V&A East Museum

Resource created by Linett Kamala



The Music is Black

A British Story

Welcome by Linett Kamala



Linett Kamala aged 15 at Notting Hill Carnival 1985 © Linett Kamala

I am delighted to welcome you to this educational resource, which I have written to accompany The Music is Black: A British Story. As an interdisciplinary artist, DJ, academic, former Headteacher and Founding Director of LIN KAM ART, my creative practice explores Jamaican sound system culture, Black British music histories and the power of storytelling through art and music. Known as the "Sound System Queen" at the age of 15, I became one of the first female DJs to perform on a sound system at Notting Hill Carnival in 1985 and I continue to advocate for the recognition and celebration of Black music and cultural heritage.

Black music is far more than entertainment; it is a powerful record of migration, resilience, resistance, identity and creativity.

From the enduring musical traditions that survived the transatlantic slave trade chattel slavery, to the emergence of genres such as reggae, lovers rock, jungle, trip hop, grime and drill, Black British music tells essential stories about identity, community and belonging.

I hope that this resource inspires you to listen closely, think critically and continue exploring the remarkable contributions of Black artists and communities whose influence has shaped Britain and continues to resonate across the world today.

The Music is Black: A British Story is the inaugural exhibition at the new V&A East Museum in Stratford, East London, opening alongside the museum from 18 April 2026 to 3 January 2027.

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 that lead contemporary culture.

The pack is suitable for teachers of the following subjects: Music, History, Art and Design, Performance, Media Studies, Business studies. It can also reference supporting careers education, as well as those looking to inspire students to discover and engage with the stories, creativity and lasting influence of Black music, while thinking critically about its role in shaping British history and identity.



V&A East Museum © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Guidance for exploring the exhibition



The Music is Black, the exhibition is recommended for Key Stages 3-5. This resource can be adapted for different year groups and learning settings.

This exhibition includes historical material, music and film clips that reflect some of the difficult experiences and histories of the people and communities represented. This includes references to enslavement, racist ideologies and language as well as some violent, explicit, or otherwise distressing content.

These materials are included to help provide context and support an understanding of the stories being explored. Teachers are encouraged to review the exhibition content and consider the needs of their students when planning a visit. Free teacher tickets are available from our website.

The Music is Black exhibition has an accompanying audio soundscape, which plays automatically and changes as you move through the space. Before entering, our visitor services team will provide each visitor with headphones.

The exhibition is designed to be experienced with the soundscape. Depending on the needs of your group, you may find it helpful to have moments where students can choose to remove their headphones, pause and focus on reading labels, look closely at objects, or discuss what they see with their group.

The Music is Black: A British Story © David Parry for the V&A

Introduction

The Music is Black: A British Story

The Music is Black: A British Story explores over 125 years of Black music-making in Britain and its profound influence on British culture. Through sound, fashion, photography, design and personal objects the exhibition demonstrates how Black communities have shaped national identity through creativity and innovation, often in the face of racism, exclusion and social inequality. Music becomes more than entertainment: it is a form of storytelling, resistance, self-expression and economic empowerment.

The themes in this resource pack connect strongly to The Music is Black exhibition. Students are encouraged to consider how objects, clothing, album artwork, instruments and technologies featured in the exhibition can communicate identity and social change.

Defining Black Music: 'For me the answer lies partly in continuity and partly in change. The exhibition traces long musical lineages shaped by the dispersal of African peoples and the creation of new forms in new worlds, while also paying particular attention to the decades from the 1970s onwards, when Black artists born in Britain began making music grounded in their own distinctly Black British identities. In that sense, the exhibition is not simply a survey of genres or stars, but an exploration of how music carries memory, movement, politics and belonging across generations.' [1]

1. Definition of Black Music by Jacqueline Springer Curator Africa & Diaspora: Performance at the V&A and Lead Curator of the exhibition The Music is Black: A British Story

Context



The Music is Black: A British Story
© David Parry for the V&A

Black British music is a story of movement, survival, resilience and creativity. Its roots run deep and can be traced back to indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and African continent, the forced displacement of millions of enslaved Africans through chattel slavery the transatlantic slave trade, the impact of colonialism and the enduring legacies of enslavement. Despite unimaginable horrors, their descendants retained and adapted musical traditions, rhythms, spiritual practices and forms of storytelling that travelled across the African and Caribbean diaspora.

From the early 1900s onwards, and particularly the migration from the Caribbean in the early twentieth century to Britain, particularly during the Windrush era, these cultural traditions continued to evolve, giving rise to genres such as jazz, calypso, ska, reggae, lovers rock, jungle, trip hop, grime and drill. Together, these musical forms reflect histories, experiences, struggles and aspirations of Black communities in Britain that have profoundly shaped Britain's cultural landscape. People of African and Caribbean heritage brought with them musical traditions, rhythms and ideas that transformed Britain's cultural landscape.

These musical forms are more than entertainment; they are records of history. They tell stories of identity, racism, community, resistance and joy. Black British music has shaped fashion, language, art, dance and popular culture, influencing generations of artists and audiences both in the UK and around the world.

Learning about Black British music is important because it helps us to understand a fuller and more inclusive history of Britain. It highlights the creativity and contributions of communities whose stories have often been overlooked or underrepresented. Exploring this history encourages us to think critically about society, while also recognising music as a powerful tool for self-expression, social change and collective memory.

This education pack invites learners to explore how Black British music travelled, transformed and inspired new cultural movements, and to consider how its legacy continues to shape contemporary Britain today.

Section 1

Genre: Lovers Rock
Themes: Joy, Identity

Lovers Rock



Photograph of Deborahe Glasgow, inkjet print, early 1990s © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Michele Poorman

Emerging in London during the 1970s through sound system culture, Lovers Rock blended reggae, rock steady and r&b rhythms with themes of love, relationships and everyday life. Created largely by young Black Britons of Caribbean heritage, the genre provided spaces of joy, belonging and cultural pride during periods of racial tension and discrimination. It also created opportunities for independent labels, producers and community-led music businesses.

This music genre was largely excluded from mainstream popular culture until Janet Kay's memorable appearance on Top of the Pops in 1979 when her song Silly Games went to no.2 in the U.K. chart.

\+ In this section of the exhibition, look for the iconic cover photograph for Carroll Thompson's 1981 debut Lovers Rock album, Hopelessly in Love captured by Desmond Bailey.

Discuss

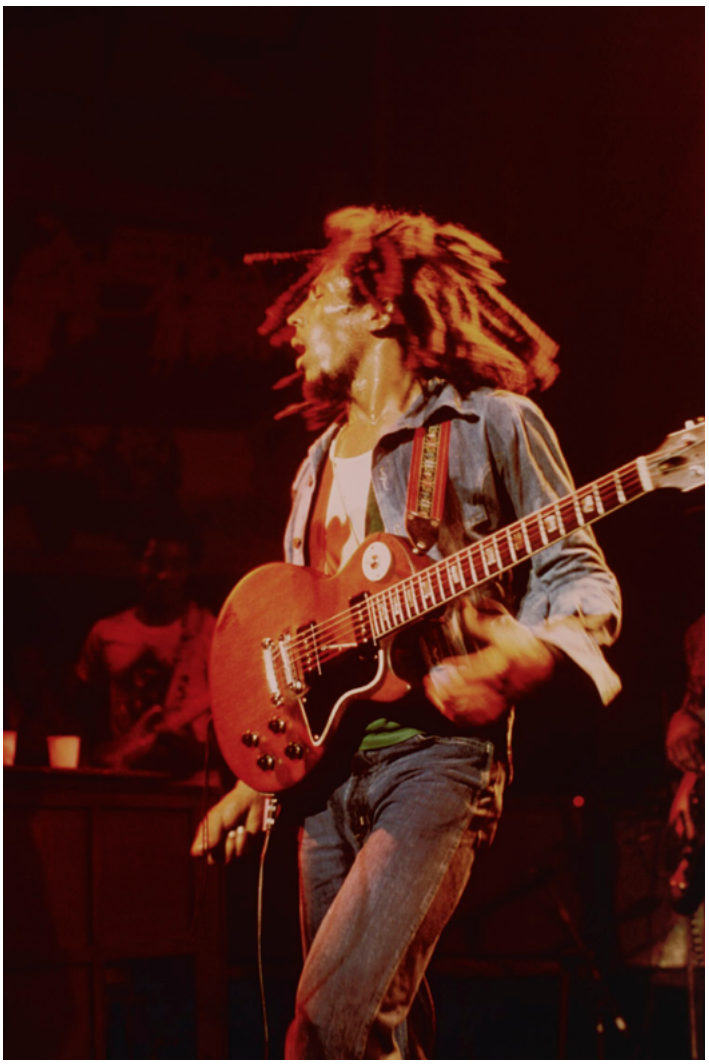
Why might music about love and joy also be considered a form of resistance? How can music help maintain cultural identity across generations?

How does the juxtaposition of a luxury fur coat with an ordinary, raw London street corner capture the complex, dual identity of life for those who created British Lovers Rock?

What do you think would be the modern day equivalent of this photograph?

Discuss themes of love, friendship, hope and resilience found in Lovers Rock lyrics









Sign for The Blue Note club, 1993, Logo designed by Tom Hingston, Object courtesy of Ed Piller. Image courtesy of the V&A, London

This photograph was featured on the album Bob Marley and the Wailers Live! Dennis Morris, Bob Marley at the Lyceum Theatre, London, 1975 © Photo by Dennis Morris

Poster advertising the performer Winston Reedy at Palais, Nottingham © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Dress designed by Arabella Pollen, worn by Betty Boo to attend and perform at the Brit Awards, 1991 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Arabella Pollen



Leather coat and trousers worn by Seal. Coat made by Carpe Diem, 1990s. Trousers made by Chrome Hearts, 1990s © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Music is Black: A British Story © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Dress designed, made and worn by Rowetta to perform at Glastonbury Festival, 2017 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Rowetta

Poster advertising the performer Manu Dibango at Odeon, Hammersmith, London, 1979 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London







Section 1 – Activity

Learning Areas:
Art & Design, Graphic Communication, Fashion

Designing Cultural Identity

Black British music movements have often developed distinctive visual styles through clothing, logos, flyers, magazines and album artwork – like the examples shown on pages 9–10.

Task

Design any one of the following:

+ A concert poster
+ Album cover
+ Fashion piece
+ Record label logo
+ Digital campaign for a new music event

Include symbols, colours and imagery that communicate:

+ Community
+ Heritage
+ Innovation
+ Pride

Listen

Black Pride by Kofi, 1988

Key Skills

Emotional literacy through exploring how music can support wellbeing, healing and emotional expression

Reflecting on the importance of safe spaces and community gathering

Understanding the importance of culture and identity in the music industry

Explore more

Other music genres from the exhibition which relate to the themes of joy and identity

+ Roots & Influences

Section 2

Genre: Jungle Drum ‘N’ Bass
Themes: Creativity, Entrepreneurship

Jungle Drum ‘N’ Bass



Developed in British cities during the early 1990s, Jungle and Drum & Bass combined Jamaican sound system culture, dancehall hip-hop, electronic music and fast breakbeats. These genres reflected multicultural urban Britain and demonstrated how new technologies could be used creatively by young people.

Photograph by Dave Swindells, ‘Fabio and Grooverider observe the street party euphoria on Tottenham Court Road’, Giclée print, 1988 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Dave Swindells

Discuss

How can technology change who gets to make music?

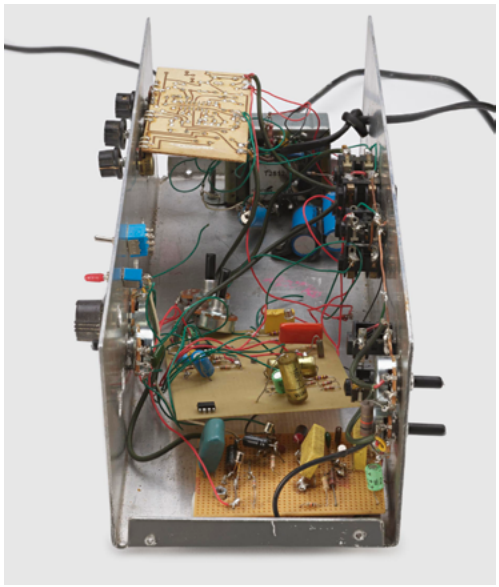
Why are cities often places where new cultural movements emerge?

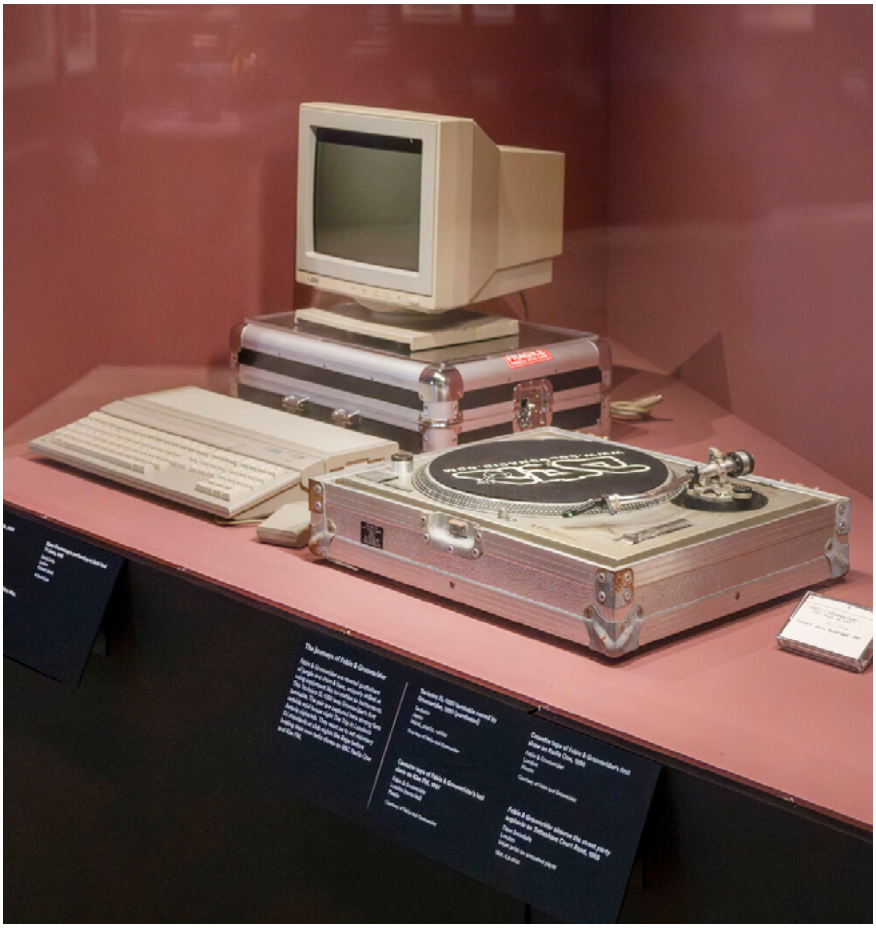
Why do you think innovation in music often emerges from resourcefulness and independence, especially from those who have been excluded from the mainstream?



Eddie Otchere, ‘Kemistry and Storm (The Diptych)’, 1995, inkjet print
© Photo by Eddie Otchere







The Music is Black: A British Story © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Pre-amplifier for a sound system made by Percival Miller (Metro), 2024 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, The Family of Percival Miller

Section 2 – Activity

Learning Areas:
Learning Areas: Music, Careers Education, Art & Design

Layering Beats and Samples

Task

Working in small groups, students use free music software (such as GarageBand, BandLab or Soundtrap) to create a 30–60 second Jungle track sample. Students begin by selecting a drum break, then layer additional sounds such as basslines, vocal samples, environmental sounds or recorded classroom noises.

They should experiment with tempo, repetition and contrast to create a piece that communicates a particular mood or story. Students can then present their composition to the class and explain:

+ Why did they choose particular sounds and samples?
+ How have layering different elements changed the feeling of the music?
+ What message or atmosphere did they want to create

Entrepreneurial Task

As an extension, students can imagine they are young music producers in 1990s Britain and develop a concept for releasing their track. They could design a cassette tape cover, record sleeve or digital artwork, choose a target audience, create a promotional poster and consider how they would share their music through social media, pirate or community radio or live events, such as a promotional campaign.

Listen

Incredible by M-Beat, General Levy, 1994

Key Skills

Creative thinking and experimentation

Digital music production

Collaboration and communication

Critical listening and reflective practice

Understanding how innovation emerges through combining different cultural influences and technologies

Section 3

Genre: Grime
Themes: Identity, Resilience, Leadership, Innovation, Collaboration

Grime

Grime developed in East London in the early 2000s. Characterised by rapid rhythms and lyrical storytelling, it became a powerful platform for young people to discuss identity, inequality, ambition and life in modern Britain. Independent production methods making use of new technology and self-promotion helped many artists build successful careers outside traditional music industries.

One of the exhibition's most thought-provoking objects is the Super Nintendo console and Mario Paint software used by musician and producer JME during his early experiments with music-making. This object demonstrates that creativity does not always begin with expensive equipment or formal training.

Using accessible technology at home, JME developed skills that contributed to the growth of Grime, a genre that transformed British music and influenced artists worldwide. The object represents determination, curiosity and entrepreneurial thinking: finding opportunities and creating something new with the tools available.

A number of artists have spoken about the music production game Music 2000 which was released for the original PlayStation in 1999. It is credited with helping inspire the grime scene, its users were able to create beats and tracks using a console, giving many young producers an accessible way to experiment with music production.

This object also connects to wider questions about design and technology in the V&A collections. Everyday objects can become powerful cultural artefacts because of the stories attached to them.

Discuss

Why is it important that young people can tell their own stories?

How can entrepreneurial thinking help creative communities succeed?

What everyday objects in your own life might become museum objects in the future?

How does access to technology affect who can participate in creative industries?

Why might there be concerns about the use of technology for the future of music making and creativity?



Photograph by Dave Tonge, ‘Dizzee Rascal and Wiley’, inkjet print, 2002 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Dave Tonge



Stormzy stab-vest designed by Banksy, The Music is Black: A British Story © David Parry for the V&A





Eddie Otchere, So Solid Crew, Battersea Park, inkjet print, 2001 © Photo by Eddie Otchere

Normski, 'Jah Shaka Sound System', inkjet print, 1990s © Photo by Normski. Courtesy of the V&A, London

Section 3 – Activity

Learning Areas:
Careers Education, History, Citizenship, Literacy

Entrepreneurs and change-makers



Listen

Igloo instrumental by Wiley, 2003

Key Skills

Research and presenting findings

Collaborative working

Pitch development

Critical thinking

Many Black British musicians and producers created independent businesses because mainstream industries often excluded them.

Task

Research one artist, producer, DJ, label or collective and create a short profile exploring:

+ What barriers did they face?
+ How did they overcome these challenges?
+ What entrepreneurial skills did they demonstrate?
+ How did they influence future generations?

Photograph by Jean Bernard Sohiez of Lloyd Coxsone and Simplicity, inkjet print, 1979 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Jean Bernard Sohiez

Section 4

Genre: Trip Hop
Themes: Resilience & Determination

Trip Hop



Trip Hop emerged in Bristol in the early 1990s, combining hip-hop beats with soul, dub, jazz and electronic experimentation. Artists and producers created atmospheric sounds that reflected the multicultural nature of the city and challenged traditional definitions of British music.

It provides a strong opportunity to explore resilience, determination and creative perseverance. The genre developed in a city grappling with social inequality, racial tensions and economic change, yet artists transformed these experiences into innovative forms of expression.

Creative Challenge

If you had to create a completely new music genre that represents Britain today, what sounds, images, technologies and experiences would you combine?

Discuss

How can different cultures and musical traditions blend to create something entirely new?

Why do some of the most innovative art forms emerge during periods of social or economic difficulty?

How might feelings of uncertainty, exclusion or isolation become sources of artistic strength?

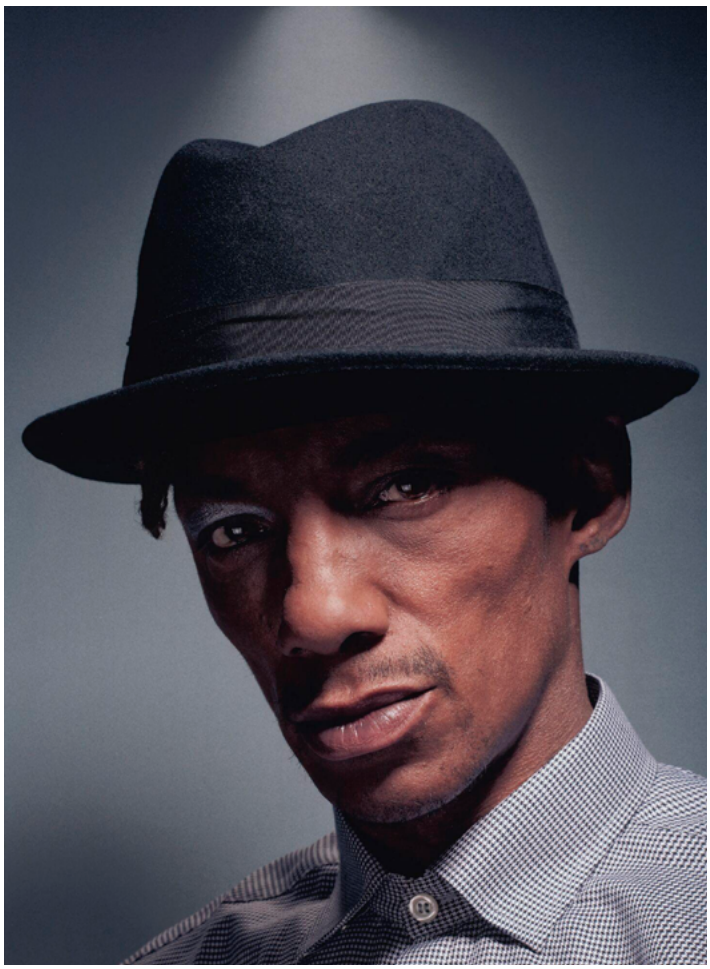
Personal Resilience

Trip Hop artists often experimented with sounds that did not fit into existing musical categories. What might have motivated them to continue despite not fitting into mainstream expectations?

Have you ever had to persist with an idea? How might someone persist with an idea that others did do not immediately understand or support?

What qualities help people continue creating when success is uncertain?

Photograph by Beezer of The Wild Bunch, 1984
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Beezer



Photograph by Jake Walters, 'Tricky', C-type print, 2008 © Victoria and Albert Museum, Jake Walters

The Music is Black: A British Story
© David Parry for the V&A



Section 4 – Activity

Learning Areas:
History, English, Literacy

Multicultural history



Put together a presentation on the multicultural history of cities such as Bristol and Coventry Jamaican / U.K. sound system culture and its influence on British music independent record labels and creative entrepreneurship.

+ Share your findings with a wider audience such as to your class, in a school assembly or school newsletter.

Listen

Blue Lines Album by Massive Attack, 1991

Key Skills

Research and presenting findings

Writing and literacy

Collaborative working

Developing an argument

Critical thinking

Explore more

Other music genres from the exhibition which relate to the themes of resistance and determination:

+ Roots & Influences

+ 2 Tone

The Music is Black: A British Story
© David Parry for the V&A

Conclusion



Black British music continues to evolve and shape culture today. The stories, sounds and creative movements explored in this resource are only the beginning of a much larger journey. I encourage you to continue listening, questioning and researching, to discover new artists, speak to family and community members about their musical memories, visit museums and archives and explore how music can tell stories about identity, resistance, joy and social change.

By learning more about Black British music, you are helping to preserve important histories, recognise the creativity and contributions of generations of artists and communities whose influence continues to resonate around the world.

What music, stories and voices will you discover next?

– Linett Kamala

The Music is Black: A British Story
© David Parry for the V&A

Explore further

Resources

BBC Bitesize The Music is Black: Celebrating Black British Music – Resources for secondary school teachers, celebrating the contribution of Black Music makers from the 1900s to the present day, including an assembly pack and three short films.
bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/articles/z6mxdnb

BBC x V&A East digital teaching resource – a CPD recording for music teachers with ideas for exploring Black British music in the classroom.
bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/articles/z6mxdnb

Visit us online

The Music is Black Playlist – A list of every song featured in the audio soundscape.
vam.ac.uk/articles/the-music-is-black-playlist

The Music is Black: A British Story exhibition page
vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/the-music-is-black-a-british-story

Find out more about the V&A's collections
vam.ac.uk/collections

Notes