

THE VOICE REASON

Kojey Radical has been one of the most progressive UK hip-hop artists for some years now, but with his long-awaited debut full-length **Reason To Smile**, he is poised to elevate his craft to a new level. *Music Week* meets the MC, plus **A-List Management** and **Atlantic Records**, to find out their plans to spread his powerful, revolutionary message like never before...

----- WORDS: THOMAS HOBBS -----

had so much stress that I got bad alopecia right before I started making this album,” admits East London artist Kojey Radical (real name Kwadwo Adu Genfi Amponsah). Laughing while pointing towards his thick wad of beard hair, he continues: “But I let go of all my hang-ups and now I’ve got follicles galore... Just look at this shit!”

Reason To Smile, his debut album, due on Asylum/Atlantic on March 4, has the potential to bring his sound to a much bigger audience. As evident in its title and family-centric artwork, it’s a record by an artist taking time to appreciate his blessings. It feels like a ray of sunshine after a brutal storm, and its core message of ‘*It’s okay to not be okay*’ (Solo) is likely to resonate with people still processing the lost years of Covid-19.

On the euphoric title track, he samples a baby’s coos (he recently became a father to a son) as he insists: ‘*I felt 10 pounds lighter when I let go of my fears and I found my reason to smile*’. It’s as if he’s prompting the listener to go down the same path.

“My position is I am a narrator,” he says. “I can step into any environment, whether that’s working class to middle or upper, and I won’t change or try to dilute my message. If you look at Bob Marley, he reached people on every level. He had their hearts, their minds, their spirits, their souls. You felt the music whether you danced or cried or revolted to it. I want to make that same kind of difference.”

His debut album proper has been a long time coming, with Kojey admitting that he has carried baggage from previous bad experiences within the music industry since he started almost a decade ago. Yet he insists he now has

a team that fully understands his vision and one that is prepared to take a step back when it is needed.

“My early experiences of dealing with major labels is that they were snakes and idiots,” he explains with a refreshing honesty. “It’s the closest thing to grooming a child off the block and trying to get them involved in a drug gang. What they offered me made no sense [financially].”

His stance eventually shifted, and he signed with Asylum/Atlantic ahead of 2019 single *Can’t Go Back* and subsequent project *Cashmere Tears*, which he completed over the course of 20 days.

Austin Daboh, who moved from Apple Music to take on the role of executive vice president at Atlantic Records in June 2020, insists that Kojey has found the right home and a place that fully understands his value to British music and culture.

“Hip-hop is the genre of the oppressed,” Daboh tells *Music Week*. “The best protest music comes out of oppression. When you look at what’s happening in the world and all the social injustices and racism that exists, then you see Kojey speaks for a generation that wants better. He gives a voice to the voiceless.”

Previously nominated at both the MOBOs and The Ivors, Kojey Radical has more than earned the right to full creative control. Since emerging with 2014 EP *Dear Daisy: Opium*, the 29-year-old has won a cult following thanks to raw songs that consider life’s big issues (sex, drugs, death, taxes, racism, class inequality, fatherhood, immigration, rising rent) from all angles, each carrying metaphors that read just as good on paper as they sound on wax.



PHOTOS: Danny Kasirye, BT Sport

OF

ON

"I am a narrator, I can step into any environment and I won't change or dilute my message"

KOJEY RADICAL



Sitting comfortably: Kojey Radical and (inset) performing a bespoke song for BT Sport in 2020

He spits over a variety of beats that – although embedded in hip-hop – are a runaway train of funk, dancehall, electronic, grime, jazz, ska, and R&B that translates warmly to a live setting. With roots in spoken word poetry and raised by Ghanaian immigrants in a tower block just off Hoxton Square, the East Londoner comes across like a New Romanticist poet who just happened to find himself in the age of Skepta.

It's exciting to hear a UK MC talk so frankly about the limitations of his own masculinity, carefully balancing his shortcomings with a strong female perspective, as on 2016 track Love's Intervention, on which Ray BLK provides tender guest vocals. Incidentally, the line 'Let me drown in your opulence' once gave your correspondent a good line to steal for a Valentine's card.

"That's sooo dope!" Kojey beams, laughing with excitement when he hears that the same relationship led to a wedding. He sinks into his chair, now looking totally relaxed. "Music is all about spreading love. That's the only reason I do this."

Kojey Radical operates in a different way to many of his peers in the UK scene. He regularly raps about Black women as Gods who should be worshiped, has songs named after pan-African revolutionaries (Kwame Nkrumah), and seems to delight in delivering sermons that treat death as a mere step towards immortality ('You can take my life/They'll just remember me more'). Given his revolutionary ideals, he says that major labels haven't always understood how to market him.

Referencing a lyric on the bold Open Hand Extended ('We don't need to close our fists for the revolution') Kojey says: "On the ground, the structure is set up so Black working-class kids fight among each other, even though they already have nothing! For me, that is completely backwards, you know? We're just taught how to hate one another and to let the crabs fight in the bucket. I am trying to show how we can all come together and create new wealth. It's important this kind of message is getting through."

And everyone on the rapper's team at Atlantic is on board to amplify that message.

"We make long-term bets with our artists, who tend to get to three or four albums," says Kevin Christian-Blair, senior A&R manager at Asylum Records. "Musically, we let Kojey dictate where that's heading and we are completely hands-off. We see Kojey as an André 3000 or Childish Gambino type of character. They're people who stand for something and let the industry catch up with them while they plough through barriers and make interesting music."

Reason To Smile highlight Together is a slice of sun-kissed funk indebted to James Brown and Sly Stone, while Nappy is a glistening anthem where Kojey promises to help all the people he grew up with become rich. On this latter track, he reveals the following reason behind the album's delay: 'They say, "Where you been?" I been on the mountain, growing my hair and finding my powers.' It isn't just a reference to an alopecia battle, but the journey of learning how to smile again after a serious bout of depression.

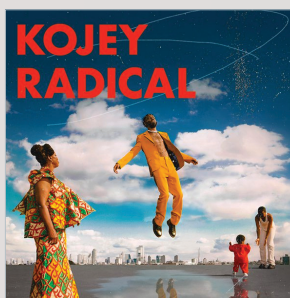
"When Harry [Uzoka, a friend and model who had worked with Kojey, and was killed in 2018] died, I had to regroup and remember all the things I had going for me," reveals Kojey, nodding solemnly. "It was weird, because we had just sold out the Roundhouse and then the pandemic happened and the buzz stopped. I knew I had to keep creating."

Like so much of Kojey's career, the 2022 album represents a family affair, with his mother narrating proceedings, just like his late dad did back on his 2016 project. She talks about the culture-shock of emigrating to the UK from Ghana in the middle of winter and carrying a fear that whenever her son

"This will be the most important hip-hop album of 2022, Kojey is saying something that no one else is"

AUSTIN DABOH
ATLANTIC

Touch the sky: Kojey Radical plays All Points East last summer (right) and (below) the Reason To Smile cover art



ROLE CALL

MEET TEAM KOJEY RADICAL

Management: John Woolf & Marsha Kwarteng

Label: Asylum/Atlantic

CEO: Tony Harlow

Co-presidents: Ed Howard & Briony Turner

EVP: Austin Daboh

GM: Liz Goodwin

A&R: Kevin Christian-Blair

Marketing: Asher Korner

Digital marketing: ID85

Publisher: Pulse Music Group

Agent: Summer Marshall, CAA

Press: Jon Wilkinson & Patrick Johnson, Technique

Managing director and president of promotions,
Atlantic UK: Damian Christian

Radio: Mikey Lloyd (Plugged In)

TV: Holly Marshall & Deirdre Moran

(who was the youngest of five children) would leave the house as a teenager, he might get hurt or tempted into gang violence. In tribute to her sacrifices, Kojey uses the empowering Gangsta, the album's second single, to immortalise this matriarch's hustle, beautifully remarking about his mother's voice "forever sounding like home".

Kojey's sister, Marsha, acts as her brother's day-to-day manager and further emphasises the importance of their family unit.

"There's 10 years between me and Kojey," she says. "When my mum raised me, it was a less dangerous time, but when Kojey came on the scene, it was scarier out there [with the knife crime]. It was important she gave him all the tools to be creative, even if that meant working three or four jobs. It didn't matter if that was pencils, instruments, Pokémon cards, or a computer; my mum just wanted to keep him creatively entertained in the house and away from all the trouble outside."

By immortalising their mum on record, Marsha says Kojey is forcing the masses to empathise with immigrant families and their struggles, something especially important in the wake of the Windrush scandal.

"As a family, we've had some really dark times," she continues. "But Kojey has found his reason to smile through it and, as a result, I think people are going to see how much he's grown as an artist."

Marsha works with John Woolf, who helps steer Kojey's path as part of his management firm, A-List.

"John understands how much family means to me," says Kojey. "It makes me more relaxed creatively if I am surrounded by them. John just elevates the whole thing."

And music industry veteran Woolf has absolute faith that Reason To Smile will entice thousands of new people to Kojey's music during 2022. The reason he's convinced the album will be a success is because Atlantic "aren't clipping his wings. They're really letting Kojey fly, which only happens when you let Kojey be Kojey". Much like artists in the vein of Little Simz and Dave, Woolf says his act is filling a vacuum in UK rap for artists who are driven by intellect and pointing out societal injustices.

"On his new track [Pusher Man BWI] Kojey says there's nothing more dangerous than a Black man's intelligence, he's pointing out hypocrisies, but also it's very aspirational," Woolf insists. "It's more than just boasting. We all see success as the journey Kojey Radical has gone on and the overall body of work he's left with. We won't measure Reason To Smile based on sales or streams, but in creating a timeless album. A lot of UK rap artists can be a flash in the pan, but I believe his message will last."

We ask Atlantic's Daboh what would constitute success for Reason To Smile from the label perspective.

"Obviously, we have commercial targets and we operate alongside Kojey as both a partner and a business," says Daboh. "But Top 10 albums and singles aren't how we really judge success here. I want to sit down in a year's time and this record to be played as a cultural bookmark at schools across the country. That's more interesting."

Daboh describes Kojey as a "long-term artist" and says the world is his oyster: "In 10 to 15 years, you might be talking to him about his new fashion range or a hit movie."

But what about the right now?

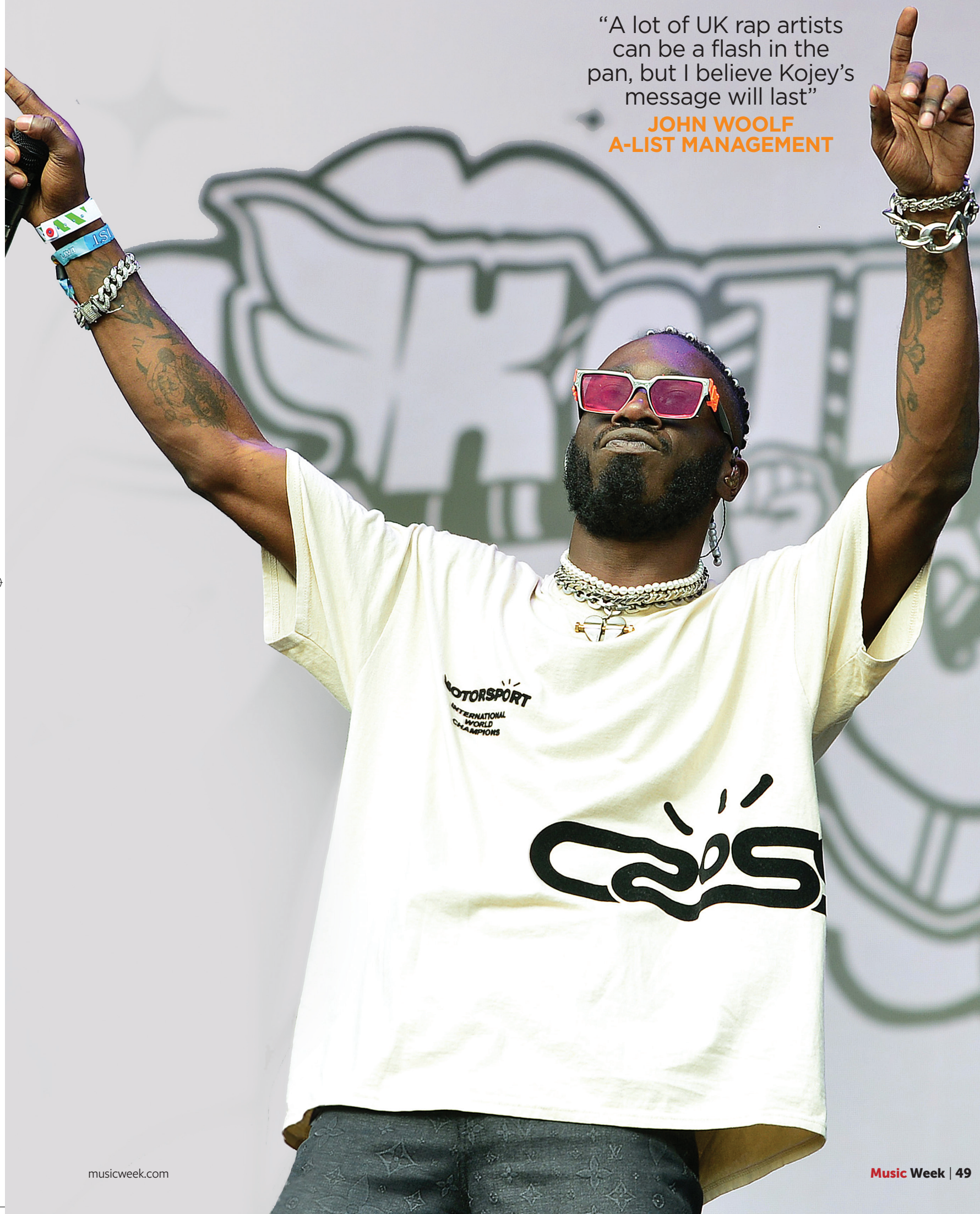
"Kojey's album will be the most important hip-hop album of 2022," answers Daboh, defiantly. "I truly believe that. He's saying something about class and identity that no one else is saying in hip-hop."


According to Daboh, the idea that protest music doesn't resonate with mainstream audiences simply doesn't add



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JOHN WOOLF
A-LIST MANAGEMENT



A portrait of Kojey Radical, a Black man with short, dark, textured hair and a beard. He is wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt with the top buttons open, revealing a pink shirt underneath. He is also wearing a pearl necklace with a diamond Playboy bunny pendant and a silver chain bracelet on his left wrist. He has tattoos on his forearms and is resting his hands on a light-colored surface. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression.

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KOJEY RADICAL

up. He's convinced Kojey Radical can win new fans over with his upcoming music, especially on platforms like TikTok, and points to the artist recently winning a place on BBC Radio 1's Playlist as proof of his ascension on these shores. Going into the release, he has almost 700,000 monthly listeners on Spotify, where his biggest song is 2019's *Water*, which features Mahalia and producer Swindle.

"Hip-hop is a protest genre, steeped in getting an opinion across and pointing out injustices, and it's using whatever platform is available to do so," adds Daboh. "Maybe people stereotypically think of young teenage girls and pop music when they see TikTok, but scratch under the surface and there is a complex ecosystem of opinions and the analysis of deep lyrics."

A&R Christian-Blair adds: "When we get Kojey's music to market, we're going to be unapologetic, no matter the platform. A great example is when we got him a freestyle during the UEFA Champions League Final a couple of seasons ago. That is one of the most mainstream places you can possibly go, but he was unapologetically Kojey, talking about revolution, and it was still this big success. That approach will continue."

The exec says *Reason To Smile* will have a "culture-first" and "digital-first" strategy, aiming to push Kojey Radical's name into ecosystems – such as GRM Daily – where he wasn't "always a natural fit" previously.

It's a little strange even asking label execs about Kojey Radical. He has previously spoken out against the major label system (rapping on Icarus, saying: *'Didn't know my worth until they owned me'*), insisting he'd always maintain his independence. Kojey came across like the kind of person who meticulously studied rap legend Q-Tip's proclamation of *'Industry rule #4080 / record company people are shady'*. So, what has changed?

"It felt natural to me because it's already been done," comes his confident reply. "For the legends like Jay-Z or Nas to evolve into the ownership side, they had to step on certain stages and make the most out of [commercial] opportunities put in front of them. They did all this while never wavering on their message. I don't have to sell myself or argue against statistics or figures. I just speak my truth and people listen."

Reason To Smile features guest appearances from Tiana Major9, Masego, Shaé Universe, Cashh, Lex Amor and Kelis, with production handled by a cast including Swindle and KZ. Like previous Kojey releases, there's a strong grounding in the perspective of women and each song feels like a back-and-forth conversation about life between the guests and the lead artist. This is a natural progression from childhood, where strong debate among women was everywhere Kojey turned.

"I have four sisters, I got enough aunties and nieces," he says. "My perspective from [being] young has been shaped by the perspectives of women. My inspiration comes that way inclined to be honest, so there is a pandering way to do it and there's a natural way to do it. I'm with the latter."

There's also an obvious jazz influence. *Born*, which features Cashh, a South London rapper who was controversially deported from this country eight years ago back to Jamaica, contains a transcendent saxophone solo, as the pair dig deep into the idea of assimilation. *Knucks-duet Payback* is punctuated by vibrant tuba playing. Kojey believes that the UK is leading a renaissance in jazz rap right now.



Awards season:
Kojey Radical at the 2020 MOBOs (top) and the Ivors in 2019

"Jazz rap never died because producers like Swindle have always been here," he says. "I didn't know about Sons Of Kemet or Ezra Collective until Swindle introduced us to one another. Now I'll probably choose working with a jazz act over a rapper".

Suddenly looking 30 years into the future, Kojey smiles: "I hope when I am in my sixties that there's a legacy where people say: 'Shit, he really loved his music! In his heyday, he popped up on everything.'"

Looking ahead, Kojey believes his future is so bright due to his versatility. He can pop up on songs with Amaarae, Sons Of Kemet, Ghetts, Rudimental, Shy FX or God Colony – no matter the collaboration, it always seems like he's on home turf.

"My earliest form of musical rebellion was accepting that, although hip-hop will always be in my heart, I need to listen more to indie, rock, ska, jazz, neo soul, R&B, and punk to complete my musical education," Kojey explains. "I guess I would only listen to rap if it was doing something genuinely different to what was considered the norm."

When *Music Week* describes *Reason To Smile* as Kojey Radical's most accessible work yet, no one really argues against it. Least not the artist himself.

"I would love all the looks: a Top 10, award wins... all that," he says. "When we did *In Gods Body* and toured Australia, a fan said my music had helped him manage depression after his dad died. That's what really matters. If music survives long enough to achieve that connection then you've done your job."

Currently, Kojey is most focused on being a father and says raising a son has given him an even greater appreciation of his own mum's sacrifices.

"That cuddling instinct isn't natural," he says. "It takes a second for men to learn, because we're usually trying to assume the role of the protector."

"Watching my son's mother write books and breastfeed and also find the time to work on recipes,

man, it doesn't even matter that we're not together; I am seeing her from the perspective of my son, who is going to look at his mother as a superhero. It's the same way I grew up watching my mum work all these jobs and provide for me and my four sisters. Seeing my son's lived experience reminded me of my own and how we've both been held up by amazing women."

On *Pressure*, Kojey gives himself a pep talk (*'Stop complaining bro, remember you chose this life'*) referencing the psychological experiments the scientists put droog Alex DeLarge through in late filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. The director is someone the artist wants to emulate.

"I think of myself more as a screenwriter," he says. "People who can craft things from words to visuals and keep you interested for two hours, well, that is the ultimate skill level. I want to achieve that, and not just with the music."

Even though the stakes are higher than ever before, Kojey Radical is continuing to find reasons to smile. Things seem to finally be clicking into place for the artist, who is looking a long way clear from the humble days of struggling on his estate (*'Pound coin won't stretch past that Panda Pop'* he rapped on 2016's *Bambu*). But does he miss the simplicity of his youth? After all, only having to worry about buying a soft drink sounds preferable to the pressures of releasing an anticipated record.

"That's a different kind of hunger, back then, I thought drinking Panda Pops was flexing," he says, gathering one final thought. "I miss having something to gain as opposed to something to maintain. But I also feel like this is my time. I'm just ready for it all, man. We're just getting started..."

PHOTOS: Michael Tubi, David M. Bennett, Getty