RISKY ROADZ:

EXPLORING BIRMINGHAM WITH GRIME'S GREAT DOCUMENTER, ROONY SAMUEL KEEFE.

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I will start this piece by emphasizing that grime is not the UK's version of hip-hop. More than that, it's a complex fusion of the multifarious influences that make up this small island: reggae, electronica, hip-hop, ska and rocksteady. Its cadences career in triplets, bars beyond bars, 140bpm, hearts racing and brains connecting at a speed outside of intoxication. Grime is the beat behind everything - it's ubiquitous in the DNA of British culture. Something that started in the bedrooms and pirate radio stations of East London, grime's vital pulse can still be found in the grimmest, darkest quarters despite the city largely becoming a homogenous home-ground for grime's pioneers to live in comfortably - its edge has been blunted somewhat.

Long before anyone else saw grime as a serious art form (let alone one whose cultural significance was more of a threat than its Form 696), Roony Samuel Keefe did. Wanting to capture what was happening around him, the young Londoner took matters into his own hands. Literally. Armed with a Sony Handycam he documented grime's history in real-time.

You'll likely know Roony by his infamous moniker Risky Roadz. And if not, you'll be familiar with his trademark aesthetic: rough-and-ready, DIY, documentary-style visuals that possess the ability to enter into grime's core emotions and visualise them. His work has always run concurrent with grime itself, from its incipient pirate radio days with Ruff Sqwad, Nasty Crew, Meridian Crew and Roll Deep to directing visuals to Skepta's "That's Not Me", "Man" and "It Ain't Safe" – all in his ubiquitous raggo-self-shot-style. He never writes down his ideas either, reflecting grime's abundance of freestyles in his filming methods: "I just have a constant flow of ideas and conversations in my head, all in various stages of development so I'm always ready to go. I rely on spontaneity and tap into the same energy as the artist [I'm working with.]" The 33-year-old (who still lives in the Bethnal Green home he grew up in) was at the epicentre of the subculture from the start, he "grew up listening to old school garage and pirate radio, jungle and ragga… until Pay As U Go and Nasty Crew came along and things got darker."

As a young DJ, Roony would buy his records at Rhythm Division in Bow, a store he says was "the home of grime", before earning a Saturday job there. The job not only immersed him in the scene he loved, but also inspired him to pick up a camera for the first time:

"The [grime] artists used to come in [to the shop] so I got to know people. Pirate radio was where we got to feel these voices but couldn't see what the characters looked like. I got to see them [at work] but other people wanted to see them, too. I wanted to showcase our love of this music to the world so I just thought – why don't I make a film? Let me show people who these voices are, where they're from, how they live."

"My nan loaned me £300 pounds for my first camera. I had no practice, no experience. It was 2003 and there was no YouTube so I had to buy books to find out how to do it. I documented the scene as a whole: the producers, the radio and the battles. I wanted to show everything about the scene. A Plus was doing it, Jammer and Ratty were doing it too. Jammer documented rap battles - we ran what was being seen by fans of grime."

Roony's descriptions of grime at its inception are endearing, a nebulous subculture – small, secretive and precious. Sitting in his Bethnal Green home he states: "all the scene has been here, in my house, with my nan. Grime has always been this thing we did because we loved it. No rewards. We're just one big dysfunctional family. I think that comes out in the videos because we know each other so well."

He continues: "*My first video was the J2K interview inside Rhythm Division. The DVD was sold in some stores and news of it spread by word of mouth, RWD magazine and Grime Forum. The film was three hours long, but everyone loved it. That was Risky Roadz #1. They wanted #2, so I used my student loan to fund the production."*

Risky Roadz #2 was released in 2005, and soon after came both The Movement Documentary and the Fuck Radio DVD in 2006 – a literal fuck you to the attitude of pirate radio stations at the time: "there was a backlash against pirate radio as it didn't like the rowdy cyphers. They said there were too many artists going to sets." All of this output helped to pave Roony's inevitable path towards creating music vid-

eos; something he developed an interest in "while learning "The Knowledge" to be a black cab driver." I tell him I think being a black cab driver must give him a real insight into many other facets of London life - has he had any experience of his two worlds colliding?

"The other day I drove Liam Gallagher. I'm actually a big fan of his. He asked me what I do when I'm not driving and I told him I make videos. He asked me if I meant home videos and I told him no, and mentioned that I'd done Skepta's last video. He replied like, 'oh man, I was just watching that yesterday! Hopefully you won't be a cabbie for long.' - I loved that."

On the subject of celebrity admirers, Roony also recalls a morning when he woke to an unprompted influx of Twitter followers which turned out to be the result of a follow from Barack Obama. Roony says he "wrote back to thank him and he said, 'Keep doing what you're doing.'" Soon after came a follow from Drake: *"We conversed for a year. When I passed the Knowledge, all of us new cabbies went to Miami to celebrate. My pal mentioned that Drake was in town whilst we were, so I messaged him and he sent me his number, gave me VIP passes to the club and I took him the one spare copy I had of Risky Roadz Lost Tapes."*

Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK. It's a weird amalgam of 1980s wastelands: multistoried blocks of flats, disused factories, ugly spaghetti junctions sitting against the new digital empires. The Midlands birthed The Specials and UB40 in the late 1970s, their influence still felt, they produced haunting soundscapes of devastation for the U.K. as it rushed towards American capitalism. And now, in the corners and crevasses of the city, creativity has been flourishing through grime. Stormzy claims Birmingham's MCs are the real "unsung heroes" of the culture, pushing the music forwards – declaring Birmingham to be the current epicentre for the sound.

After following the Birmingham scene for some time, Roony knew (in the same way he felt compelled to tell London's stories all those years ago) that he had to let the world know the secrets that Birmingham was keeping. Enlisting story editor Toby Robson to collaborate with him on the fledgling project, the pair began searching for support to make it a reality. Roony explains how they "went to commissioning editors but they were stalling," until "finally, I was like, 'we should just go and make it.' Toby wrote the treatment up and we interviewed for a sound and camera guy, then jumped in my cab one snowy day in February and drove up to Birmingham, contacting artists on the way." The aim? "To film sets at Silk City, Birmingham's pirate radio station. I know grime artists from all over the world so it wasn't difficult to have a crew of them ready to go, despite the weather and short notice." And in true Risky Roadz style, Roony uses every actuality in his world as his material; the dashboard mounted camera on his cab forms a textured introduction to the world he enters on arriving in Birmingham.

The raw footage from this expedition, which will become "a film that's going to be called Risky Roadz 0121" flips between black cabs, dark tales and interviews with those involved in all areas of the Midlands grime scene. From artists and producers to managers and comedians, they all gathered - regardless of weather and finances - to claim their place on film; sharing consonants, beats and cadences with their contemporaries, some of whom had travelled to Birmingham from Manchester, Derby, Wolverhampton and Bristol – coming together where the fire is right now for grime.

At the end of the Risky Roadz 0121 first draft footage, there's a set filmed in a freezing cold bunker. A group of MCs are all competing when suddenly, someone drops "Gangsters" by The Specials and the mic is handed to a 13-year-old kid, baseball cap pulled low over his ears. He starts spitting at a furious rate of syncopation without missing a beat or a breath, relentless and fluid as mercury. It's an iconic moment captured on film Risky Roadz style: the young seizing power and riding over the past.

The young MC is Birmingham-born T.Roadz. The son of a producer, his immersion in the grime scene was inevitable. He explains that his dad *"was a DJ too and MCs were always coming over to the house. Growing up, there were always artists like Trilla coming through but we also had untold vinyl and grime coming*

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from London: Wiley, Scorcher, Kano. I really grew up on Lord of the Mics and Risky Roadz.”

What began as “messing about with lyrics or chatting a rhyme in my head to myself” later became the winning performance at his primary school’s 2004 talent show. Reflecting on his beginnings, he says “the positive energy and constructive comments [from winning] had an impact on me. It was a shock, but it made me want to take it further.” And after recording some tracks at his youth club and posting them on SoundCloud, he quickly became involved with various projects in the Birmingham scene - notably with MC Mist. T.Roadz explains that Mist “liked what I was doing and wanted to support me, so he brought me out on his sell-out tour show at the O2 Academy. He said ‘I’ve always wanted to support someone but I’ve never had anyone to support. My nephews ain’t into it.’ But he said when he saw me, he could see how he could mentor me. He’s helped me a lot on the business side, as well as with writing techniques.”

I ask him what his goals are, being so young and early in his career?

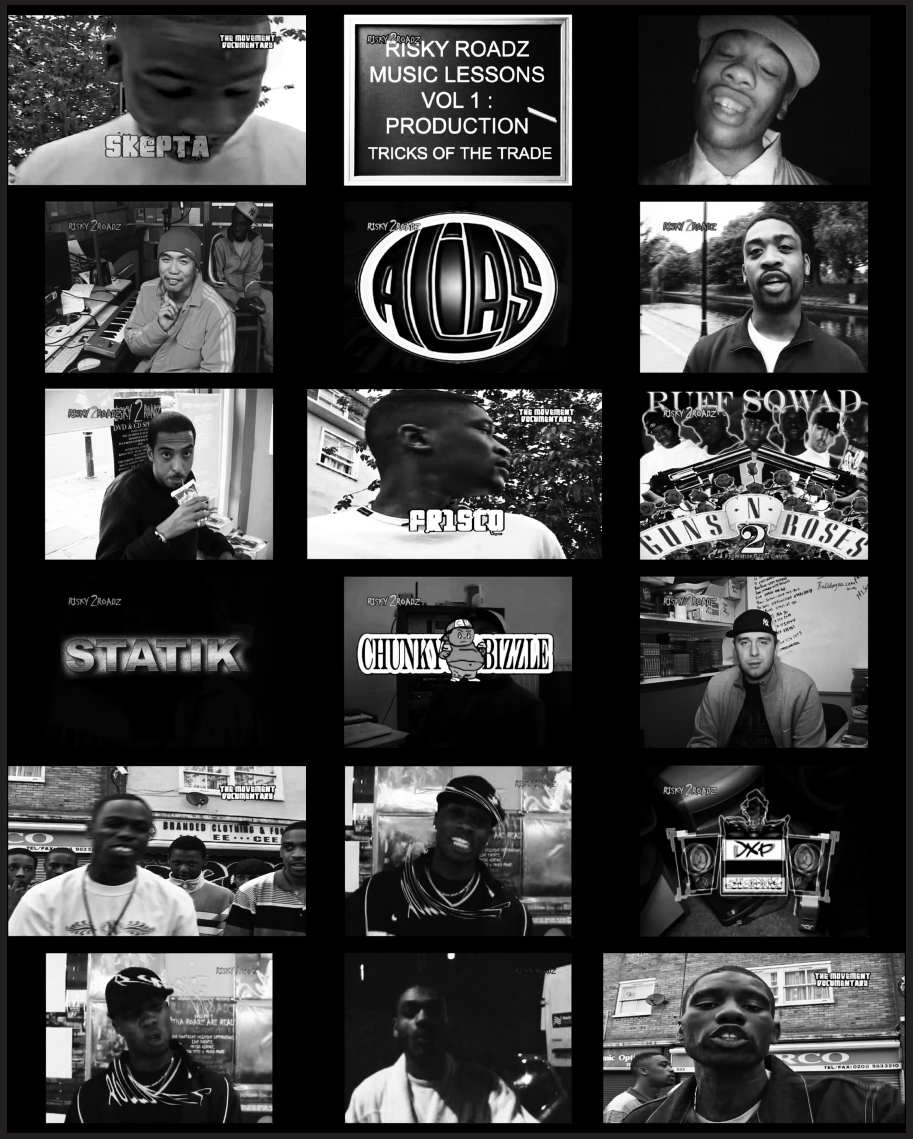
“I have things on my list but there’s also things that just happen. Like when you go into a supermarket and you’ve got a shopping list but you might see a tin of beans for one pound fifty and think, ‘Oh I’d like that!’ - so although I get the stuff on the list, I also add others. A sell-out show at the arena was on my list but the Risky Roadz movie wasn’t, but it was a brilliant experience and I feel so honoured I got to be a part of that. Also, yesterday I was recording the SBTV Warm-Up Sessions. It’s just been one week into the summer holidays and I haven’t had a rest yet!”

Speaking with an optimism that only youth can possess, he enthuses about the future of the culture: “‘I want grime to be everywhere - like how pop music is. Grime shows are special. It’s competitive, because you want to spray better than everyone else but you’re all working together to make each other - and grime - better. You don’t get that energy anywhere else.”

In contrast, veteran manager of numerous artists in the 0121 postcode Despa Robinson understands that it’s not that simple, explaining that “the problem between us and progress is our proximity to grime’s infrastructure, which is currently in London. We need our own.” But it’s a double-edged sword, he says, as “Birmingham has that unfiltered rawness because there’s no business aspect. It can be very raw and dark sometimes. In Brum, we’re very straight up and it all adds to the flavour. [Despite the lack of infrastructure] we’re still putting out music, and some folk are feeding their families off it. It’s just a handful of people right now but still, success stories. You know it’s a confidence thing. If I take this seriously, it may lead somewhere.” – this is a statement reiterated by Roony, who confirms: “without the artists, you haven’t got a scene. Without the artist, there is no infrastructure.”

Back to London and Roony is excited to shine his light on Birmingham’s scene, stating “‘the main obstacles to grime right now is to avoid being diluted. We have to keep pushing through new grime - not just focus on the already successful.” His work is the best way to do this, spotlighting names who may not be familiar to the audiences they’re reaching and creating context for outsiders, saying “my work is based on wanting to bring people in. People who aren’t in. I want the younger or the fan to feel like they are in it with us. Making them feel welcome - like they are part of what is going on.”

Roony has come from a unique cultural standpoint – he began his film career at the highest bar possible, by documenting the untamed, undefined organic life force that is grime. His visual journey has run parallel to the formation of the subculture itself, and his roots remain ever-deep in the genre that formed him – yet his shoots consistently reach out to tell new stories to new audiences. A director with the power to bring an entire culture into your living room.



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