

# Mad Dogs and Englishness

Popular Music and  
English Identities

**EDITED BY  
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## CHAPTER TEN

# The (un)masked bard: Burial's denied profile and the memory of English underground music

*Gabriele Marino*

### **Intro (South London Boroughs)**

*A train crosses South London, late at night, sharp and feline like a blade trimming a thick, dark velvet fabric. The vehicle is running fast, but the time inside seems to be flowing slow. As if it was covered in formaldehyde. The wagons are haunted by fuliginous, diaphanous figures – They go to and fro, broken blocks, broken buildings, while dancing to the rhythm of a trembling heartbeat. A collage of memories, distant and vivid, personal and shared, clearly identifies the culprit of such a resigned pain, putting them under a dim spotlight.*

### **1. 'He is (not) Burial': The media quest for a name and a face**

*Burial's media vicissitudes may be articulated into different phases, according to the degree of explicit – and implicit – information he lets us grab out of his interviews, social media posts and music production.*

### 1.1. Masked and anonymous (2004–7): ‘The mysterious Burial’

According to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine ([archive.org/web](http://archive.org/web)), the oldest online reference to a musician called Burial dates back to the end of 2004. Kode9 (journalist, cultural scholar, DJ, and music producer Steve Goodman) lists ‘Burial – Broken Home’ in his 5 December *top9* on his personal blog ([kode9.blogspot.com](http://kode9.blogspot.com)), along with tracks by Plasticman, Digital Mystikz, Roll Deep, Macabre Unit and himself. Later on, probably in the following February (as far as we can infer from Archive’s snapshots), ‘Burial – Southern Comfort’ appears in another Kode9-curated top selection, on the Hyperdub website ([hyperdub.com](http://hyperdub.com)), along with tracks by Virgo, Terror Danja and – again – Plasticman, Digital Mystikz and Kode9 himself. Among such established underground producers, Burial is completely unknown and the mentioned tracks are still unpublished.

On 16 May 2005, Kode9’s Hyperdub, the once-online magazine about electronic music which turned into a record label in April 2004, releases its first non-single record: Burial’s *South London Boroughs*, an EP including the eponymous track, a track called ‘Nite Train’, and the two aforementioned Kode9-favoured ones (‘Broken Home’ and ‘Southern Comfort’). With HDB001 as catalogue number, this record is the third one in the history of the label, and the first not directly connected to Kode9 (the first two were singles by Kode9 and Daddi Gee, alias Stephen Samuel Gordon, who will later be known as the Space Ape), as well as the absolute debut of the unknown producer. In an interview published on 26 March 2006 on Blackdown/Martin Clark’s blog ([blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com](http://blackdownsoundboy.blogspot.com)), Burial says he stepped into Hyperdub by chance, while searching for old UK garage and El-B’s records in particular. He would email ‘some budget first tunes’ to Kode9, who would surprisingly put one in a mix for the historic web radio Groovetech; it is approximately 2003. After a one-year hiatus, Burial would send a whole CD of tracks to Kode9, which provided the basis for his official Hyperdub releases to come.

On 15 May 2006, Hyperdub releases its first long playing ever, the homonymous by ‘the mysterious Burial’, as claimed by the official presentation on the label’s website. The album includes the already published tracks ‘Southern Comfort’ and ‘Broken Home’. On 26 August the *Distant Lights* EP is released, including the title track, ‘Pirates’, and ‘Gutted’, which were already included in *Burial*. Critically acclaimed worldwide, the full length is nominated ‘album of the year’ by *The Wire* magazine (no. 275, January 2007; cf. also Walmsley 2009), sanctioning the cult status of the artist and making the hype around him and his music increase.

Burial’s success among the insiders is strengthened by his second album, *Untrue*, published by Hyperdub on 5 November 2007. The album is anticipated by the single ‘Archangel’ (issued without cover or insert) and the EP *Ghost Hardware* (14 June 2007), which includes the title track (which

will be featured on *Untrue* as well) and the otherwise unavailable tracks 'Shutta' and 'Exit Woundz'. *Untrue* is an underground success – its best UK album chart placement will be 58th – and lots of national and international magazines list it as one of the best albums of the year: it will score second on the podium for *The Wire* (no. 287, January 2008) and Metacritic recognize it as their second best reviewed album (with a medium score of 90/100). *Untrue* will be his last album to date. In the article by Mark Fisher/k-punk published on *The Wire* (no. 286, December 2007: 28–31), two pictures by Georgina Cook/Drumzofthesouth, the photographer of London's dubstep scene par excellence (as well as the author of the pictures featured on *Untrue*), show Burial's silhouette. This interview will be his last accounted one to date.

'The mysterious Burial' – we know nothing about him, but his music. We do not know his name, nor his face. His records do not feature any photographic portrait, nor any biographical note. He gives very few interviews – there will be ten or so, overall, all of them concentrated between December 2005 and December 2007 – and he does not perform nor appear in public (not even in an acousmatic form, for instance when DJ Mary Anne Hobbs premieres his tracks on her weekly show at BBC Radio 1). Burial's identity is a proper mystery.

## 1.2. Unmasked and uncovered (2008): 'my names will bevan'

On 11 February 2008, *The Independent* publishes an article about the Elliott School ('The real school of rock'), portraying it as a true pool of talents set in South London and revealing that 'another former student is William Bevan, a.k.a. Burial, a dubstar artist who enjoys a cult dancefloor following and who likes to retain a Banksy-like anonymity'. The parallel with the graffiti artist will be a constant element in Burial's media odyssey.

On 21 April, a post on Backspin Promotion blog announces the new DJ-Kicks volume to be mixed by Burial; the news appears also on the series' label website, !K7 (26 May), spreading the buzz to the extent that some alleged track-lists start circulating. On 30 June, a post – the very first one – appears on Burial's Myspace ([myspace.com/burialuk](http://myspace.com/burialuk), created on 7 March 2006); the artist says the track-lists are fake and that 'if i do djkicks it will be mostly old jungle tunes & new tunes'. The release of the record, originally scheduled for June (United Kingdom) and July (United States), will be continuously delayed for years, up to the announcement that 'the reality of a Burial DJ-Kicks doesn't seem to be any closer' (DJ-Kicks website, 11 July 2011); along with such statement, a Steven Ellison/Flying Lotus' Soundcloud track is being linked in the post, with the note that it would have been one of the songs to be featured on Burial's album.

On 22 July 2008 the BBC announces the Mercury Prize nominees; *Untrue* is among the shortlisted and the favourite of insiders such as the NME.

The news makes the buzz around Burial explode. In August Gordon Smart from *The Sun* starts a real manhunt, offering a reward to anyone capable of giving him useful information about Burial's identity. Smart argues that behind 'the unknown Burial' there may be a celebrity such as Richard D. James (Aphex Twin) or Norman Cook (Fatboy Slim); such theories were dismissed as ridiculous by the most specialized press. In coincidence with the campaign on *The Sun*, on 7 August the double website *iamburial.com* and *iamburial.spreadshirt.net* was created, selling 'T-shirts, hoodies and other stuff with slogans such as I Am Burial and I'm With Burial', as Smart will say in an article. The phrase 'I am Burial' echoes the 'I am not Burial' written on the carton box worn as a mask by Kode9 in a series of iconic portraits by Georgina Cook (January 2008) and soon becomes a proper internet meme, leading to a number of manipulations, replicas and parodies. In a few days, the *iamburial.com* website turns into a static homepage with the message 'No I'm not'; by November, it will go offline.

On 5 August the second – and last – post on Burial's Myspace appears; starting off with his first ever self-introduction: 'my names will bevan, i'm from south london'; Burial confirms the identity revealed by *The Independent*. At the same time, the musician changes his profile's avatar by uploading a photo, presumably an *ante litteram* selfie, in which his face is clearly shown. Until then, Burial's Myspace profile picture featured the figure from the *Untrue* cover; a drawing by Burial himself and, perhaps a self-portrait, as it may be inferred. In the message, Burial explains his anonymity strategy and why he changed his mind about it: 'For a while theres been some talk about who i am, but its not a big deal / i wanted to be unknown because i just want it to be all about the tunes. over the last year the unknown thing become an issue so im not into it any more. im a lowkey person and i just want to make some tunes, nothing else.' The very same post, on the very same URL address, was edited and dated 3 October, cutting off most of the text and confirming the first name only, in the final greetings: 'Big up everyone, take care, will (burial).' On 9 September the Mercury Prize winner is announced: Elbow.

### 1.3. Is Burial Burial? (2008-13): 'burialisfourtet'

On 31 October 2008, Clark/Blackdown publishes on his blog a picture shot in 2006 by photographers Tim & Barry for a feature about the dubstep scene commissioned to journalists Chantelle Fiddy and Hattie Collins by an unidentified fashion magazine. As the title of the post suggests, echoing a classic moment in the history of jazz music ('A great day in Harlem', in 1958, when more than fifty notable jazzmen were photographed in a group), it was 'A great day in Brixton'. In the photo, sandwiched between Blackdown himself and Mary Anne Hobbs, Bevan/Burial is clearly shown.

On 15 October 2009, 'Gorilla vs. Bear' reports that earlier that year Flying Lotus had uploaded on his Myspace profile a four hands track produced



with Burial, soon deleted. The news starts a big buzz, but on 19 October *Fact Magazine* explains that ‘Hyperdub write in to establish that this isn’t a Burial/Lotus collaboration, rather, it’s a remix that Flying Lotus made from Burial samples’. In fact, the track featured a large portion from the track *Ravemond’s Young Problems* by Flying Lotus’s friend and collaborator Dimitri Grimm/Dimlite, still unpublished at the time.

Hypotheses such as the ones proposed by *The Sun* have spread throughout the years, suggesting that Burial’s real identity may have been, from time to time, Damon Albarn, Thom Yorke or Kode9 in the first place. Already in 2006 (in the aforementioned interview), Blackdown had asked Burial whether he was Basic Channel (Moritz Von Oswald and Mark Ernestus) or The Bug (Kevin Martin). But the number one suspect in the case has always been Kieran Hebden/Four Tet, who had attended Will Bevan’s same Elliott School (as confirmed by the aforementioned *Independent* article) and had collaborated more than once with Burial.

In November 2009, MIT Press publishes *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, an essay by Steve Goodman (Kode9) focusing on the cultural significance of the usage of frequencies and sounds as weapons, in politics and war; in the acknowledgements, we find a Will Bevan as well.

On 23 December 2011 ‘Burial is Four Tet’ ([burialisfourtet.com](http://burialisfourtet.com)) is created; a tumblr recapitulating, tickling and mocking the conspiracy theories spread around the two musicians. Four Tet himself will post the link to the website on his Twitter profile (14 December 2012). On 19 June 2013 ‘Equalizer’ reports that Four Tet would have confirmed to be Burial via Twitter; the website provides a screenshot of the post (the classic ‘I am Burial’) and quotes most of the ‘clues’ presented by ‘Burial is Four Tet’, along with a tweet by Dan Snaith/Caribou (who had collaborated with Burial), dating back to 15 May: ‘How has it taken me this long to figure out four tet is not burial?’. The news of the confirmation spreads across the fandom. Insiders, and Snaith himself, speak ironically about that, and Four Tet has to deny the claim more than once via social media. In a few hours, the real nature of the news is revealed: the website is not new to satirical announcements at all (namely, the screenshot is fake) and Snaith’s tweet was just a sarcastic joke (disproved by Snaith himself on the very next day, 16 May).<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.4. Burial is Burial (2013–14): ‘Hi this is will’

On 10 December 2013, the very same day when Burial’s EP *Rival Dealer* leaked on reddit (one day before its scheduled official release), *Fact Magazine* interviews Flying Lotus; in the stream of questions and answers the musician incidentally makes it clear he met Burial, adding that he is ‘probably the only guy who wears full black addidas [*sic*] track suits too’.

On 13 December, two days after the official release of the EP *Rival Dealer*, Burial texts Mary Anne Hobbs during her live weekly broadcast at BBC Radio 1, in order to explain the meaning of his work, which was

immediately judged by the specialized press as his most autobiographical and outspoken to date, including a hint about the artist's sexuality (a sample from the motivational speech held by director Lana Wachowski at the 2012 Human Rights Campaign gala) or, at least, about the artist's attitude towards sexuality: 'I wanted the tunes to be anti-bullying tunes that could maybe help someone to believe in themselves, to not be afraid, and to not give up, and to know that someone out there cares and is looking out for them.'

On 16 January 2014 songwriter/producer James Blake announces via Facebook that he will be airing a special interview with Burial during his debut as radio host at BBC Radio 1 that night. It turns out to be a joke: a surreal, Twin Peaks-alluding cut and paste of voices from Burial's productions, 'revealing' that Burial and Four Tet would both come from an ancient, almost extinct tribe.

On 31 January the page *hyperdub.com/burial* appears on Hyperdub website (which displays the records catalogue only, in this latest incarnation). It features a selfie of Bevan/Burial and a paragraph in which he thanks his family, fans, and insiders for their support throughout the ten years since he started releasing his music: 'Hi this is will, I just want to say thank you to anyone out there who liked my burial tunes & supported me over the years.' Burial says he hopes to be able to finish his new tunes as soon as possible, since 'Dark Souls 2 [the follow-up to an immersive, cult videogame; editor's note] is on the horizon soon so I'm not sure if I will have many new tunes for a while because I need to play that game a lot'. The webpage immediately becomes a meme; on the very same day, producer Joshua Leary/Evian Christ makes a parody out of it on his website's homepage and a fan, Cameron Reed, launches on Twitter a series of selfies marked by the hashtag #burialing.

On 1 February blogger Antonio Fatini creates a whole new website on the URL *iamburial.com* (cf. *supra*), featuring a template that allows one to semi-automatically generate one's own profile in Burial's fashion, modelled upon Hyperdub's post; Fatini launches also the 'I am Burial' Facebook fanpage (*fb.com/youareburial*), the posts of which are marked by the hashtag #iamburial. By 6 February Fatini claims to have generated more than 1,500 profiles, across 100 different countries worldwide.

*After having eventually showed up and 'taken the mic', Burial seems to have disappeared again, except for sporadically releasing new tunes (Lambeth 2014; Temple Sleeper 2015; Sweetz with Zomby 2016).*

## **2. Dig the Burial: Trails of meaning inside and around his music**

### **2.1. London and music: A manifesto**

Burial speaks little, but his words are clear. He does not give many interviews and all of them actually say almost the very same things. They are few –

but they are generally long, sometimes fluvial. Their tone is colloquial, sincere, intimate, they look like open confessions, wherein he justifies what he does, and how he does it, and why. They are constantly crossed by two encumbering presences, two main isotopies – that is, semantic field – which seem to innervate the discourse back and forth, constituting his environment, his whole ecology – two totemic presences before which everything else seems to disappear: London and music. They overlap one onto the other, the second being the expression of the first, the first the natural setting for the second. It would be quite unfair to say that the critical cliché of Burial's music as the 'soundtrack to late-night inner-city life' (Warren 2007) is untrue; but, at the same time, it cannot be passed over in silence that music here is meant to be more than a background to the city, more than a soundtrack. Burial's work aims at being not only a music *for* London, but the music *of* London; not its accompanying, but its sonic transmutation, its 'musicification'. Burial aspires to make London *sound*: to turn the matter of which London is made into a different substance.

The very first Burial interview, in fact a monologue (Interview: Clark 2005), already contains *in nuce* the key elements of his poetics; it is a kind of unconscious, yet programmatic manifesto. Burial's description of his lonely wanderings across the bowels of the urban world, in a kind of hallucinated, oneiric state, are excerpts of lyrical urban prose, featured with a strong adolescent, diary-like feel. He depicts a dark scenery, a city doomed to alienation, loneliness, lack of meaning, the inland of which can be just wandered across, aimlessly.

Such a ghostly, deadly or, at least, larval, survival-oriented status does echo the hollow, claustrophobic atmosphere exuding from a landmark underground electronic album such as Kevin Martin/The Bug's *Tapping the Conversation* (1997). Definitely marking the shift from jazzcore to electronic music in his career, conceived as an ideal, alternative soundtrack to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974; not by chance a film about obsession, hiding, and loneliness), that industrial dub take has been generally considered a mood-defining milestone for dubstep's aesthetics (Scaruffi 2009). On the contrary, whereas The Bug's *London Zoo* (2008) reflects the very same dark and moody London, it does so in a completely different fashion, stressing its vital, energetic, 'spiced' nature. Burial's London feels more like a morgue than a zoo. And just like in a morgue, you do not only find the cold of pain and grief, but also the warm presence of the people you have always loved and will love for good. In turn, Burial's relationship with London is dualistic and such dualism is sonically embodied by his music; set between the dusk and the dawn of the metropolis, it is constantly shifting, dithering over love and hate, light and darkness. It may be not a mere coincidence that Burial's logo is a kind of stylized, two-piece shuriken tao.

## 2.2. Music as the night drug: The rough sleeper

Only when the wanderer gets hypnotized by his own personal 'nighttime train music' (the 'UK d&b dubstep jungle rave garage party tunes'), if not everything makes sense, at least 'the sorrow just come out of it'. He can even surprisingly exclaim, mesmerized: 'I love this place'. This music is a *pharmakon* by definition – a potion, a drug, a hailing, saving device. Burial's London is a dead block of concrete that may be turned on only when it is innervated by it.

When Burial makes his getaway about music, his speech becomes a soliloquy, an interior monologue, filled with references, artists' names, records, tunes – and fragments of everyday life connected to them – in an obsessive name dropping ritual. They are always the very same names, ever recurring and repeated, as if they were formulas, or magic spells: El-B, Photek, Digital Mysticz, Skream. Burial makes it clear he is, first and foremost, a passionate listener; then – maybe – also a musician. His relationship with music is quasi-pathological, as much as the one with his city: 'The compilation [he had prepared for his night rides] had some amazing tunes on it, but I didn't listen to anything for weeks after' (Interview: Clark 2005); 'All I listened to for a year was [A Guy Called Gerald's] *Black Secret Technology* [1995]' (Interview: Goodman 2007).

Burial's human figure becomes tinier and tinier, it weakens, and eventually waters down in music – the one he listens to and the one he makes on his own. Emerging from the meaningless of reality, solid like Kubrick's black monolith, the tunes become detailed and hyperrealistic, capable of expanding themselves beyond measure, filling up everything, becoming a totalizing reduction of reality.

## 2.3. Loneliness, darkness and debris: Splinters of imagery

Burial's visual paraphernalia look coherent with his poetic statements. Only two records of his feature pictures besides logos and track-listings. The 2006 eponymous album displays two uncredited aerial views of suburban blocks, absorbed in a dark violet, smoggy atmosphere – that is all. *Untrue*, the 2007 album, shows the drawing (made by Burial himself) of a lonely hooded guy, eyes wide shut, frowning, thinking, maybe even sleeping (and dreaming?), seated in front of a cup of hot drink. On the back of the album, a backlight silhouette of blocks; inside, a pile of debris lying within a tunnel (these two shots are by Georgina Cook; cf. *supra*), with the superimposed inscription 'THANK YOU' – that is all.

Burial's paratexts are nothing more than small hints meant to confirm what we are already hearing in his music and reading in his rationed statements: this is a world of loneliness, darkness and debris. Deep dense distant atmospheres, in the background and all around; small, shaky,

magnified, broken objects, and defeated figures, in the foreground. Burial's track titles serve as a clue as well; they are short (three words, at most), they are always descriptive, cinematographic, and they are often locative, spatial-referencing, geographical: 'Nite Train', 'Distant Light', 'Night Bus', 'Broken Home', 'Near Dark', 'Dog Shelter', 'Homeless', 'In McDonalds', 'South London Boroughs', 'UK', 'Street Halo', 'NYC', 'Lambeth'. Burial's dubstep is

about when you come back from being out somewhere; in a minicab or a night bus, or with someone, or walking home across London late at night, dreamlike, and you've still got the music kind of echoing in you, in your bloodstream, but with real life trying to get in the way. I want it to be like a little sanctuary. It's like that 24-hour stand selling tea on a rainy night, glowing in the dark. (Interview: Hancox 2007)

It can be said, with Adam Harper (2009), that Burial's vivid soundscape tunes – his sound sketches – are the musical equivalent of an impressionist's visual works of art.

## 2.4. Masked without a mask: The hero with a thousand faces

Burial's 'display of un-display' (he clearly shows that he does not want to show himself) recalls the 'tradition of mystery' of the 'techno jerks without face': the techno utopians of the 'second generation' and of the classic rave era. 'I like the old records, where you didn't know who made them and it didn't matter. You got into the tunes more' (Interview: Goodman 2007); music stands as an emissary, a plenipotentiary delegate, an anything-but-empty *simulacrum*.

There are two main strategies to hide one's identity and force the audience and the media to concentrate on the music per se: using an implicit or explicit mask (or logos used as masks; cf. Mike Banks' Underground Resistance, James Stinson and Gerald Donald's Drexciya, Mortiz Von Oswald and Mark Ernestus' Basic Channel) or multiply the monikers (Marc Trauner aka Marc Acardipane, Mescalinum United, The Mover, Pilldriver, Marshall Masters, Resident E; Richard D. James aka Aphex Twin, AFX, Bradley Strider, Caustic Window, Polygon Window, Universal Indicator, GAK, Power-Pill, Q-Chastic etc.). Besides mystery, masks give a connotation of universality; having no face means you might have any face, *a thousand faces*, to paraphrase mythologist Joseph Campbell (1949).<sup>2</sup> The fact Burial never wore a proper mask does not mean he was not masked: he was hiding his face in every respect and – moreover – provided a perfect substitutive icon with the drawing displayed on the cover of *Untrue*: 'I've been drawing that same one since I was little. Just some moody kid with a cup of tea sitting at the 24 hour stand in the rain in the middle of the night when you are coming back from somewhere' (Interview: Goodman *ibid*). Another obsessive, hypnotic image of repetition reported by the musician.

Even when his name and face have been eventually revealed, mystery continued to accompany his figure. That happened because one's identity is not simply an identity document, it is not something made just of a name and a picture (which are just signifiers), but of relationships, connections, overlaps between actor and person. And Burial has never had something like that to offer to us. We know Burial's name and face, still we know nothing about him. And we desperately scrutinize any possible clue, in his music, in his words, in order to come up with a personal profile (in this respect, the threads at [reddit.com/r/burial](https://www.reddit.com/r/burial) are quite impressive). Burial's is a denied identity – a shadow play wherein to project our imaginary about him and his music.

## 2.5. Maverick and mistaken: The rubbish superhero

Burial stands, humble and proud, as an outsider, a maverick; almost a hermit, completely set aside from the contemporary electronic music scene: 'I don't know any other producers. I don't know anyone who makes tunes. I'm just out there. I'm not part of the scene and I can't get up and DJ. I'm proud of this music but I'm not a fully paid-up member of the board. I'm none of those things' (Interview: Clark 2006). Burial gives us the image of a musical nerd, a musical *hikikomori*, autistically self-secluded within the four walls of his bedroom: 'Only about five people outside of my family know I make tunes, I think. I hope' (Interview: Hancox 2007).

At the same time, he is not nerdy at all as concerns the production of music; compared to the compositional and technical skills of his colleagues, who have achieved the status of 'sound scientists' proper (e.g. Sam Shackleton, Rob Ellis/Pinch, Paul Rose/Scuba), his music looks pretty craft-made; in the sense of naïve and amateurish, as Burial himself clearly explains in his interviews: 'I'm a bit like a rubbish super-hero' (ibid). His signature, organic, wonky, crackling sound is the outcome of a literally hand-made compositional process, of him employing a non-professional music editor, with no sequencers: the infamous Sound Forge. Fans and other musicians all seemed really upset to learn how Burial actually worked, since it is generally agreed that with such a tool it is almost impossible to produce 'good beats'.

Obviously, Burial's sound is not only a matter of technical limitation, but also an aesthetic statement: 'I was thinking of the kind of shit I want to hear that isn't studioboy weak fucking clumpy drum fake tunes' (Interview: Clark 2005). The aim of Burial's music is to convey the feelings which had produced it in the first place, being the medium and the message of his discourse:

it's always been difficult for me to make tunes. I'd just sit or walk waiting for night to fall hoping I'd make something i liked. ... I still made most of the tunes in the dead of the night, and when you do that you have to let the tune kind of hypnotize you otherwise you'll just fall asleep or

play Playstation. The tunes just lulled. ... The moodiness made the tunes.’ (Interview: Goodman 2007)

Burial’s uniqueness lies in this diverse type of production skills; not technical, but emotional. Yes: these takes on music are nothing but a series of cliché, and definitely ‘he is a romantic about music’ (Interview: Hancox 2007 *ibid*).

This kind of ‘epic of the lack of means’, this ‘triumph of the mistakes’ recalls the tradition of the early lo-fi and Do-It-Yourself ethics and poetics of indie music, the golden age of pioneers and creativity in electronic popular music, the recycled trash-technology of dub and hip hop of the late seventies, the serendipity of DJ Pierre’s Phuture *Acid tracks* (1987).

## 2.6. Before and beyond dubstep: The heretic traditionalist

Burial’s relationship with tradition, an exquisitely English tradition, explains his role and his importance as an innovator of the genre:

Whereas Pinch [with his album *Underwater Dancehall*] looks at the future of dubstep, Burial submerges himself in the very past of the genre, going back to its primary roots: UK Garage and 2 step. *Untrue* holds entire years of history of the UK sound. ... Burial carries to its extremes the work on voices developed within the English continuum, from hardcore to 2 step, passing through jungle and its affiliations.’ (Galli 2007; my trans)

His secular devotion to those sounds has been translated into his music, which pays tribute to his obsessive listening. Burial digs the sources of dubstep and, at the same time: ‘Fifteen years ago, we would have called it trip hop’ (Christgau 2013). When Burial and Massive Attack released a collaborative work (*Four Walls/Paradise Circus*, 2011), the English tradition of urban music seemed to have come to a full circle – he had become a reference for the ones who had influenced him in the first place.

Burial managed to carry dubstep from being a subcultural genre, rooted in dancehall, pirate radios and the club scene, to the zeitgeist, melancholic, highly emotional – ‘hypersoul’, according to the icastic definition of Kode9 – soundscape designed for the earlobes of the indie, arty listeners worldwide. He is being a paradoxical innovator, a chiasm: he made the genre leap forward, by bringing it back to its pre-genre roots. By reviving its origins, Burial deeply changed the nature of dubstep as a codified genre; by pointing to its tradition, he has renewed it, injecting new meanings. Whereas we can talk of retrofuturism, including afrofuturism (Zuberi 2007), we have to admit the possibility of an avant-pastism. Whereas we can identify *the invention of tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), we can detect, symmetrically, the recovery of invention. Burial used tradition to make innovation – he reimagined a possible past, a possible passed time ‘which could have been’.



## 2.7. Faraway so close: The myth

All these features make Burial an icon, a mythical figure in every respect – not only in common sense terminology, but also in a specific structuralist one. According to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958), myth is something that is created in order to provide the chaotic world with meaning; it works by *bricolage*, by arranging the existing things together, employing the available means. One of its main outcomes is the capability of reconciling the opposites. This is exactly what Burial did. And as in every myth proper, cases of uncontrolled mythogenesis and mythography have been reported: apparition and autosuggestion (*the Flying Lotus-Burial collaboration*); apocrypha (*the DJ-Kicks affaire*); persecution (*‘The Sun’ affaire*); Urban legend; Imitation.

Burial became a kind of ‘boogie man’ to be chased, and this led to funny anecdotes such as the following: ‘I’ve had times when I’ve had mates sitting next to me and they’ve put my tunes on without knowing. I would just sit there whispering to myself, “Please don’t put that on – Or at least, don’t say anything bad about it”. ... I’ve had someone say to me, “Yeah, Burial’s a girl. I know someone who met her”’ (Interview: Hancox 2007).

Burial’s signature sound has been replicated obviously by others. Zomby’s ‘Natalia’s Song’ (2011), a plain plagiarism of the homonymous Reark’s tune he was contributing to, is actually a stylistic plagiarism of Burial’s ‘hypersoul’, in the first place. Zomby stated: ‘I wrote it to give to Burial, really. It wasn’t intended to be a single’ (Parks 2011). Even Burial’s antipode and ‘nemesis’ Sonny Moore aka Skrillex, the chief figure of ‘the American way’ to dubstep, the drop-based and metal-affected brostep (cf. the groundbreaking 2010 EP *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites*), has been influenced by its style, as the eponymous tune from the 2013 EP *Leaving* testifies. Amateur music producers and fans tried to ‘dictionarize’ Burial’s style, by analysing and re-creating his sounds palette, featured by memorable analogical glitches such as the ignition of a lighter or the shaking of a keychain; on 19 May 2012, someone uploaded on the Mediafire file sharing platform an accurate ten second lasting 32-file sound effect handbook, to make it possible to copycat Burial – to ‘burialize’ one’s own beats.

## 2.8. Soundscape, memory and the continuum: How does Burial sound like?

Burial’s interviews are obsessively focused on his obsession with tunes and music; he has always been open, outspoken about it, his speech in-depth and detailed in focus. He has thoroughly described, metaphorized and interpreted his own music. Audience and journalists have always been in agreement with him and each other, depicting his music with a repertoire of expressions which soon became crystallized: ‘Burial “mourns the death of rave”, his music is (to paraphrase a handful of commentators) a “plaintive



echo from a bygone era of collective energy”, “a melancholy, ghostly memory of the faded promise of rave, drenched in weathering and mired in urban decay” (Harper 2009).

A ‘degree zero’ of the discourse about Burial, therefore, seems to have been set. But: How did Burial get to this largely agreed reading of his work, this largely agreed attitude towards his figure? How did he manage to construct a new musical form within the womb of dubstep?

Adam Harper maintains that Burial is other than the ‘vulgata reading’ of Burial; he is not only the ‘pall-bearer of rave culture’ (albeit this death-centred isotopy – I take the liberty to add – is obviously conveyed by his moniker, and has been so since his original, disturbing Myspace exergue: ‘rest in peace Danny’), but a lot of other things at the same time. He is the impressionistic painter of Zone 2-London;<sup>3</sup> a storyteller, a poet, an architect. And also ‘the Percussionist, the Audiophile, the Engineer, the Polyphonist, the Gamer, the Film-Watcher, the Music Fan, the Listener/Perceiver, the Orchestrator, the Gothic, the Socialist Realist, the Dancer, the Poststructuralist, the Bricoleur, the Romantic, the Diarist, the Raver, the Independent, the Victorian and the Myth’ (Harper *ibid*). Harper claims that, among the twenty-first-century composers, in the ‘post-experimental electronic musical style’, a category which perfectly fits his music, Burial is an innovator, precisely within two specific areas: ‘The complex electronic alteration of rhythm and pitch in vocal samples to create new, cyborg melodies [which] is referred to as “vocal science”’; and the harmonic and rhythmic cadence, namely ‘a configuration that creates a sense of repose or resolution [finality or pause]’ (Wikipedia).

In other words, Burial’s discourse about music through music is much more musical than we may infer at a first listen. Burial’s music works in a subtle fashion, outlining a double journey, both physical and metaphorical: it is a journey through London, a journey through music – a journey through London’s music. Like a gifted homeless, a special rough sleeper, just like the Fisher King, Burial is doomed to wandering across the ruins of London’s music continuum,<sup>4</sup> chased by painful illuminations.

An obsessive listener, Burial is an obsessive music producer as well. Obsession lies in the field of repetition, and repetition – at its peak of hypnotic power – is significant for the microscopic swerves it may be featured with. Say, Burial’s tunes are more or less all the same, all of them exploring all the possible micro-variations of just one formula: the skeletal and dust-covered shaky jungle and 2-step cadences; the wooden timbre of the rimshot on the snare; the modified voice cuts; the dirty yet vaporous ambience – a place filled with the empty spaces of dub only. Burial’s music has definitely changed, has evolved throughout time, but just like a plant which blossoms from a seed does, it has always been there, *in nuce*, encapsulated within a few key elements: The (anti)structural usage of the voices (at least, since *South London Boroughs*, 2005); a concrete music, field recording-like noise (a kind of background which has become more and more important and prominent, being no more a merely neutral sound canvas; since *Distant*

*Lights*, 2006); the ‘discovering’ of house and techno (since *Unite*, 2007; in fact, maybe the only Burial tune employing a sequencer). Burial’s signature sound is a kind of after-bomb soul music, a resilient soul, a ‘found’ soul – found in the midst of debris: A desolated soundscape set by some skeleton rhythms, some dark dust, some ghostly voices – a blurry musical Polaroid from the past.

Space is a key aspect of Burial’s music. And it is via this modulation of space that two different existential dimensions, which Burial is between, seem to have been set, outlining a semiotics of proper light. The sounds he displays are far-off, but still pretending an emotive closeness – a spatial rendition of the recurring ‘distant light’ (i.e. the spirit-ideology of underground music) he wants to keep alive. All the acknowledged genres, styles, and formal elements (all of them identifying a lost utopian dimension, ‘there and then’) are re-enacted, re-played as if they were dematerialized, as what remains when nothing is left of them but the idea (‘here and now’, the heterotopian dimension).<sup>5</sup> Burial’s micro-shifts are not discoveries then, but memories. They are not just traces from the past, but fossils – it is a ‘metaphysics of crackle’ (Fisher 2013).

## 2.9. Those were NOT the days: Hauntology to the square

With his most recent works (*Kindred*, February 2012; the diptych *Truant/Rough Sleeper*, December 2012; and *Rival Dealer*, December 2013), Burial carries his style to the extremes. He leads the riddim-resounding rhythms of dubstep to a more song-oriented set up (the most striking example is definitely ‘Hiders’, from the latest EP) and, at the same time, towards complexly layered textures weaving electroacoustic soundscapes (sometimes, they can even be beatless or ‘Gorecki-like’; Reynolds 2012: 514), made of found sounds, cut and packed in the form of suites. Features such as these made Burial easily comparable to Aphex Twin or Boards of Canada’s isolationism, or to the once-avant subgenre called illbient (Christgau 2013).

‘Ashtray Wasp’, the closing track from *Kindred*, displays a housey flavour, conveyed through a shining – a *slightly* shining – keyboard moving underskin. Burial’s signature snare is absent, being replaced by a more 4/4 dancey rhythm. The voices are still Burial’s hypersoul trademarks, Todd Edwards’ modelled (Zingales 2008), now resounding even Clams Casino (who, interviewed by myself, unbelievably said he did not know Burial at all; Marino 2011) and footwork’s high-pitched, cut-up confetti. Burial’s hustle and bustle on the sonic matter here is so advanced and fine grained to be on the verge of classical-contemporary music; as testified by the disclaimer which clarifies that ‘the skips and cut outs on the track “Ashtray Wasp” are intentional’. When Kode9 premiered *Truant/Rough Sleeper* at Club to Club music festival (Hiroshima Mon Amour club, Turin, Italy, 9 November 2012), it sounded like he was live processing the tunes. But Burial himself was playing the game, willingly deconstructing the musical

matter with rips, needle sticks, jumps ('Etched Headplate' is the title of the sixth track of *Untrue*), and silences. He builds up a kind of 'slacked radio' switch, he continuously disappoints the listener's expectations, forcing them to continuously reset their attempts to 'go in time', since the stop and gos he implements are far different from the techno and house routines. This is an electronic music that has been mutated into a street-captured folk music: an ethnography of the remembrances, of the memory, an update of the ancient 'field recordings' – a new blues for this epoch. If it is still dubstep, this is a disturbed, hypnagogic, post-ecstatic dubstep, situated 'out there' – the club is surely somewhere else.

Dubstep has been icastically described as a double ghost: 'the ghost of jungle', for 'your brain supplies the missing hyperspeed breakbeats' (Goodman/Kode9, in Reynolds 2012: 515), and 'rave's afterlife, or even a form of mourning without letting go' (ibid). Burial's, thus, is already a post-dubstep music, something incorporating dubstep itself in the process of abstraction as the ultimate step of the UK dance and bass music tradition – the lymph for dubstep in the first place. If Burial can be set within the aesthetics of hauntology (Ulrich and Fogel 2012),<sup>6</sup> as one of its most prominent exponents, indeed (Harper 2009; Fisher 2013), we can do so since his hauntology is a 'to the square' one. A lo-fi hauntology, a phenomenological, non-ontological one, the re-presentification, the rendition of what you listened to *yesterday*, heard as through today's iPod shuffled noise-crammed ears – heard as from a crackling pirate radio, or a broken cassette. We do not listen to the contemporary revival of an old music, but to an old music being revived by the act of listening to it today, with all the beautiful *stigma* of the time that passed upon it.

I'm not old enough to have been to a proper old rave in a warehouse or a field, ... but I used to hear these stories about legendary club nights, about driving off into the darkness to raves on the outskirts of London. But it's got this sadness now, because most club culture got commercialised in the 1990s; oftentimes it got taken off ravers and sold back to them. But it's still out there; there's a signal, or a light. It's like there's someone still holding a lighter in a warehouse somewhere. (Interview: Hancox 2007)

This mnemonic-oneiric journey within the (hi)story of English electronic music is largely an imaginative trip: it is a meditation, a speculation upon the genre and its macro-context – an 'audio essay about the London hardcore continuum' (Reynolds 2012: 515). At the same time, depicting a post-urban, Ballardian ambience (Sellars 2008; Reynolds 2012: 514), being a 'post-geographical sound ..., deterritorializing and border-crossing, ... it could equally be about any city anyway' (Reynolds 2012: 515). Burial's 'dubstep' is, just like every great work of music, both specific and universal in its identification mechanism: it is a specific place, with precise coordinates, but also a state of the mind everyone can feel, everywhere.

Tickling the forgotten pleasure of remembering, doubting and investigating, Burial presents himself as the borderline conscience of English underground electronic music: a secluded bard for these days of future past.

## Outro (Truant/Rough Sleeper)

*'I fell in love with you.' It comes from my guts, I feel this abandon with no more struggle, no more tears, for I know it is not on you, not on this city. I am the culprit: I love you, but it 'Doesn't really mean I want you.' We move slightly blurry, wrapped within an upward pathos, moving amidst techno-house hints, trip hop skeletons, dark ambient dust, dub bubbles, up to an Arabic fusion sax playing down in an alley. It lasts just for a second. All these faded memories are resounding like the tinnit after a rave does. I am there again. The struggle is over, I am resigned, I have accepted myself for what I am, maybe, as a smile eventually appears shy on my face: a pulse, a ringing, a porcelain bell, blessed with simplicity, and tender grace, brings to light that pale, tepid hope. I feel at home, now. For just a second. Then, the wandering starts again.*

## Notes

- 1 At this point, I cannot skip the anecdote. On 19 June 2013, I was about to take a flight from Turin (Italy) to London to participate in the conference about 'Englishness and popular music'. I was a PhD student in semiotics at the time, I was working on my thesis about the system of musical genres, and dubstep was particularly interesting in this respect for its multilayered history and intricate branches. Burial was a very interesting theoretical subject of enquiry indeed. Thus, the topic of my talk was Burial. Just before getting on the airplane, my then-fiancé – now my wife – texted me: 'Gabri, Four Tet just confirmed he is Burial.' I can say I panicked for a second, since my whole interpretation of Burial and his music was built upon one single belief: he was not the spin-off project of some other musician, but a kind of ephemeral revelation of the incredible strength of the imaginary connected to contemporary electronic music. I knew I was right. And I was. The conference was particularly important to me for a number of reasons: it was my first one ever, it was about a complex subject, and it gave me the chance to meet scholars with different backgrounds, dealing with a number of diverse subjects. Moreover, it definitely became clear to me that the perception of international music that my Italian peers and I had was quite distorted. I thought Burial was a 'dubstar' and, more in general, a popular music star in London, as much as in Italy. Well, it turned out that he was more a niche phenomenon, and cult act, than a proper 'star', since most of the participants, both among the speakers (some of them even talked about Tricky or the grime scene) and in the audience, had never heard of him.

- 2 It is quite interesting that, as noted by famed rock journalist Robert Christgau (2013), despite the scrupulous anonymity of its public moves in the beginning, on the one hand, and his peculiar work upon voices (and lyrics; Bradley 2013), on the other (they are ‘chopped and screwed’, pitched up, slowed down, gender ambiguous etc.), no one ever suggested Burial might have been a woman.
- 3 London’s public transport system is divided into six main zones. The inner district is zone 1. Zone 2 represents the edge of inner London.
- 4 Since 1999 circa, journalist and cultural critic Simon Reynolds theorized that most of the traditions in the history of electronic popular music in the UK were interrelated; he named such phylogeny the ‘hardcore continuum’ (cf. Reynolds 2012).
- 5 The terms ‘utopian’ and ‘heterotopian’ are employed here in a semiotic, non-Foucauldian way.
- 6 Music journalists Ian Penman (1995) and Mark Fisher/k-punk (2005) were the first ones to apply the Derridian notion of hauntology (Fr. *hantologie*; a pun between *ontologie* [ontology] and *hanter* [to haunt]) to popular music. According to Derrida, hauntology is a phantasmal ontology, a palpable absence, a presence from the past which keeps haunting present times. The literature upon this topic in popular culture is incredibly rich, since it has been a growing trend throughout the 2010s. In order to get both a wider context and some key case studies (including Burial), please cf. Harper (2011) and Fisher (2014).

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## ***Official webpages***

burial.bandcamp.com

Burial's Myspace [myspace.com/burialuk](https://myspace.com/burialuk).

Burial's post on Hyperdub's website [hyperdub.net/burial](https://hyperdub.net/burial).

## ***Discography***

Burial (2005) *South London Boroughs*, Hyperdub [EP]

Burial (2006) *Burial*, Hyperdub [Album]

Burial (2007) *Ghost Hardware*, Hyperdub [EP]

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**Note:** All the online resources were last accessed on 13 November 2016; URLs have been shortened via Google's URL shortener (*goo.gl*). Images of Burial to accompany this text can be found at [goo.gl/82OuQu](https://goo.gl/82OuQu)