

“He’s the wicked stepfather of the UK’s electronic music scene, coming to fame amid the ghetto grime and euphoric breakbeats of ’90s rave”

KEEPING
IT REAL

Alex Diggins talks authenticity, Bristol’s ley lines and getting to die every Christmas with James Bond, to musician and artist Goldie ahead of his appearance at The Downs Festival

Goldie’s got music on his mind. This shouldn’t surprise us. The man’s been active in underground music since at least the mid ’80s; he had the first drum & bass album to go gold in the UK with 1995’s *Timeless*, and he’s been steadily producing them ever since, including 2017’s *The Journey Man*. He’s the wicked stepfather of the UK’s electronic music scene: coming to fame amid the ghetto grime and euphoric breakbeats of ’90s rave, and shepherding it from the niche experimentalism of jungle to today’s chart-topping dubstep.

But even so, his sheer eloquence on the subject takes me aback. He’s unquenchable: a flood of names, tracks and opinions pours out of him. Wherever I turn the conversation, trying to expand on his extraordinary career – which spans West Coast graffiti artist to *Strictly Come Dancing* contestant to *EastEnders* villain – he turns inevitably back to the music. Which is just fine. Goldie being Goldie, you let him do his thing.

And his thing now apparently includes avant-garde jazz. He’s wrapping up production on a collaboration with the singer Natalie Williams, and he’s full of enthusiasm for her. “[Natalie] trusts me, her music is amazing. It moves the jazz world forward. It’s new age stuff.”

I ask him whether it’s a departure: the artist who came from a West Midlands foster home and made his name on the harsh beats of d&b, noodling around with avant-garde jazz. Not a bit of it, he replies. “I’ve always wanted to do a down-tempo project. Now I’ve managed to do that successfully, and I’m very happy with that”.

Being avant-garde, whether in electronic music or graffiti culture, has always informed Goldie's career. He points to the example of Bristol's street art: "I can guarantee that 95% of these people didn't go to art school. They're all properly self-taught. I don't mean that in an exclusionary way – there's been a massive explosion in the way people respect and appreciate graffiti post-Banksy."

Banksy's Bristol's most famous – and most commodified – expression of urban authenticity, but to Goldie, self-reliance is as important as being iconic. "I haven't come via the internet, so I don't need to culturally jump on whatever's happening at the time." If that's a criticism of Banksy and his fame, then it's an uncharacteristically guarded one.

But Goldie's twin careers as musician and graffiti artist share more than a concern with pushing boundaries and staying authentic. "I use my synaesthesia and dyslexia to channel my creativity. I don't play an instrument but I have a very good ear. Every piece I do is a melting pot of ideas so every time I finish I always have an idea for the next one." I get the impression that Goldie pities those bedroom DJs, chasing a fickle public attention online, with "thousands of unfinished tracks". Pre-internet, his career had to be built on equal parts inspiration and organisation – "I had to have a plan going into a situation. Back then you had to hire a studio, a technician, an engineer and you had to pay for it!"

It's an approach he seems to have applied to his entire working life. I ask him about his forays into acting (he appeared in Guy Ritchie's *Snatch*, Bond movie *The World is Not Enough*, as well as *EastEnders* and *Strictly*). He's sanguine that it failed to catch alight in the same way as his music: "I'm a love or hate character. But I'm not



Goldie won't eat his cereal

about isolating myself from culture – I'm immersed in it. You can make me the monkey on the barrel any time you like, if you're going to pay me 80 grand and put my kids through university. I get to die every Christmas on *James Bond* – how many other people can say that?"

Sometimes, pushing boundaries failed to pay, though. "I had to deal with the fact I was making music that was so far ahead, I wasn't making any money from it. I've been riding the wave of culture since the '80s."

Part of riding that wave, it seems, is to see that culture – street culture, ghetto identity – be co-opted by the mainstream. "In every culture over time, there will be an element of gentrification. You look at the main fashion houses – they decide that street wear is the way forward 35 years too late. Well, they're fucked. But culture does what it says on the tin: it has to have roots in something. Once you have those roots it's very hard to shake. It's the barbarians from within that conquer."

Bristol has that deep-rooted culture, he claims.

"I'm really excited to come back here. The point of playing *The Downs* is partly the told-you-so aspect: 35 years ago, people thought we were bonkers, we were so far ahead of the curve. Now everyone's followed suit. Bristol's always had this really beautiful musical heritage – it's the ley lines, the energy. The show will have no backing tracks, just human beings playing electronic music, live. And that's real."

And so we're back to those twin poles guiding Goldie's career: music and authenticity. "Most artists are grounded people, but you have to be aware of the water that you're swimming in. The inner struggle is to keep that water clear. As soon as those waters become cloudy, when you go out of your depth, you risk going in circles. Like, I became a parody of myself in the '90s. But you have to detach yourself from all that and realise: it's all part of the journey." ■

Goldie will be dishing music – and a little philosophy – at the Downs Festival on 1 September; www.thedownsbristol.com

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Mixed pre-Downs messaging from Goldie and Noel