 17-year-old rapper Junior Simpson, known as M-Trap, was sentenced to life for his part in the stabbing death of 15-year-old Jermaine Goupall. In May 2018, South Londoner Rhyhiem Barton, a member of the drill crew Moscow17, was killed in a drive-by shooting. Police seized on his killing to justify banning videos. Another member of Moscow17, Saddique Kamara, was stabbed to death months later.

Like other crews, Moscow17 regularly played up local rivalries with provocative tracks challenging neighbouring groups. Among them were the Brixton-based crew 410, who produced “Attempted 1.0,”

taunting rivals by name and describing graphic violence.

No one, not even the police, has suggested the members of 410 were involved in the deaths of the rival crew members. But the Metropolitan Police classified 410 as a gang anyway, stating that their activities, “including but not limited to the production of drill music videos... have amounted to gang-related violence.”

Under the police injunction, certain members of 410, including Skengdo, AM, TS and Blackz, who all produced “Attempted 1.0,” are barred until January 2021 from entering SE11, the postcode 10 minutes’ walk from their homes. The police tried to have them barred from entering SE1, which covers the South Bank area, but this was rejected by the judge.

Skengdo and AM are also prohibited from performing or broadcasting songs mentioning rival crews, individual rappers from those crews, or any “intrusions on to any other gang or group’s perceived territory.”

In December, Skengdo and AM concluded a national tour with a sold-out gig in North London. There they performed “Attempted 1.0.” The police argued that this performance, and the circulation of clips of the gig on social media, “incited and encouraged violence against rival gang members,” in breach of the injunction.

As AM later explained in an interview with the *Guardian*, the song was “already out, and it’s a tour—people are expecting it.” The police, however, were able to secure a nine-month suspended sentence for breach of the injunction. AM said, “We don’t have a lot of power, ultimately,” and “the authorities have taken advantage of that. They have imposed something that will give us a criminal record for just making music.”

The rappers could not afford to contest the injunction or the breach, so they had “to choose between our careers and freedom.” They pleaded guilty in order to try to “move on with making music.”

Konan has written that he was able to break out of a life of violence and crime thanks to music. Last year’s decision by the Crown Prosecution Service to use the Serious Crime Act to prosecute drill artists stripped away that possibility. The petition notes angrily that rappers can now be treated “in the same way [as] traffickers and terrorists,” It explained, “... the police no

longer have to prove any link between a song or an artist and a specific act of violence to secure a conviction of ‘inciting violence’.”

Konan has described the ban as “just another version of stop and search—targeting a group of people without justification for a crime that hasn’t actually happened.” A “ Ban Drill ” video directed by Rapman has been launched to coincide with the petition.



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