



# Stormzy: grime and grace

South London grime artist **Stormzy** has a debut album called *Gang Signs & Prayer*. It was the first grime album in history to reach number 1. This is an edited version of Miranda Sawyer's *Guardian* article about her interview with him, and explores his beliefs and spirituality. Use it with your students and the learning activities that follow on pp. 8–9. Teachers using this interview with pupils should consider whether any of the strong language is inappropriate for their classes. There's a PowerPoint of student work related to this on the RE Today website; thanks to the teachers and pupils who contributed. As always, this term's members' password is inside the back cover.

I meet Stormzy in a beautifully appointed recording studio in a chi-chi area of London. He stands out, but then he would anywhere. Stormzy, real name Michael Omari Jr, is a can't-hide 6ft 5in in his trackie bottoms, black socks and slides. Stormzy makes music, mostly grime, and in his YouTube videos he towers over his crew, dominates the frame like a giant.

There's a cheekiness to Stormzy: he is friendly and engaged. When the tickets for his March–May 2017 UK tour went on sale the two shows in Brixton, London, sold out in seven minutes (he adds another date; it sells out too); within 12 hours, nine more venues, from Belfast to Birmingham, have no tickets left.

Stormzy's climb has been rapid. When Kanye brought the UK's biggest grime stars on stage at the Brits 2015, Stormzy was there. He won Mobos for best male and best grime act that year. In Christmas 2016, he grabbed himself a number 8 by rereleasing his YouTube track 'Shut Up'.

Making an album is not easy, especially not for one-man-and-his-mic grime artists. Stormzy, who is far from just that, chose to join forces with Fraser T. Smith, a Grammy-winning producer known for his work with Adele. The album took them ten months from start to finish.

## God, grace and church on Sunday

We talk through each track. There are 13 tracks on there, plus a few extra bits, and as Stormzy goes through them, he talks of vulnerability, uses words such as 'pure', 'touching' and 'reflective' as well as 'explicit', 'raw' and 'horrible'. Sonically, there's R&B in the mix, afrobeat, a gospel choir, live strings ...

There are definitely a few bangers: 'Shut Up' and 'Big for Your Boots' are on there. This isn't a simple album. The subject matter

isn't as straightforward as you might imagine. A track called '100 Bags' sounds like it's about drugs or money but is, instead, a 'sad tribute'. When I try to guess what 'BBYG Part 1' might stand for (I say embarrassing things like 'Better Bring Your Gun'), Stormzy says no: it's 'Blinded By Your Grace'.

'It's about God,' he says. 'One of the things that I'm most impressed by, in God, is the grace that He has. No matter what we do, there's always this, "OK, it's fine. I understand." That's not to say I can go out and do something bad ... But just that knowing that someone's got you throughout anything, and they're not going to judge you, they're just going to understand your situation. That's grace.'

Stormzy's first memory is of 'Sunday, going to church': his mum, Abigail Owuo (she appears in the video for 'Know Me From'), was a parishioner of a Pentecostal chapel in Streatham. 'It was just what you did on a Sunday,' he says. He has a strong faith, but he admits that he lost his way for a time. 'I was a good boy in primary, but then I was a bad boy.'

## Family and the whirlwind of emotions

The last track of the album, 'Lay Me Bare', gives a few hints as to why. Stormzy calls it a 'whirlwind of emotions', and it moves between resignedness, intimacy, regret and anger. The anger is mostly directed at his dad, who wasn't around at all when he grew up. Father to young Michael and his two older sisters, Stormzy's dad worked as a cabbie in Croydon. The few times Stormzy had contact with him was when he asked his mum for money and she gave him his dad's number and told him to text him.

'And I remember going to the cab office and picking up an envelope and there being £20 in it. That happened twice. At the time, I thought, "Oh, £20, I'm good." But now I'm thinking ... mad. I'm not bitter towards him, it's more, "I can't respect you as a man".'

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Because now I'm a man. And even if I was the shittiest prick on Earth and I had a child ... I think, "You didn't even do the bare minimum. You didn't even get me a birthday card."

He says: 'This album is good, this is incredible, this is heartfelt, this has been put together so well, so strategically, so neatly, so creatively.'

Stormzy grew up near Croydon, with his mum, two sisters and a younger brother. His home life wasn't unhappy, but it wasn't cosy.

'We always had the family tightness of "We've got each other no matter what",' he recalls.

'I think my home reminded me of the poverty I was in,' he says. 'We had a small house, it wasn't the best of houses, not in the best condition, and ... it wasn't comfortable for me to be there and just chillin'. I would go to my friends' houses and they had these nice, beautiful houses, and with my house I felt none of that. So I was always out, doing things to get money.'

He did well at school until after his GCSEs. He was smart, so he could mess around and still ace exams. 'I always figured out how to play the borderline,' he says. 'I was as horrible and as menacing and as troublesome, as annoying as I could be. Just playing that line of "you can't really expel me".'

And though he was suspended, on occasion, he wasn't expelled until he went to sixth form. The school he was at, Stanley Tech, wasn't a good one, and, when he was in Year 10, it was taken over to become a Harris Academy. Harris schools are known for their discipline.

From his school year, and the one above, he knows around four or five boys who are in prison for murder. Yet he and most of his friends weren't what he would call real gangsters: 'You're not going to knock on someone's door and put a bullet in their head. A lot of these kids haven't got that in them, as 95 per cent of humans don't, because you're a human. There are a lot of good kids caught up in it.'

**A different course in life**

When he was 19, Stormzy changed. He can't pinpoint an incident that made him alter his course, but he knows why he did. 'Somewhere along the line, I figured out that this isn't a logical option. I realised that being on the streets is very bad for business, very bad for going forward in life, and very bad for success – and success has always been the biggest thing for me.'

Everyone has a different idea of success, of course; and for a while, he followed his mum's dreams. After college, he got on to an apprentice course and ended up as a project manager at an engineering firm, working on an oil refinery off the south coast. But it didn't fit. He thought hard and realised that he wanted to try music. For a while, he combined the two: writing while he was working, calling in sick because he had a radio gig. But eventually, the pull of music became too big and he quit.

He likes his independence, because he enjoys being involved in every aspect of his career. 'I always say an artist, a musician, is like

a car,' he says. 'And cool, you're the engine and you've got all these ideas. But someone has to do the alloys, someone has to make sure the tyres are up, someone's got to make sure the boot's working, someone's got to do the air con, all these little things.'

If you want to be an internationally known artist, you have to think about the international environment. And 'Shut Up' was released into a world that was different from today's; post-Brexit, post-Trump. Stormzy has expressed support for Black Lives Matter in the US ('I'm not going to wait until something happens to me or my loved ones before I speak out about it,' he said to *i-D's* Hattie Collins last year). But actually, he says, though he thinks internationally in terms of his art, when it comes to his political message, he stays closer to home.

'The main thing with me is my young black kings,' he says. 'And this ain't to ostracise young black women or old white men, or Asians, it's not to ostracise anyone, it's just to say, "OK, young black men in my country, when it comes to who is going to achieve, you are always the very last." So I need to talk to my young black kings, because I'm one of you, we who are always last. And I say to them, "You can do this. You're better than anything anyone's ever told you that you are. You're just as powerful as me. You can be just as creative and as incredible and as amazing as me, Kanye West, Drake, Frank Ocean, all these people that you see. You can do that."

'And that message is big: hopefully I'm going to connect with the person who one day is the political rival of Trump.'

Stormzy thinks big, but he doesn't forget his small start.

**An interview with Stormzy: learning activities from Kate Christopher**

• Before your lesson, search on YouTube for a Stormzy video where he responds to critics, such as 'Shut Up' or 'Big for Your Boots'. Choose a short clip you think is suitable (take care: strong language is part of the pitch here). Play this clip in class and ask pupils to list all the emotion words they detect in the lyrics. How many words describe negative emotions, and how many positive? Discuss what sort of person they think Stormzy is (don't shut down negative comments, you will reflect on them later).

• Then show this clip of Stormzy singing 'Blinded By Your Grace, Pt. 2' in Westfield: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=drLT1yVYt8g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drLT1yVYt8g). Ask the class to list emotion words they detect as they listen. Compare to the emotion words listed from 'Shut Up' or 'Big for Your Boots'. Are pupils surprised the same person can make such different songs? Compare songs: what is similar and what is different?

• Give the lyrics (or a selection) of 'Blinded By Your Grace' to pupils. Ask them to underline the Christian references they recognise. Define 'grace' (God's willingness to reach out to humans, generosity from heaven, forgiveness and love). What does Stormzy say about grace? Has it helped him? How?

• Return to the emotions the class listed in response to Shut Up'

or 'Big for Your Boots'. Ask if they made certain judgments because Stormzy is urban, black, and singing in a takeaway chicken shop? Would it be different if he was in an environment suggesting money and power, such as if he was white, wearing a suit and in a smart office, or a beautiful old building? Define 'stereotype' (associations based on someone's outward appearance). Students might keep a 'stereotype diary' for a week. What stereotypes can the class recognise throughout the week?

• Display the cover of album *Gang Signs & Prayer*. Compare to a classic Last Supper painting, such as Da Vinci's. Gather pupils' responses as to what they think Stormzy is saying with this image. Below are some suggestions:

– Stormzy in the same position as Jesus: is Stormzy some sort of saviour?

– The black background, black clothes and balaclavas: is this a sort of nothingness? They seem to be nowhere, and they are nothing, or they have come from nowhere and nothing.

– Comparison to Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Is Stormzy's music 'high culture' just like Da Vinci?

– The balaclava-wearing companions: are they in some way like Jesus' disciples; supporters and defenders of Stormzy?

– The night of the Last Supper. This is the night Jesus announces he will be betrayed. Is one of Stormzy's companions going to betray him?

**These suggested stimuli and discussion points lead into separate writing tasks. The suggested written response is given afterwards.**

• Show the video for 'Cold', where Stormzy starts the song using the N-word. This word is unacceptably racist today, as it speaks directly to the way the white world dehumanises black people. However black artists often use the word. Discuss if this is a reclaiming of the word, to undermine its power in white racist language. Or does it suggest black people seeing themselves through the same demeaning eyes as white racists? Discuss how gay groups have reclaimed the word 'queer'. Do feminist groups use words like 'slut' or 'frigid' to describe women? If not, why not?

**Suggested written response: 'When black artists use the N-word, it reproduces white racist attitudes.' Discuss.**

• Reread the lines in the interview referring to 'young black kings'. Stormzy refers to these in 'Cold'. Suggest these possible meanings, and allow students to come up with their own:

– Young black men bear negative stereotypes. They need protection from stereotypes.

– Young black men are disenfranchised and need more support in order to flourish and be successful.

– Young black men need to work harder to get somewhere in life.

– Young black men need to work harder.

– Young black men need to believe in themselves.

– Young black men start life with worse odds than others.

– Young black men need better role models.

• Find recent data on 'race relations', such as in *Healing a Divided Britain* by the Equality and Human Rights Commission: [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy). A summary of data findings is given here: [www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/latest-projects/race-report-statistics](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/latest-projects/race-report-statistics). The outcomes for young black men in Britain are not good. Discuss this in light of Stormzy's desire to protect and nurture his 'young black kings'.

**Suggested written response: 'We should all care about the "young black kings".' Discuss.**

• Read this article in NME stating Stormzy's support for the Black Lives Matter campaign in the US and UK: [www.nme.com/news/music/stormzy-0-6-1191412](http://www.nme.com/news/music/stormzy-0-6-1191412). Could Stormzy be used as an example of a Christian fighting racism, or is he a musician who happens to be Christian, fighting racism? Discuss with your class how far Stormzy's views could have an impact on young people.

**Suggested written response: 'Musicians have more influence over young people than biblical teachings.' Discuss.**

• Compare Stormzy to Reverend Al Sharpton in the US. Reverend Sharpton is a pastor and public figure. This is a summary of his speech at the funeral of Michael Brown in 2014: [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/25/al-sharpton-michael-brown-funeral-eulogy](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/25/al-sharpton-michael-brown-funeral-eulogy). This is a quote taken from this funeral speech: 'Religion ought to affirm what we are doing, not be an escapism from what is done. And some of us are so heavenly bound that we're no earthly good ... Michael Brown, 18-year-old boy, laid out in the street hour and a half before the detective came ... What did you do? What religious phrases does he use? Discuss how far someone used as a good example of a Christian fighting racism needs to be deliberately engaged in this struggle, or how far any Christian trying to make the world better could be used?

Both Reverend Sharpton and Stormzy call for mass community responses in the fight against police racism. Discuss how far justice is achieved through political activism and how far through religious or ethical inspiration.

**Suggested written response: 'All Christians should be fighting racism.' Discuss.**