

UNSEEN.UNHEARD.

Race and Disability – Black disabled experience in the UK's music industry

June 2023

A joint report by Black Lives in Music and Attitude is Everything

#UnseenUnheardReport

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Foreword

As a Black female creative working in the industry and being neurodivergent, having the chance to take part in this report which focuses on the experience of Black disabled music creators and industry professionals in the UK's music industry was important to me. I have dyslexia and dyspraxia and it's been a challenge working within this industry.

I've often felt ashamed, uncertain about my ability in some roles due to lack of understanding about my disability and how it assists me and affects me on a day-to-day basis. I've had confidence issues, imposter syndrome and more. However now that I am in a space where I embrace my disability as a Black woman, I welcome the report as it's an opportunity to educate and give insight about some of the barriers faced by Black disabled creative people across the board.

This report highlights the multiple and complex barriers Black disabled people face in their day-to-day working environments, but it also raises awareness about intersectionality within that whilst championing the talent that Black disabled people have. It provides a small snippet of the voices of the Black creatives that are unseen in this industry, giving space for some to be heard.

The subject pertaining to intersectionality and diversity is one that is ongoing, but it can be said that many barriers faced by individuals in the form of discrimination are based on multiple identities such as disability, gender, race, ethnicity, class to name a few. Whilst many do not recognise this as they may not have faced this, it's important that we start addressing the conversation around diversity more broadly and recognise that it is no longer good enough to just think about people as single blocks of identity. Each person has their own uniqueness, regardless, so within that each person has a right to be treated as they wish to be rather than being placed in a box or group.

If there is one thing that is clear from this report it is that Black disabled people do have talent and there is a massive loss here to the industry in terms of the lack of emphasis placed on the positives that Black disabled creatives bring to their roles. Whilst some companies within the industry do value and recognise the assets that Black disabled creatives bring, there is still a long way to go as many still feel apprehensive about applying for roles, declaring their disability and more.

If you look around the industry there are many disabled people THRIVING within their roles – it is possible. Radio presenters, content creators, events managers, producers, engineers, Radio Broadcasters, photographers, the list is endless. But this report shows that many more out there feel that they cannot progress and that they are not recognised as talented artists or industry professionals with vast potential to contribute to this industry we all love. If the correct support was given across the board, it would fill a huge gap in terms of what the industry is currently missing out on.

Esta Rae
Senior Events Manager

Context

“There are specific issues and things that come with that experience of being Black. [They] just need to be valued and approached in a way that fits the profile of that experience.”

Voices in the data

In April 2021, Black Lives in Music launched a survey focussed on the experience of Black music creators and industry professionals in the UK’s music industry.

This resulted in the publication in October 2021 of a landmark report – **Being Black in the UK Music Industry** – that revealed systemic racism in the UK music industry.

16% of respondents identified as being of Black African, Black Caribbean, mixed African or Caribbean descent alongside being disabled people or people with longstanding health conditions that impact their daily lives.

These 149 individuals were composed of 99 creators and 50 industry professionals.

Action not words

Their voices began a conversation between Black Lives in Music and Attitude is Everything about the need for a new partnership to amplify Black disabled experience in the music industry and break down barriers with industry partners.

This intersectional report is the first action in this work, sharing the key findings from the original survey responses alongside quotes from in-person interviews carried out since the publication of the original report.

What do we mean by ‘intersectional’?

With ‘diversity’ commonly used as a catch-all term, many individual experiences run the risk of not being heard. People can identify as many things at the same time, and face discrimination on multiple fronts. ‘Intersectionality’ refers to the ways in which people can face barriers and discrimination based on multiple identities at the same time including gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and class. In this case, we are looking at the unique lived experience of Black disabled people navigating the music industry. ‘Diversity’ needs to be looked at through this lens if meaningful and inclusive change is to be achieved.

It is essential that the music industry understands and learns directly from the experiences of those who are impacted by both racism and ableism both in society at large and in their professional and creative practice.

Experiences of discrimination

“It’s hard enough to even recognise when you’re being discriminated against because you know if you recognise it, you might have to deal with it in some way. I might have to say something, or it might show in my face, or it might show in the way I work. So you just learn to just let it go somewhere else. But what’s the psychological impact? What’s the long-term effect of just getting on with it?”

- **80%** of Black disabled music creators and **89%** of Black disabled music professionals felt they had faced some form of discrimination in the music industry.
- **28%** of Black disabled music creators and professionals have had to ignore racist comments in order to progress professionally.

Among Black disabled music creators:

- **71%** said they had experienced industry racism or racist bias
- **76%** had witnessed racism or racist bias in these spaces
- **81%** had experienced racist microaggressions in the music industry and
- **79%** had witnessed them.

Black disabled music creators reported the following forms of discrimination:

- **7%** based on disability
- **65%** based on race
- **34%** based on gender

In the same areas, Black disabled music professionals reported:

- **5%** based on disability
- **80%** based on race
- **32%** based on gender

In addition:

- **74%** of Black disabled music creators felt there are specific barriers to success in the industry because of their race or ethnicity compared to **58%** of Black non-disabled creators who felt the same way.
- **21%** of Black disabled music creators and **25%** of Black disabled music professionals said they had faced discrimination because of their socio-economic background.

Feeling the need to change to be appreciated – Black disabled music creators:

- **37%** felt the need to change the way they behave
- **44%** felt the need to change their appearance (clothes, hair etc)
- **31%** felt the need to change the way they speak
- **47%** felt the need to change the type of music they make
- **17%** felt the need to change their name

Feeling the need to change to be appreciated – Black disabled music professionals:

- **44%** felt the need to change the way they behave
- **46%** felt the need to change their appearance (clothes, hair etc)
- **51%** felt the need to change the way they speak
- **15%** felt the need to change their name

COMMENT

- It can be very difficult for Black disabled people to determine what the discrimination they experience stems from – is it racism or ablism?
- The increased percentage of Black disabled creators reporting barriers based on race vs non-disabled people may be because disabled people are experiencing more discrimination overall, so can better identify it when it occurs. More research is needed on this topic.
- Its also important to note that people may only identify as having been discriminated against due to disability if they themselves identify as a disabled person. If for whatever reason someone doesn't (In **Attitude is Everything's 2019 Artist Snapshot publication**, only 66% of artists with access requirements identified as a Deaf or disabled person), they may not have ticked this box in the original survey.
- There is more work to be done to examine the experience of microaggressions related to disability in order to see how easily identifiable these are for Black disabled people in the workplace when they may already be identifying those related to race.

"I wasn't hearing certain words, and speaking loudly, especially in an atmosphere of loud music. I didn't realise I was so loud, and many people took that as being, you know, aggressive or talking over people, and it wasn't the case. It was just clearly because I couldn't hear people, you know? And I knew it was an issue, especially being perceived as a Black man. I knew it was an issue but it didn't deter me. There was a big stigma to me with the music industry people being disabled and not hearing. It felt like this 'angry Black male stereotype' against me. Because of the way I'd been treated previously by the engineer, I couldn't tell if they were treating me like this due to the nature of the event or who I was as a Black man. I started to think, is it because I'm dressed more hood than when I came before? Does he think I'm being aggressive towards him because I'm talking loudly? Or is it because I am disabled that he is treating me like this? Or maybe it is all of these things? I felt horrible when I was just here to do my job; I blamed myself. But you know I'm disabled, need help, and am just getting palmed off. It was my first event after lockdown, and I had been looking forward to it, and I'd been put in this hostile environment."

Michal Grierson aka The House Poet – DJ, Radio Broadcaster, Music Producer and Engineer

[Read a full account of Michael's interview at the end of this report.](#)

Perceptions of industry diversity

- Only **38%** of the 149 respondents felt that diversity and inclusion is an industry priority.
- **91%** felt there were barriers restricting Black people from progressing in the music industry.

COMMENT

- This data suggests that Black disabled people are not yet feeling the benefits of existing campaigns, and not seeing themselves represented.
- This underlines the need for persistent, ongoing work on this issue, not short-lived industry 'moments'.
- Industry discussions around race need to be intersectional, and include Black disabled people.
- Campaigns and initiatives are only worthwhile if they lead to opportunity, including financial.
- Black disabled people need to be given platforms to communicate their lived experience of barriers.

"I don't think that [Black disabled people] don't want to speak up. I think it is because there's been no reason to speak up, and there's not been a lot of support given to the Black community around learning disabilities, or in the music and media industry. It kind of feels that there's no point in doing it because it will not bring any more awareness, benefits, or support. So everyone is just kind of doing their own thing."

Jay McGregor – Radio & TV Presenter, content creator and Executive

[Read a full account of Jay's interview at the end of this report.](#)

Access to funding

“A lot of us aren’t educated in how to write funding applications.”

A snapshot of **33** Black disabled music creators who had applied for funding found that:

- Only **42%** had been successful, compared to **54%** of Black non-disabled creators.
- **48%** tend to apply to grants that are specifically targeted at Black music creators, compared to only **17%** of Black non-disabled musicians doing so.
- **70%** found application processes confusing but only **24%** had sought help for funding applications.
- **73%** said that they often find out about funding opportunities late or very close to deadlines.

COMMENT

- Interview participants reflected on the difficulties of seeking and securing funding for their music projects. It was generally felt that unless applying to targeted funding, individuals who were previously known to grant-giving teams or were experienced in the complexities of grant application and reapplication processes were more likely to be successful.
- Considering this sentiment alongside the survey responses, there also appears to be a reluctance among Black disabled musicians to apply for funding that has not been targeted towards them or their communities. This is a concern that needs to be explored in more detail.
- Even for those who could navigate the grant application information, steps and deadlines, additional barriers are often present. Support for people who are neurodivergent, have additional learning needs, or chronic fatigue are specifically supported by some organisations during the application process, but many musicians are not aware that they can ask for help. In addition, many creators stated the reluctance they feel in asking for assistance.
- Information about funding opportunities does not appear to be reaching this group with the sufficient consistency, with many only finding out by chance.
- Another thing that organisations need to take into account when designing funding applications is the barriers the process may raise. Attitude is Everything’s Accessible Employment Guide explores access barriers, but other barriers related to ethnicity can also be created. For example, if an application requires someone’s full name, some potential applications may be concerned about ethnicism – discrimination based on people’s perceptions due to their name.

“That Access to Work application is a nightmare. It’s overly long because you got to show them what your income was for the last two years... it’s a whole process. If you don’t have an accountant, I don’t know how you go through all of that.”

“I thought it was only employees that could apply for Access to Work, but I applied for money to go to a project that’s ongoing. I had to be able to Uber there and back, so that I’ll be in a fit state when I get there, and a fit state when I get back home. Which was a big deal. So, I asked about that. And they’re like, yeah, OK, we can fund that... It made it so that I can take more jobs because I don’t have to go on London Transport.”

COMMENT

- Whilst there were no findings related to intersectional barriers and Access to Work, we've included these quotes to highlight its importance and the barriers the process of applying can create.
- All industry employers should inform themselves about Access to Work and communicate its existence to employees – not all disabled people know it exists.
- It's another system to navigate and to know about, and there is a real need for increased industry awareness of what it can offer – including for self-employed people.

Career progression

"Some things demand that you need to be there in person. I don't want to be seen as the Black girl that's lazy, she never comes out. I don't want to be seen as the person that doesn't want to bond with everybody because it's about bonding. It's like 'she's antisocial'. No, I can't make it without cancelling two days' work."

- **81%** of Black disabled creators do not feel there is a clear career trajectory or path for them. Only 8% said they had felt supported through each career stage.
- **61%** of Black disabled music creators and professionals had received no mentoring or support towards their current roles.
- **61%** of Black disabled music creators felt they had been ignored, overlooked, or dismissed in important conversations about their own music.
- **47%** of Black disabled music creators said they have been paid at a lower rate than other music makers working on the same event and for a similar amount of time.
- **36%** of Black disabled music professionals have been stopped or dissuaded from applying for a job within the industry because of racism.
- **58%** have been offered contracts that compare unfavourably with non-Black contemporaries.

"I'm a Black woman. Being a Black woman. Being a plus-sized Black woman. Being a Black woman with a child. Being a Black woman with a child with 'special needs'. Then you're going to add a disability to that? That's why I don't tell them. I don't want to say. If I get the job, you'll find out."

COMMENT

- Interviewees who had accessed informal or formal networking and mentorships schemes said they found these connections invaluable in terms of helpful guidance.
- These schemes were helpful in placing experienced creators or professionals as mentors with less experienced industry peers from similar backgrounds. In these cases, mentees were especially keen to pass positive experiences on by becoming mentors themselves in the future.
- Networking and progression can prove challenging when Black disabled music creators and professionals are not taken seriously or included in important career decisions. This highlights the regularity with which people are not being supported and not in positions where they can advocate for themselves.
- Career progression in the music industry can take several forms, leaving individuals often looking to their peers for comparison. This underlines the importance of representation – the career progression stories of Black disabled people need to be told as beacons for others.

"There's a way that you sit in concert, you've got to be quiet, everything's very strict and if you don't do x, y, z you're not included. The fact that there's all these traditions that we're still trying to grasp on to makes

it so hard to make the music accessible to other people because it's been built on this traditionalist mindset of white male privileged people."

Lavandar Rodriguez – Composer and Musician

Read a full account of Lavandar's interview at the end of this report.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

"At the moment I feel like even if people did know support exists, they don't feel comfortable, safe enough, trusting enough to go for that help."

- **70%** of Black disabled music creators and professionals said that they have experienced racism or racial bias towards them. 22% have accessed counselling as a result of these experiences.
- Just **9%** of Black disabled creators and professionals said they felt satisfied with how they are supported by the music industry.
- **55%** of Black disabled music creators and **50%** of Black disabled music professionals had needed to use charities and resources to support their mental wellbeing in the industry.
- 15% of Black disabled creators had sought support from MIND compared to 7% of all creators surveyed for the original report. 13% had sought support from Samaritans compared to 6% of all creators.
- 19% of Black disabled professionals had sought support from MIND compared to 10% of all professionals surveyed in for the original report. 6% had sought support from Samaritans compared to 3% of all professionals.

Recent studies into mental health assistance for Black African and Caribbean people have shown that much more proactive support is needed. In the UK, Black people are "less likely to access mental health support via traditional pathways due to stigma and mistrust of mental health services", with a need for collaborative and culturally relevant approaches (**Devonport et al., 2022**).

Building up systems of trust is hugely important in providing appropriate guidance and frameworks, and part of this is understanding the breadth of cultures within 'the Black community'. Some Black musicians come from social or cultural backgrounds where it is seen as unusual or unnecessary to seek counselling or therapy for mental health reasons, an issue often not understood by service providers and mental health practitioners.

This potential disconnect is highlighted in the data that shows despite 70% of Black disabled music creators and professionals saying that they had experienced racism or racial bias towards them, only 22% have sought counselling as a direct result of this experience.

“For me, my personal experience has been I’ve been treated differently based on my race, gender and disability. So I don’t think it even has been separate. My experiences have been hand in hand, and I felt so shit sometimes because some men don’t really take to being in a position where they have to directly report to a Black woman on a day-to-day basis who also has a learning disability. Like, who are you to tell me what to do, but it’s my job, though. It’s kind of like they can’t get with that. It’s always micro-aggressions but it’s so embedded it’s the norm. I was strong, putting on a brave face that I could handle the comments and the situation. But then when I got away from it, it was like, wow. Like this person really insinuated to me - “You’re dumb, you’re stupid, like they said to me, you can’t manage this project on your own, you’re female, and you’ve got dyslexia, and you want to be taken seriously on big projects with big clients.” So imagine that being your every day and on top of that, you’ve got people making you feel shit about that. That’s going to affect you at some point and that’s the mental health issue that it gave me.”

Esta Rae - Senior Events Manager

[Read a full account of Esta’s interview at the end of this report.](#)

Knowing where to turn

Several interviewees highlighted the difficulties in knowing exactly how to find mental health support. Common methods of identifying resources were through word of mouth or relying on chance encounters rather than already knowing about help in advance.

Cultural and systemic industry barriers can prevent Black musicians from accessing support for either their physical or mental health, leading many to feel they are completely alone through much of their careers. Individual respondents cited not just the need for individual accommodations, but also the importance of enhanced signposting of existing networks targeting Black disabled musicians with support for building new ones.

Black disabled survey participants reported that although there have been well-known publicity campaigns championing the need for improved mental health support, industry-wide change is still yet to be seen. In an industry where overwork is not unusual, this creates additional barriers and challenges for them as they navigate their careers.

Some good experiences

Whilst we think there is clear scope for music industry support organisations to further develop their services and comms to meet the needs of Black disabled people, people have had good experiences:

“Somehow, I made a phone call to Music Support. I don’t know how I got their number. I remember I was walking in, and I called that number, and I didn’t even know how to speak to the lady to say, ‘this is what I’m feeling’ or ‘this is what I’m not feeling’ or what’s going on. The lady [I spoke to] had the most compassion and patience and ability to hold space in the perfect way for what I needed at that exact time. On that exact day, the hour, that minute, that second. It just kept me floating rather than sinking, and that was enough to kickstart the process. Then she referred me to BAPAM and Help Musicians.”

Damaging industry culture

An industry-wide culture of ‘not talking about it’ was highlighted by several respondents, pointing to the need for more work to normalise talking about mental and physical health. Whilst a lot of progress been made in recent years around mental health discussions in the industry, these have often left out discussions around illness, ableism and racism.

“Artists don’t go around telling other artists what they’re going through. It’s not a conversation. It’s not a talking point in that artist-to-artist relationship. That’s why I would find out ten years into working with an artist... “All this time you needed a kidney transplant? I thought we were cool – why didn’t you tell me?” Because we just don’t talk about it.”

Experiences with promoters was reported as mixed. Unfortunately, we know that it only takes one bad experience for someone to pull back from disclosing their access requirements next time.

“Some promoters will be quite compassionate and empathetic and be like, “you know, we’ll get you a quiet area, will get you a darkened room. We’ll do this and we’ll do that. Thanks for letting me know. I appreciate that”. But some people are just like “Oooh, a pain in the butt. Stress. I don’t need it”.

Masking and disclosure

The impact of masking was deep for one participant – something that impacts many artists with so-called ‘hidden’ health or mental health conditions.

“Having to go to rehearsal, no one’s interested in what’s going on at home, really. And you have to put this face on. I always remember going in and then crying all the way home. And then a lot of the time drinking all night so that I wouldn’t have to deal with what was going on in my feelings.”

Publicly disclosing lived experience as a disabled person is always a personal choice, and we respect anyone’s right not to. Opening up in a way that benefits you can be hampered if the people around you don’t have the necessary awareness to make it comfortable. This is where training comes in, and having policies in place to ensure colleagues become educated as necessary if someone discloses.

However, there are signs that more and more artists are interested in exploring and discussing this part of their identities if given the opportunity. The industry needs to respond to this by consciously making space for Black disabled people to share their lived experiences if they wish to do so.

“The people that I work with, some know about my sickle cell and some don’t because some won’t understand.”

Some disabled people don’t have the choice whether or not to disclose due to body differences or use of equipment that is readily identifiable. The barriers that might arise from this can only be tackled by greater representation of diverse Black disabled people across the industry alongside disability awareness training.

“I don’t mind advocating for it, I don’t mind starting those conversations because I know for sure, like hands down, there are emerging artists who are going through this 100%.”

BLACK DISABLED CREATORS AND PROFESSIONALS WANT:

TO BE SEEN.

TO BE HEARD.

TO KNOW THAT BLACK DISABLED EXPERIENCE IS VALUED BY THE UK'S MUSIC INDUSTRY.

What needs to happen now

We as an industry need to ensure that:

Representation

- Health and mental health support services and industry mentoring schemes recruit Black disabled people as professionals and volunteers.
- Conferences, networking events and industry showcases consider disabled people and their access requirements from planning through to delivery.
- Conferences and industry forums provide platforms to Black disabled creators and professionals to share their lived experience AND their professional expertise.
- Black disabled people are involved in marketing campaigns in meaningful and non-tokenistic ways.

Consultation

- Black disabled people are involved in the planning and evaluation of services designed for artists and professionals.
- Safe spaces for Black disabled creative industries students are created to share their lived experiences and be able to trust that feedback will be acted upon.
- Black disabled people are paid for their time if they are asked to contribute their expertise and lived experience to benefit organisations.
- Employers consult Black disabled employees on their mentoring needs and actively support people to access career development opportunities.

Commitment

- This report and podcast are shared and responded to across teams.
- We all educate ourselves further about racism, ablism and Black disabled experience.
- We collectively put in place plans to be working on the above this year, next year and the years after.
- Organisations sign up to Black Lives in Music's upcoming Anti-Racism Code of Conduct and download and implement Attitude is Everything's Accessible Employment Guide.

Engage with this report

Share and respond to this report on your socials using **#UnseenUnheardReport**.

If you'd like us to share and discuss the findings of this report with your team or network, contact:

Attitude is Everything via info@attitudeiseverything.org.uk

Or Black Lives In Music via info@blim.org.uk

Engage with Black Lives in Music

- Spread the word about our movement and follow us across all social media [@BlackLivesInMusic](#)
- Organisations can register to become a member, find out the different membership plans [here](#)
- Musicians and music professionals can take part in our BLiM survey [here](#)
- [Make a donation here](#) to enable us to change the narrative in the music industry [here](#)

Your involvement with Black Lives in Music will help to transform and future-proof our industry, expand the reach of jazz and classical music, increase revenue, deepen relationships, enhance reputation and attract and retain the best talent in our profession.

Engage with Attitude is Everything

- Download and implement our [Accessible Employment Guide](#).
- Learn more about our [Next Stage](#) and [Beyond The Music](#) initiatives breaking down the barriers disabled artists and professionals face.
- Join our [Next Stage Talent Development Group](#).
- Book a [Disability Equality Training](#) session for your team or a place on an open session.
- [Support our work via a donation or fundraising on our behalf](#).

Help stand up to discrimination, bullying and harassment in the workplace by engaging with the [Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority](#) as it begins its vital work.

What we are going to do

In response to these findings and conclusions on what needs to happen now, Black Lives In Music and Attitude is Everything intend to lead by example.

Over the years ahead we will be joining forces to:

- Recruit Black disabled people with diverse access requirements to help steer our joint work and compensate them for their time.
- Create peer support and platform-sharing opportunities for Black disabled people linked to Black Lives in Music's networks and Attitude is Everything's Next Stage and Beyond The Music networks.
- Facilitate action-focussed conversations with Attitude is Everything's Next Stage Talent Development Group, industry health and mental health support organisations and other industry forums.
- Produce content to educate industry professionals about Black disabled lived experience, including a video podcast series speaking with creators and professionals involved in this study.
- Exchange our training to ensure our staff understand how racism operates in the music industry, how to be anti-racist, the ways in which disabled people can be discriminated against, and how to break down disabling barriers in our own work.

Unseen Unheard podcast series

The first joint action from this report is the launch of the Unseen Unheard podcast series, interviewing Black disabled creators and industry professionals at different career stages about their experiences of navigating the industry.

The series will be hosted on the **Black Lives In Music YouTube channel**.

About us

Black Lives in Music and Attitude is Everything are Black and Disabled-led Arts Council England Investment Portfolio Support Organisations.

Black Lives in Music

Black Lives in Music are at the vanguard of the effort to combat racism, uniting organisations and musicians to create a truly inclusive and diverse music industry.

We use data and insights to campaign for equity and we support the empowerment of Black musicians and professionals to realise their aspirations.

Black Lives in Music wishes to work with organisations, ensembles and companies throughout the UK music industry. To open dialogues and build relationships in the true spirit of working together.

We want to collaborate with all agents of the UK music industry to achieve equality for people of colour so they can express themselves in all genres and in all areas of our music ecosystem.

Learn more about our work via our website: www.blim.org.uk

Attitude is Everything

We connect disabled people with music and live event industries to improve access together.

Our vision is to see music and live event industries valuing disabled people as audience members, performers, professionals and volunteers. Our work won't stop until this becomes the norm.

Through our work:

- Disabled people lead the change.
- Industry professionals learn from real-life experience and expertise.
- Barriers are identified and removed.
- Best practice is celebrated and rewarded.
- More disabled people play their part.

Learn more about all of our work via our website: www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk

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Data analysis carried out by freelance researcher and professional musician

Dr Uchenna Ngwe.

Final report based on input from:

- Dr Uchenna Ngwe, oboist, curator, educator, and researcher
- Charisse Beaumont, Chief Executive Officer, Black Lives in Music
- Roger Wilson, Managing Director, Black Lives in Music
- Patricia Odje, Marketing and Communications lead, Black Lives in Music
- Joy Addo, Digital Communications Assistant, Attitude is Everything
- Jacob Adams, Head of Research and Campaigns, Attitude is Everything
- Miss Jacqui, Trustee, Attitude is Everything
- Aminder Virdee, Trustee, Attitude is Everything
- Hakeem Stevens, Researcher

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Appendix 1: Full interview accounts

Jay McGregor – Radio & TV Presenter, content creator and Executive

Jay McGregor is a Black female Radio & TV Presenter and executive from London who hosts a weekly show on Rerezent Radio. A university graduate and BRIT School Alumni, Jay has been working in the industry for under a decade and has a disclosed learning disability of Dyslexia and Dyscalculia.

Jay's learning disability was officially diagnosed when she was at university studying for her BA in Communication & Media Studies; however, she describes the issue affecting her since her school days "It was undiagnosed, I knew that I did have some sort of learning difficulty growing up all throughout my childhood, but my school never had the funds to be able to apply for the testing even when we pushed for it". In Jay's case, she was fortunate to have grown up in a family who not only worked within the education system but were able to provide her with additional support and classes paid for out of their own pocket "outside of school when it wasn't sufficient".

Upon being officially diagnosed at university with Dyslexia and Dyscalculia she described the level of help that was given as immense: "I was entitled to a laptop, to software, which really helped my dissertation and (university) really helped me by getting me a mentor. They provided me with an advisor that would help me go through everything I needed, which was so beneficial. It's like I wanted to be mad about all the times in primary school when I was struggling, and I didn't have extra time on tests, and I didn't have extra help, and I didn't have an advisor that would look out for me. But you kind of just have to look past that otherwise, you'd be mad forever."

Jay's father was also a well-respected figure in the Black music community. She describes her journey into the industry as falling in love with radio and presenting during her teenage years "after finding an alternative to dance, which was my main forte (at the BRIT school)" but was concerned with disclosing her learning disability to people due to fear of being judged. Despite her official diagnosis in university, Jay describes her concerns as "having to be able to adapt. I was very hesitant to disclose. I was worried that it would impact me negatively".

After graduating, Jay describes her journey into the industry as a young Black disabled woman: "I wasn't confident with disclosing it at all. And I would probably make work harder for myself, and it would give me trouble a lot more because I wasn't disclosing it, and I was just taking extra precautions for myself to try and help me in the industry". McGregor also says that she wasn't aware of anyone that had openly disclosed if they had disabilities in her journey into the industry, let alone people of colour. She says that she felt isolated during this period "but I tried really hard not to let this affect me. Because I knew it was something that I had to kind of deal with, and I took it upon myself to deal with it on my own rather than disclosing it. So it kind of felt like I had to deal with the consequences of that."

Within her first initial roles within the industry, Jay said that even though her contract had stated there was help available to those with disabilities, it wasn't highlighted at any point. When Jay finally found the courage to disclose her disability within the industry, it was a game-changing experience. "It (the contract wording) felt very generic. So I thought, you know what, for once, I'm actually gonna push on that and actually apply pressure to see if this is a genuine offer, to see if this is a company that stands by its word and if it's actually going to be beneficial to me and beneficial to anybody else like me, that is young. That's new (disabled employee). That is Black. That's a woman and coming forward to a big corporation for help". Jay describes some of the benefits of disclosing her disabilities to her employers: "Once I was kind of able to disclose it, and then I was kind of having to excuse myself and excused any extra length I needed to take to read things or any extra time on deadlines. And it was only at that point that people were much more supportive, and like, 'oh, you should have said, that's not a problem', but (the issue is) it's not openly known that it's not going to be something that's going to hinder you". McGregor continues by saying "I

think it's helped my career I can be a lot more open about it. I am not afraid to be able to lead with that and mention it if I need to with jobs and employment. I put it at the end of my email signatures now to excuse any spelling mistakes or issues... I am now really confident within myself."

In terms of getting additional help that Jay needed to flourish within her role, she found the initial diagnosis she was given from the university has helped her guide her employers. As a consequence, they were able to provide the assistance she required "I was able to download assistive telepathy software, which they paid for, and I had to provide the recommendations that were given from my learning disability assessment at uni and kind of verify what the systems do, what they can help with, and what I would find good to work with". The end result of this disclosure to her employers was that Jay found that it made their job easier "because I wasn't working so hard to play catch up with everybody else".

Jay found this experience and the support of her employers empowering, and throughout her continuing journey in the industry has met more disabled people and more people of colour in her network. However, she didn't necessarily feel like race or gender was an overriding intersectional factor in her particular case "All people with disabilities are treated like an afterthought when it comes to working in media companies and finding out what sort of assistive packages you have". Jay goes on to say that the issues she has observed were "What training do you have? What extra time can you give to help go through things? It felt like it hadn't been done before, which was really strange, because you think that it would be something that was quite easy to do, but it was something that was very new to everybody, having someone being so vocal about it and kind of demanding that things were put in place".

Within the process of getting the assistance Jay needed the onus was her to lead on the initiative "It really just felt like, we don't really know what we're doing. We don't want to misstep so we're gonna let you lead on things that we think will help you, and then you can kind of tell us what you need." Jay describes the process as "empowering" and one that has made her a change maker. As a consequence, other new executives with learning difficulties have benefited from Jay's experience during their own onboarding and disclosure journey. In terms of mentoring executives and creatives of colour within the industry with disabilities, similar to her experience at university, Jay feels it would help most disabled people to have that option available to them in the workplace but not a mandatory requirement. "Yeah, I think that would have been very helpful to have a designated guide that would be able to get me through the workplace. And like an understanding to what support is available."

McGregor would like to see changes to help those with unseen disabilities navigate the industry "I think I just like more awareness and more support. I'm seeing a lot more funds that are being brought forward for people and people of colour and Ethnic Minorities are being welcomed". Jay elaborates on this point further by saying "But I'd also love to see people with learning difficulties like dyslexia or dyscalculia, dyspraxia and other things welcomed because they don't seem to be taken as seriously by the industry. Jay would also like more people from the Black community to feel empowered to disclose their disabilities within the industry "I don't think that they don't want to speak up. I think it is because there's been no reason to speak up, and there's not been a lot of support given to the Black community for learning disabilities or in the music and media industry. It kind of feels that there's no point in doing it because it will not bring any more awareness, benefits, or support. So everyone is just kind of doing their own thing."

Michal Grierson aka The House Poet – DJ, Radio Broadcaster, Music Producer and Engineer

Michael Grierson aka The House Poet, is a music veteran of Mixed Race heritage with over two decades of industry experience. Starting his career in the late 90s as a Club DJ, he then progressed on to being a Radio Broadcaster, Music Producer, Studio Engineer and Radio Executive. However, House Poet has been navigating his time in the industry battling ignorance and overcoming obstacles, having been diagnosed with both physical and mental health disabilities.

In his teenage years prior to his music career, young Michael was diagnosed with some hearing issues but told that it shouldn't be an issue with no additional help given. However, eight years ago he was diagnosed officially with an ear condition called osteosclerosis. House Poet describes the difficulties he faced at the time: "The music volume was lower in one ear than the other. Thus, when I realised that my hearing had been decreasing, I went for some audio tests, and it was confirmed that I had around twenty per cent hearing in one and sixty per cent in the other. But during the last seven years, it's got gradually worse. So I have been wearing hearing aids to help me with my music career and daily life".

However, during the lockdown, House Poet's hearing started to deteriorate; the NHS decided after two years of using stronger hearing aids that an operation was needed to improve his quality of life. Unfortunately, the surgeons made a mistake during the process and sadly made him permanently deaf in one ear. Consequently, Michael was in a wheelchair for several months and was diagnosed with vertigo and tinnitus. He now uses a walking stick to help him with his new mobility impairment and was additionally diagnosed with depression and PTSD in the aftermath of the surgeon's errors. House Poet also recently had a permanent implant placed in his ear to help amplify sound. This technology works in tandem with his headphones and a mobile app to help him with his DJ'ing, radio presenting, producing and engineering. He describes the last three years as a learning curve from being very active, and playing sports to having mobility, mental health and degraded hearing issues.

Despite being in the industry for several years, it was in the last eight years that his career took off in tandem with his hearing disability being officially recognised by doctors. House Poet describes this as a "big loss" and he was scared to discuss his disability with other industry professionals: "It took a long time for me to actually tell anyone that I was deaf because I finally found myself now at the stage of my career where I wanted to be. To be this far in the music industry and then turn around and say to someone, you know, 'I can't really hear you' or 'I can't hear the questions'. And then being within a social environment where you've got loads of people in a creative environment, bouncing ideas of each other and not being able to hear correctly was devastating. You become the person who's the ignorant person in the room, who people think is not listening or stupid when you clearly just can't hear. So, you're now facing that battle. Do I let everyone know I can't hear, or do I just carry on struggling and get to where I need to be first and then explain?".

Michael plucked up the courage to speak to the executives at the radio station and recording studio he works at. He describes the help of his boss and his fiancé as being the catalyst for him speaking up and asking for help at work "I told the people at the station, this is what I was going through, petrified thinking that's the end of my career, and you know, they embraced it. Their support helped me and told me don't be scared to wear your hearing aid. I've had in a sense mourn the person that I once was with hearing. And now embrace the new person that is a disabled music exec, DJ, producer, engineer. And this is what I can give you, even with my hearing loss. And now, I find myself at this stage of my life going into 2023, embracing my disability and seeing where my career can go and where my disability can take me. Also, how my story can help other people and it can hopefully inspire other people that may become deaf or may already be, who may be wondering how to get into music".

House Poet had to retrain himself on how to 'hear' music based on vibrations before he received his new hearing implants: "I was learning how to mix off vibrations. Just a thud, like a waveform. And that was

enough for me to learn how to, you know, bring the mix back in and catch the riddim". However, since he has been diagnosed it hasn't been plain sailing for a talented multi-hyphenate creative. House Poet describes being discriminated against numerous times, stereotyped as being aggressive as a male of colour in a predominately white House music industry in the UK and a disabled person: "I wasn't hearing certain words, and speaking loudly, especially in an atmosphere of loud music. I didn't realise I was so loud, and many people took that as being, you know, aggressive or talking over people, and it wasn't the case. It was just I clearly because I couldn't hear people, you know? And I knew it was an issue, especially being perceived as a Black man. I knew it was an issue but it didn't deter me. There was a big stigma to me with the music industry people and being disabled and not hearing. It felt like this 'angry Black male stereotype' against me".

In another intersectional issue, House Poet describes a sound engineer at a venue discriminating against him "I have been given an assigned engineer, and he is looking at me strangely, right? He looks at me with a smirk on his face, because I've got a hearing aid in there, and he's talking down to me like I don't understand what I'm doing. So I'm not just DJ'ing but also live-streaming this event for the radio station. So I need an audio link into my equipment so I can get this broadcast stream out. This is the thing: I've worked with the guy before on a different event, and he was fine because he visibly noticed my hearing aid. This event which was post covid had more Black clubbers there this time around, his persona and demeanour were definitely changed from before. His vibe was he was upset that he had to work with me, and when I needed to speak to him loudly, he acted like I was being aggressive, but the music was loud, and obviously, I'm deaf, which he can see. He just stopped and told me abruptly, 'I'll deal with you in a minute,' and never came back. He was just not being helpful at all, not realising the urgency due to the broadcast. So I started to ask other people for other equipment I needed, but you know, it was just like no one wanted to be helpful, and then you see that I can't hear very well. But the other all-white staff at the venue told me they can't help when I knew they could".

He continues: "Because of the way I'd been treated previously by the engineer, I couldn't tell if they were treating me like this due to the nature of the event or who I was as a Black man. I started to think, is it because I'm dressed more hood than when I came before? Does he think I'm being aggressive towards him because I'm talking loudly? or is it because I am disabled that he is treating me like this? Or maybe it is all of these things? I felt horrible when I was just here to do my job; I blamed myself. But you know I'm disabled, need help, and am just getting palmed off. Was my first event after lockdown, and I had been looking forward to it, and I've been put in this hostile environment".

"If It wasn't for my love of music, I don't think I would be speaking with you right now, I was suicidal, I would have resigned to, you know, this is what I've got to live with. Now, it's my disability, and it inspires me, and I hope I can inspire others. So I will kick back now and try to live the rest of my life. And enjoy the ride".

Esta Rae – Senior Events Manager, AIM

In 2022, Esta Rae was appointed as the Senior Events Manager role at the Association of Independent Music. She has worked for many years in the music industry across events and artist management. Alongside her successes in the industry, Esta also graduated from the University of Westminster with an MA in Music Business Management.

However, Esta's journey in the music industry hasn't been smooth sailing; Esta also has disclosed learning disabilities which include dyslexia, dyspraxia and number dyspraxia which didn't get officially diagnosed until she was an adult. Esta had just begun her journey in the music industry and her BA at Goldsmiths when she had been diagnosed.

"Anything academic was a struggle at a young age... I basically was often told, for example, in school, you don't listen, pay more attention, you're reading too fast, take your time. School reports would always read, Esta's concentration is poor or Esta is unable to stick to one topic and often struggles to add basic numbers up. My GCSE grades were poor, I actually tried to get into university for many years as an adult but didn't have GCSE maths which was a requirement. I took my maths test FOUR TIMES and my driving test in an automatic car SEVEN TIMES. All this time I had no idea I was neurodiverse, but it made sense because if it wasn't something creative, I struggled with it.

Esta describes the relief of finally being diagnosed with a learning disability as an adult "I was so relieved, so welcome about it. It's one thing feeling like you can't do something and thinking you're not good enough. But it's another thing, when you understand why, because now I could get the help that I needed, I shout from the top of my voice that I'm dyslexic and proud simply because it doesn't mean anything other than my brain functions differently to the average person. So, when I found out, I wanted to empower others who are dyslexic, but I don't know if that will be the case for other people. I think that came from my experience of being fed up with struggling and not knowing why."

However, this disclosure didn't mean Esta's journey within music became any easier "I didn't get any help. A lot of that is because I feel that neurodiversity or invisible disabilities are not championed enough in the industry. The only time I have felt shit about having these difficulties stems from earlier on when I was starting out in the industry. Other than that, I was comfortable saying I needed help in my non-music industry work. However my own personal experience is that the support wasn't there with industry, because it wasn't understood what support is needed".

Describing her feelings during the process of navigating the industry: "at the time was very distressing. Still, looking back at it, I understand, but when somebody's ticking a box and saying that they have got a learning need or are disabled, there's no point in putting it there as an option to disclose if you're not gonna help people with the same disclosure, and that's why it was difficult for me. So, what I would do is I would get tasks done, but it would be a struggle. So, if it took someone two days to do it, I'd have to start a week before to complete it but the companies weren't helping me with support like computer packages known as assistive technology, as an example, but yet they asked on the form if I have a disability, you get what I mean now? It makes no sense asking".

Since becoming more vocal about her unseen disability, Esta has found a lot of people reaching out to her for support, especially senior executives. "A lot of people are coming into my DMs or emailing me, and they're embarrassed and are thanking me for being open about dyslexia etc, and they to work in the industry. They say to me as an example, 'Esta, thank you for that speaking about this because I've got dyslexia and ADHD, but I don't really know how to tell people but I just rock on, but it's crazy seeing you talk so openly about your learning struggles. I really want to tell the label but not sure if they will understand'.

In terms of intersectionality Esta's experience as a Black neurodivergent woman in the music industry has found her being discriminated against on several levels "for me, my personal experience has been I've been treated differently based on my race, gender and disability. So I don't think it even has been separate. My experiences have been hand in hand, and I felt so shit sometimes because my experience was that some people don't really take to being in a position where they have to directly report to a Black woman on a day-to-day basis who also has a learning disability. It's always micro-aggressions".

In one more overt incident, Esta reported the behaviour of the colleague. She felt it was only taken seriously when the company saw the effect the issue was having on her mental health "I want to be honest with you. I felt like I got a result because I had a breakdown for about two hours in tears. When I explained to the manager that I felt somewhat low and hopeless, I think they understood what I was feeling from being a woman because I felt downtrodden about everything the person was saying. Because remember, I was strong, putting on a brave face that I could handle the comments and the investigation into the situation. But then, when I got away from it, it was like, wow. Like this person really said to me, 'you're dumb, you're stupid, like they said to me, you can't manage this project on your own, your female, and you've got dyslexia, and you want to be taken seriously on big projects with big clients'. Esta continues, "So, imagine that being your every day experience and on top of that, you've got people making you feel shit about being dyslexic. That's going to affect you at some point and that's the mental health issue that it gave me".

In her current role at AIM, Esta says they have been highly supportive, providing her with the assistive software and providing her with more pastoral advice "Since I started at AIM last year I've not had one sick day. I haven't needed to, because I've been on full form. I feel so positive and supported with my learning needs in my day to day role. They support all my learning needs from software to the day to day mental exhaustion I sometimes have around tasks. My team step in to support me, they understand my limits but the point I'm trying to make to you is people that have disabilities; if you get the right support in place, it makes a huge difference. It just changes everything and helps me because I own it, it's mine, and I'm proud, I'm a dyslexic superhero."

In order to affect change within the industry from disabled people of colour, Esta suggests that more needs to be done during the job onboarding process by highlighting the help that people could be given. She says, "companies need more than just saying "do you consider yourself to have a disability?". I think that there needs to be something around saying to people, "what support do you think you need to do this role? Is there any specific software that you may need that will help to make it easier for you to complete tasks? It's about taking that time look at the employees needs to help them fulfil their role in the company. That is what I don't think there's enough of. Taking note that this person is very capable of doing this job but might need a little bit more support. More than a tick box is needed on a form, it needs to be the norm to be asked "how can we support your learning need?".

We need to have an industry space where neurodiverse people that are of executive level feel confident. A steering group of various people, and guess what? We all have learning needs, but we still work in the industry. You know, there just needs to be something about visibility, that's the keyword for the music industry, to help people to understand that the industry supports neurodiversity across the board, it just needs to be heard and seen more now and championed a bit more going forward as it effects a lot of people disclosed and undisclosed".

Lavender Rodriguez – Composer and Musician

When composer and musician Lavender Rodriguez began her career, navigating her way through the classical music industry as a queer Black woman quickly began to feel “isolating” in a world that shows a subconscious lenience towards “white male composers”.

“There’s a certain air about people who play classical music and obviously there’s a lot of privilege that comes with that,” Rodriguez explains. “There’s a lot of trying to play catch up because in order to get some opportunities, you just have to have the money rather than pure talent.”

After being diagnosed with ADHD during the pandemic, Rodriguez had to come to terms with the reality that the classical world, full of deadlines and strict rules around conduct, is not equipped for people who are neurodivergent. “There’s a way that you sit in concert, you’ve got to be quiet, everything’s very strict and if you don’t do x, y, z you’re not included,” she explains, “The fact that there’s all these traditions that we’re still trying to grasp on to makes it so hard to make the music accessible to other people because it’s been built on this traditionalist mindset of white male privileged people.”

The problems in the industry according to Rodriguez start at the beginning with music education. “With this whole traditional atmosphere and attitude, it’s very much like if you’re going to play music you have to learn music theory and then Mozart, Beethoven, and all the classics, but music has changed so much. They are classics, but there are other people that are classics also and other people that mean a lot more to young children than people that died 400, 500 years ago.”

Beyond the limitations of the school system, like many others Rodriguez says being on the receiving end of numerous microaggressions makes for a difficult environment for Black creators. “I found that, at least in my university and other similar organisations, when you’re asking for more representation in programming and training on how to be inclusive, it always comes down to money. When that excuse keeps being used over and over you begin to lose hope and then you don’t want to work in that environment.”

The pressures of working in the industry can impact your mental health. It is a cycle which she sees as embedded in the industry. “We need to make [the industry] more stable, so that people have the time to focus on their health. Otherwise, everyone’s health will just keep deteriorating,” she explains, also acknowledging that mental health pressures can become more apparent if you’re neurodivergent or have a disability, “trying to fit into this fast-paced ableist world, it just needs to be slower.”

Ultimately, for Rodriguez, building a more equitable industry means diversity needs to be included at the start of any project and those with power need to educate themselves on the lives and culture of different communities. “As soon as you reach out to other audiences and learn their stories and music, and their traditions, then you can start to change”.

Appendix 2: Survey participant Demographics

In April 2021, Black Lives in Music launched a survey into the experience of Black music creators and industry professionals in the UK music industry.

This resulted in the publication in October 2021 of a landmark report – **Being Black in the UK Music Industry** – that revealed systemic racism in the UK music industry.

16% of respondents identified as being of Black African, Black Caribbean, mixed African or Caribbean descent alongside being disabled people or people with longstanding health conditions that impact their daily lives.

These 149 individuals were composed of 99 creators and 50 industry professionals.

This report also features insights from three music creators and two music professionals gained through individual interviews as part of a collaboration between Black Lives in Music and Attitude is Everything.

Gender identity - creators

Male (47%)

Female (46%)

Non-binary (5%)

Other (2%)

Gender identity - professionals

Male (40%)

Female (56%)

Non-binary (2%)

Preferred not to say (2%)

Age - creators

Under 18 – 19 (6%)

20 – 24 (15%)

25 – 29 (15%)

30 – 39 (29%)

40 – 49 (20%)

50 – 59 (9%)

60 – 69 (4%)

70+ (1%)

Age - professionals

Under 18 – 19 (0%)

20 – 24 (6%)

25 – 29 (14%)

30 – 39 (24%)

40 – 49 (22%)

50 – 59 (28%)

60 – 69 (6%)

70+ (0%)