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 hiphop 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 hiphop, 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.