

MUSICAL TRUTH

A Musical History of Modern Black Britain in 28 Songs



JEFFREY BOAKYE

Illustrated by Ngadi Smart

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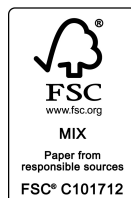
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*Listen to the songs on our YouTube playlist at
musicaltruthplaylist.co.uk.*

Introduction

From early on in all our lives, we learn history. Our own history, and the history of the world around us. Sometimes it's in a classroom, sometimes from the TV, or it might be from your parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles who won't stop telling you about what it was like when they were young, with phrases like 'I remember the time when . . .'

But these stories are important. They can show us what happened in the past, help us work out what life was like before we were born, and, if we pay enough attention, they can even help us understand what might happen in the future.

You might have learned about the Victorians, the Romans, the Egyptians . . . who knows. But what about the untold stories? What about the people who don't end up in textbooks and exam papers?

This book is going to open up a few of these stories and give you a few more pieces of the puzzle. It's going to take us on a journey through black British history, exploring how black

culture has developed over time and influenced British society along the way, and we're going to do this through a selection of songs. Why songs? Because music is powerful. Music is life. Music can carry the stories of history like a message in a bottle.

And it can also do three very important things.

Music can be a *celebration*.

Music can be a way of talking about *oppression*.

Music can be a type of *resistance*.

For me personally, music has done all of this and much, much more. Ever since I was a child, I have loved exploring worlds outside of my home through songs and lyrics. Even before I owned any music of my own, I would listen to the radio or songs that were being played at parties and lose myself in sounds and rhythm. Music has always had a powerful impact on my life. Reggae and soul could calm me down while hip-hop and dancehall could make my heart start racing. I would dance for hours with my siblings and cousins, lost in the joy that music can bring. That's the power of music.

When I was a kid, I remember playing my dad's old records on his huge stereo system, being introduced to funk, disco, jazz and Ghanaian highlife. I remember recording songs off the radio on my tape deck with my two older sisters, getting excited to hear the latest hits from our local station. I remember getting my first Walkman cassette player

and listening to music on my own massive headphones, losing myself in the sounds of American hip-hop, Jamaican dancehall and all sorts of sounds from the UK. I remember writing down song lyrics that I didn't even understand and reciting them to my friends in the playground. My whole life has beaten to the pulse of black music, and I'm telling you right now: we can learn a lot by looking at the world through a musical lens.

In this book, we'll explore songs from the global black community that do all of these things, sometimes all at once. We'll calypso through the 1940s and see reggae bounce its way into the 1980s. We'll catch soulful grooves in the 1990s and rap our way into the new millennium. We'll see UK garage step up the tempo on the dancefloor and eventually join grime on the rooftops of east London, in the early 2000s.

Get ready to travel the whole world on the sounds of the past and keep it moving right up to the present. We'll meet groundbreaking musicians whose songs have changed the world, and then we'll see one of the biggest black British superstars kicking up a storm(zy) in the here and now. Phew.

Welcome to *Musical Truth: A Musical History of Modern Black Britain in 28 Songs*.

You ready? Let's go.

Welcome to the British Empire

Now, before we really get going, we'll need to understand what is meant by something called the British Empire.

It's not that difficult. An empire is basically a collection of places that are owned and controlled, or 'colonised', by one powerful country. Not long ago, Britain had a huge empire that spread all over the world. It was so huge that people used to say, 'The sun never sets on the British Empire.' This is just a clever way of saying that the empire included so many countries across so many time zones, it was always daytime somewhere in a British-controlled country.

The British Empire was a system that allowed a very small country, Britain, to rule over huge chunks of the globe. Another name for it is British *imperialism*, and imperialism is great if you want to be in charge of everything (and don't really care about the people who were there before you). Have you ever wondered how and why English became one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, despite England being just one patch of a tiny island? It's because English is the language of the British Empire. If, let's say, France had built an empire that was as powerful as Britain's, then *on parlerait tous français maintenant* (we'd all be speaking French right now).

At one point, just before the First World War, the British Empire controlled more than 410 million people – across huge

parts of Europe, America, Australia, Asia and Africa. This was nearly a quarter of everyone on the planet at the time. That's major. If you controlled nearly a quarter of the kids at your school right now, you'd probably be as powerful as the headteacher.

From this starting point, we can begin to understand how black people, originating from the continent of Africa, came to find themselves part of the British Empire. Eventually, millions of black people (like me) would even become British citizens, born in Britain, and would call it home.

The legacy of empire

Now, I couldn't really call this book *Musical Truth* without exposing a few truths along the way. This next bit is all about one of the biggest lies in British history, a lie told directly by the government.

After the Second World War, Britain found its empire starting to slow down and crumble. A number of its colonies were beginning to win their independence, which meant that the sun was finally beginning to set on the British Empire. The USA had been the first colony to gain independence from Britain all the way back in 1776, followed by Canada in 1867, Australia in 1901, Afghanistan in 1919, Egypt in 1922 and New Zealand in 1931. But it wasn't until after 1945 that

other colonies (mainly in Africa and Asia) began to be free of British rule.

Times were changing. It was becoming clear that one country having complete control over lots of other countries was not a fair or modern way of doing things. It may seem obvious now that countries should have control over themselves, but in the 1940s a lot of our world was still controlled by Britain.

And the British Empire could be incredibly dangerous.

When countries tried to revolt against British imperial rule, they were often met with violent acts of control and terrorism by the British authorities. Here are some examples.

In Kenya (a name given to the territory by the British Empire after the tallest mountain in the country), hundreds and thousands of innocent people were forced to work without payment as slaves, imprisoned, tortured and brutally killed in mass executions.

In India during the 1870s, famines were made worse when the British Empire's rulers decided to increase exports of food from the country while its people literally starved to death. The money from these exports went straight back into the British economy.

Elsewhere, Britain was responsible for running concentration camps – such as in South Africa during the Boer War between 1899 and 1902. Tens of thousands of people died in these

camps, often from disease or hunger. Many were children. Elsewhere, those in charge of the empire were responsible for carrying out massacres in order to conquer new territories, ignoring famines and profiting from the slave trade. Because Britain had such a powerful navy and a history of travelling around the world on great ships, it was very often British ships that carried slaves across the seas.

Many British people became wealthy off the back of the slave trade, setting up banks and other businesses that still exist today.

All of these actions were crimes against humanity.

British politicians knew this and didn't want to go into the second half of the twentieth century with the ghosts of the country's colonial past out on show for everyone to see. So they set about hiding evidence, like a criminal covering up their tracks. First, they changed the name of the 'Colonial Office' to the less imperial-sounding 'Foreign Office', which still exists to this day. Then they destroyed the evidence. Files that revealed the crimes of the empire were burned, buried and even dumped at sea. This process was known as Operation Legacy, a massive cover-up that is not usually taught in British schools. The dictionary tells us that 'legacy' means something that is left behind, usually after someone or something dies. In the 1940s, Britain was looking back at an incredibly dark past, but the government didn't want to

look bad as it went into the future. The big question is: how can anyone really go forward without owning up to what they have done before?

As we continue looking at and listening to the history of black Britain, keep an eye out for the legacy of the British Empire.



‘LONDON IS THE PLACE FOR ME’

Lord Kitchener (1948)

OK, so before we get on to the first song, there are a few things I want to tell you about the Caribbean. It’s a part of the world that includes a collection of small islands that have had a big impact on British culture. And if we go back far enough, we’ll see that it has a lot to do with sugar. But it’s not a sweet story. And it started hundreds of years ago.

Back in the eighteenth century, it was discovered that Caribbean islands such as Jamaica and Barbados were perfect places to grow sugar crops. At the time, demand for sugar in Europe was increasing dramatically. Everyone loved the stuff, which meant that European landowners were keen to grow as much sugar as possible. Not wanting to be left out, Britain started to invest heavily in the sugar business.

At this point, Britain had already taken control over a number of Caribbean islands by sending people to settle there and colonise them. Barbados was taken in 1625 and Jamaica in 1655. By the eighteenth century, the British economy was relying on its Caribbean colonies to grow and sell sugar for profit. To do so, British traders needed workers. And the way they found workers was to sail to west Africa, force people away from their homes, pack them on ships and sail them to the Caribbean, where they were bought by British sugar plantation owners. They became enslaved.

It was a time of great cruelty and suffering, during which white Europeans forced black Africans to work, for free. And if these Africans resisted, they were killed. Let's stop and think about that for a second. Can you imagine being taken from your family, your friends, your home, tied up in shackles and sent on a ship filled to every last inch with up to six hundred other slaves for almost three months, to a new continent thousands of miles away? If you survived that awful journey, can you then imagine being sold to a plantation owner, before being forced to work for free? Suffering beatings, seeing death, seeing killings? For the rest of your life.

Those who survived this harsh life had children of their own, born into slavery, and the cycle continued over and over until slavery was eventually abolished. You've probably heard about William Wilberforce, who is heralded as the British

man who abolished slavery – an abolitionist. In reality, black slave rebellions, black British abolitionists and white British workers, alongside white abolitionists like Wilberforce, *all* worked to abolish the slave trade in Britain, in 1807. (Slavery itself would not be made illegal in Britain until 1838.) Then, the descendants of enslaved African people would go on to form communities in the British West Indies, where they lived for generations.

And when I say the 'West Indies', did you realise these countries are nowhere near India? The West Indies – countries like Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Haiti – got given that name because when European sailors first went there, they got confused, and wrongly thought that they were somewhere near India!

Many of these 'West Indians' who grew up under the British Empire saw Britain as a home they had never visited. They were taught that Britain was the so-called 'mother country', like a parent who ruled them from across the ocean. They were also told that they could one day travel to Britain, where they would be welcomed by British people.

In 1948, this dream seemed to come true when the British parliament passed the British Nationality Act. This new law meant that anyone who was part of the British Empire was allowed to become a British citizen, including all those Caribbean men, women and children who thought of

Britain as their mother country. The British government was encouraging them to come to the UK to do jobs that needed doing after the Second World War. For many people from the Caribbean, Britain had always seemed to be a great nation offering endless possibilities, and when faced with job shortages or fewer opportunities in smaller countries like Jamaica, many men and women took the chance of a better life.

But the Caribbean is a long way from the UK, and there weren't jet aeroplanes to take people from their home countries to the mother country, so how did they get there? Well, in 1948 a ship called the *Empire Windrush* carried over a thousand paying passengers from different parts of the world all the way to Britain. Five hundred and thirty-nine of them were from Jamaica, the largest Caribbean island. These travellers and those who followed them became known as the 'Windrush generation', one of the most famous groups of Caribbeans to settle in the UK, establishing black communities that still exist today.

So what's all this got to do with music, and this song by someone called Kitchener? Well, if you haven't ever been to the Caribbean, then close your eyes and this song will take you straight there. It's called calypso, and it's a rhythmic type of music originating from Trinidad in the nineteenth century. It's somehow bouncy and laid-back at the same time, and when

you hear it, you're suddenly on the beach squinting up at clear blue skies while a soft breeze cools you down.

Now, during the First World War, there was a famous British army officer called Lord Kitchener – but he didn't make calypso music, so don't worry about him. There's another Lord Kitchener, a man from Trinidad, who actually did make calypso music, and that's the one we're going to focus on. His real name was Aldwyn Roberts, and he was nicknamed after the earlier Lord Kitchener. It's very interesting that he chose a stage name that seemed to celebrate the British Empire. It shows how proud many black people were of Britain, even if they had never been there.

All of these facts are important, but the most important fact is that Aldwyn 'Lord Kitchener' Roberts was a passenger on board the *Empire Windrush*.

Lord Kitchener's song 'London Is the Place for Me' perfectly captures the optimism that West Indians coming to the UK felt in 1948. It's happy and fun and light-hearted, with a quiet innocence about how great London will be when the passengers get there. It even starts off with the sound of Big Ben chiming happily in the breeze, before you hear lyrics about how lovely London is and how the people of England will make you feel like a millionaire.

In reality, black people arriving in Britain faced overcrowded living conditions, the coldest weather they had

ever experienced, and open hostility and racism. With this in mind, I find there's something quite sad and poignant about this song, with its hopeful attitude in the face of difficult times ahead.

So even though black people have existed in Britain since long before 1948, this song is a good place to start our journey, because the *Windrush*'s arrival marks the start of modern black Britain. And like the song says, London really was the place to be. Right up until today, the majority of black people in the UK live in London, which makes it an important part of the black British story.

However, as we shall see, the songs and sounds that help tell the story of black people in Britain travel very far and very wide.