

# News Release

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## V&A East reveals first major exhibition - *The Music Is Black: A British Story*

- Landmark immersive exhibition revealing the extraordinary contribution Black British music has made to British culture, and around the world
- Celebrates 125 years of Black music in Britain from **Jazz to Reggae, 2 Tone, Drum & Bass, Trip Hop, UK Garage, Grime** and beyond
- Reveals hidden stories behind early 20th Century pioneers, international music-makers and today's groundbreaking artists from **Sampha to Little Simz, Tems, Jorja Smith, Ezra Collective** and more
- V&A East Museum's exhibition to inspire new season of programming across **East Bank** in collaboration with the **BBC, Sadlers Wells East, UAL's London College of Fashion, and UCL East**

V&A East announces its first exhibition, *The Music Is Black: A British Story*, scheduled to open at V&A East Museum, East Bank, in 2026. The landmark exhibition will reveal how Black British music has shaped British culture – and its global impact – to tell a long-overdue story of Black excellence, struggle, resilience, and joy.

Spanning 1900 to the present day, *The Music Is Black: A British Story* will celebrate 125 years of Black music in Britain, taking visitors into the heart of music making, from Carnival to club nights, recording studios and record shops, MC battles, festivals, and more.

With full access to the extraordinary **BBC Archive**, the exhibition will have a soundtrack spanning generations and an evocative set design. Visitors will hear directly from music makers, both centre stage and behind the scenes, to bring the story to life. From early pioneers, **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Winifred Atwell, Emile Ford** and **Janet Kay** the exhibition will also highlight international music-makers including **Joan Armatrading, Eddy Grant, Sade, Soul II Soul, Seal, Fabio & Grooverider, Goldie, Massive Attack** and **Tricky**. It will also focus on the multi-talented artists of today, from **Shabaka Hutchings to Kano, Little Simz, Jorja Smith, Nubya Garcia, Ezra Collective** and more.

V&A East Museum's inaugural exhibition will inspire a season of collaborative programming across East Bank in 2026. The **BBC, Sadlers Wells East, UAL's London College of Fashion, and UCL East** will join **V&A East** in bringing the themes of *The Music Is Black: A British Story* to life across Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park – and beyond – with a series of special activities, events, displays and live performance.

V&A East Museum's *The Music Is Black: A British Story* will draw on the V&A's extensive archive of performance in Britain and around the world, and track record in creating evocative and immersive performance exhibitions from *David Bowie Is...* (2013) to *Pink Floyd: Their Mortal Remains* (2017) and *DIVA* (2023). With a mix of never-before-seen major new acquisitions and international loans, the exhibition will showcase immersive AV, large-scale installations, and seminal musical instruments, equipment, and personal belongings from some of the most ground-breaking music-makers of the last century.

The exhibition will also address the social, historical, and cultural context behind Black music in Britain, which led to the creation of the UK's most progressive musical genres from **Brit Funk to Lovers Rock, 2 Tone, Jungle, Ragga, Drum & Bass, Trip Hop, UK Garage, Grime** and beyond. Paintings, prints, playbills, and posters, sculpture, TV, fashion and textiles, photography and film, will all help tell a broader story of Black British music and its cultural impact beyond sound.

**Jacqueline Springer, Curator of *The Music Is Black: A British Story* and Curator of *Africa and Diaspora Performance at the V&A*, said:** *"Music is the soundtrack to our lives, and one of the most powerful tools of unification. It brings collective and individual joy as we recite song lyrics at festivals and gigs, recall dance moves perfected in childhood bedrooms, and mime to guitar breaks, bassline drops and instrumental flourishes with glee. Set against a backdrop of British colonialism and evolving social, political, and cultural landscapes, we will celebrate the richness and versatility of Black and Black British music as instruments of protest, affirmation, and creativity, and reveal the untold stories behind some of the world's most popular music of all time."*

**Gus Casely-Hayford, V&A East Director, said:** *"V&A East is dedicated to opening up new creative opportunities for all. *The Music Is Black: A British Story* will be a landmark show foregrounding multiple perspectives to tell a long-overdue story about the creation of our national sound and its impact on culture around the world. I'm delighted the exhibition will inspire a major season of creative programmes across East Bank. I'm enormously grateful to our East Bank partners, including the BBC who have opened up their archives to us, in helping us take the exhibition beyond our building and into the wider world."*

**Trevor Nelson, legendary music broadcaster and presenter, said:** *"There are so many different colours and shades of Black music, and so many eclectic styles that have emerged from the UK. The fact that we haven't had a national exhibition on Black British music is quite surprising to me. I feel it needs to be documented. But more importantly, to tell the stories that are untold."*



**The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said:** *“London is the music capital of the world and at the heart of that success is the incredible contribution of Black British artists. From Samuel Coleridge-Taylor to Stormzy, we’ve seen Black musicians inspire and influence our lives, and I’m delighted that V&A East Museum’s inaugural exhibition will honour this, alongside other partners from East Bank. Together we are creating a new culture and education powerhouse for our capital and this wide-ranging exhibition will be a wonderful example of how East Bank is helping us to build a better London for everyone.”*

Beginning in the early 20th century, with African musical influences, classical music, and Jazz as the first global popular music and youth culture phenomenon, V&A East Museum’s *The Music Is Black: A British Story*, will explore the impact of musical genres including **British Folk, American Blues, Jazz, Gospel, Highlife** and **R&B** had on British musicians from **Dame Shirley Bassey, Dusty Springfield, Fleetwood Mac,** and **Davy Graham** to **The Beatles** and **The Rolling Stones**. The show will also highlight the myriad international artists who made music in Britain and in turn impacted the richness of our national sound, from **Elisabeth Welch, Adelaide Hall** and **Paul Robeson** to **Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, Amii Stewart, Fela Kuti** and **Neneh Cherry**. It will also showcase **West African Jazz, Calypso, Steel Pannists, Sound System culture, Rocksteady, Ska** and **Reggae**.

The exhibition will celebrate the broad spectrum of international music that was Anglicised by Black British artists to create **UK Rap, Nu Classic Soul, Dubstep, Afrobeats,** and **UK Drill**. Highlights will include the benchmark recordings of **Aswad** and **Steel Pulse**, which awakened the spiritual, social, and political consciousness of British youth, instrumentally contrasting with **Linton Kwesi-Johnson** and **Benjamin Zephaniah’s** Dub-poetry. **M People’s** landmark 1994 Mercury Prize, which foregrounded significant wins for **Roni Size & Reprazent, Ms. Dynamite, Dizzee Rascal, Speech Debelle, Benjamin Clementine, Skepta, Sampha** and **Little Simz**, will also be explored alongside **The Prodigy, Skunk Anansie’s** and **Stormzy’s** history-making Glastonbury debuts.

The exhibition will also look to the award-winning home-grown talent on the international stage including Reggae’s **Sir Coxson Outernational** sound system, the indomitable Dub pioneer and recording artist **Jah Shaka** and **Saxon** sound system and the reggae emcees and singers it propelled from within its ranks to **Rap, Soul** and **‘Alt R&B’** from **Slick Rick, Monie Love** and **Estelle** to **Floetry, Labrinth** and **FKA twigs**.

A national and international story, the exhibition will also spotlight the creativity and impact of east London on Black British music across time. Home to **All Points East** festival and **Hackney Carnival**, and birthplace of **Rinse FM, Grime**, and artists and groups including **Newham Generals, East Connection, Roll Deep,** and **N.A.S.T.Y Crew**, east London is also known for its legendary radio stations, studios, clubs, and venues. From **Jammer’s Basement** (Leytonstone, Waltham Forest) where Lord of the Mics was founded, to the now closed **The Blue Note** (Hoxton Square, Hackney), where Drum & Bass exploded on a Sunday night courtesy of the pioneering **Metalheadz** sessions by **Goldie** and **Kemistry & Storm**, the exhibition will explore this and more.



As part of the exhibition, V&A East has commissioned a new film by **Meeks & Frost**, the directorial duo behind **J Hus**, **Pa Salieu** and **Kojoy Radical's** music videos – with a new teaser trailer released today. With a dynamic collage aesthetic and narrative bringing together different generations and Black British musical styles, cuts of the longer form film will drop over the coming months ahead of the full release in 2026.

### Notes to Editors

For further PRESS information about *The Music Is Black: A British Story* at V&A East Museum, please contact Laura Mitchell, [l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk](mailto:l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk) / Abigail Francis, [a.francis@vam.ac.uk](mailto:a.francis@vam.ac.uk) / [press.office@vam.ac.uk](mailto:press.office@vam.ac.uk) 020 3949 4509 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from [pressimages.vam.ac.uk](http://pressimages.vam.ac.uk).

**Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging that *The Music Is Black: A British Story* has been made possible with support from Gregory Annenberg Weingarten, GRoW @ Annenberg.**

### About V&A East

The V&A is a family of museums dedicated to the power of creativity. Our mission is to champion design and creativity in all its forms, advance cultural knowledge, and inspire makers, creators, and innovators everywhere.

V&A East is dedicated to creative opportunity and its power to bring change. V&A East Storehouse and Museum are two new free cultural destinations created in partnership with young people and inspired by east London's creative heritage. The first of two new V&A East sites – V&A East Storehouse – will open on 31 May 2025, the second, V&A East Museum, is scheduled to open in spring 2026. Working directly with the voices that are shaping global contemporary culture, V&A East will bring the V&A collection and archive to life in new ways, celebrating making in all its forms and opening up new possibilities and discoveries for everyone.

V&A East Museum celebrates making and creativity's power to bring change. Created with young people and rooted in east London's heritage, V&A East Museum explores what's shaping our world with the voices leading contemporary culture. Two galleries explore why we make, alongside a major exhibition space, restaurant, shops and spaces for social gathering and events, all housed in a new building designed by world renowned architects O'Donnell and Tuomey.

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### About East Bank

- East Bank is the UK's newest cultural quarter at the heart of Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. The place where everything happens – entertainment, inspiration, and discovery – and open to everyone who visits, lives, and works in east London.
- East Bank represents the biggest ever cultural investment by the Mayor of London, with support from HM Government and the four Olympic boroughs.
- Opening from Autumn 2023, East Bank is a unique collaboration between



cultural institutions, world-leading universities, and the people of the Olympic boroughs.

- East Bank is made up of V&A East Museum and Storehouse, Sadler's Wells East, London College of Fashion, UAL, UCL East and the new BBC Music Studios.
- A powerhouse for innovation, creativity and learning in Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, East Bank is rooted in the communities of east London and reflects the creative spirit and legacy of the London 2012 Games.

