# Simon Wheatley rereleases grime photo book capturing East London’s lost youth culture



On a typical overcast Thursday morning in Bow, East London, photographer Simon Wheatley revisits a landscape that once throbbed with the raw pulse of grime music and youth culture. For those unfamiliar, grime was more than just a musical genre; it was a socio-cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the working-class estates of London, particularly around Roman Road. Once described by the artist Wiley as "the nurturer" of local talents such as himself and Dizzee Rascal, this street was the chaotic heart of the scene. In the early 2000s, Wheatley, then a struggling photographer in his twenties, spontaneously began documenting this vibrant world just outside his Limehouse doorstep. His intimate and unfiltered portrayal of grime’s players and their environs culminated in his photo-book Don’t Call Me Urban, which was released in 2011 and has since become a cult classic, often hailed as "grime’s Old Testament."

Wheatley’s photographic journey started amid suspicion. Early on, some of his subjects viewed him warily, suspecting he might be an undercover policeman. However, by gaining the trust of key figures, including Roll Deep’s DJ Target, he was able to embed himself within the scene—capturing pivotal moments like impromptu street ciphers, pirate radio broadcast sessions, and the quieter, domestic facets of young grime artists’ lives. These images went far beyond glamorised clichés; he photographed fights, drug deals, and everyday moments of lyric writing, camaraderie, and reflection, providing a raw social document of youthful energy, boredom, and resilience. Wheatley explains that grime was both a "coarse expression of a kind of individualism" and a tight-knit community reaction to social neglect, reflective of post-Thatcherite social breakdown.

His unique access and approach stemmed from being a self-styled outsider—someone who described himself as "a bit of a weirdo," which helped him navigate and connect with this community. Wheatley’s dynamic style was influenced by his physicality and his background in sports and martial arts, which allowed him to keep pace with the restless energy of youth. Beyond simply chronicling grime’s underground, Wheatley considered the cultural significance of the era: it was a form of expression for a generation often dismissed by the media and politicians as "hoodies" or "chavs," a moral scapegoat for deeper systemic issues. The book’s title itself was a deliberate challenge to the glamorisation of urban life, aiming instead to present grime as it was—raw and real.

The social backdrop Wheatley captured was on the cusp of dramatic change. His documentation of East London predated the transformative 2012 Olympics, an event that accelerated gentrification and altered the cultural landscape. He stresses that while some see the changes as positive, bringing refurbished housing and a cleaner environment, the raw textures and atmosphere of the earlier era—its sense of abandonment turned into a playground for hopeful, frustrated youth—are irreplaceable. Through Wheatley’s lens, the familiar streets and estates are shown as living canvases of hope and despair, capturing a moment of creative explosion before the mainstream arrival of grime changed public perception. Today, grime stars like Stormzy are global icons, but Wheatley reminds us that the first wave of artists faced marginalisation and hostility, making their achievements all the more remarkable.

The original Don’t Call Me Urban quickly went out of print and grew into a sought-after collector’s item, its photographs serving as an important visual archive of British Black music heritage and youth culture. Thanks to the support of fans within the creative community, including streetwear designer Clint Ogbenna of Corteiz, the book is being rereleased in a significantly expanded format that offers even deeper insight into the era. Wheatley’s work not only celebrates grime's sound and style but also preserves the socio-political context from which it arose, reflecting both the struggles and the vitality of the communities that birthed it.

Wheatley’s story and approach offer a potent reminder that grime was much more than a musical trend. It was a complex sociological phenomenon and a vivid cultural resistance. His visual legacy affords us a nuanced understanding of an overlooked youth movement, documenting both the artist's ascent to fame and the grinding realities of everyday life in East London's council estates during the early 2000s.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/simon-wheatley-london-grime-scene-photography-b977194.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-13608668),[[5]](https://dmy.co/features/don-t-call-me-urban-by-simon-wheatly)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/simon-wheatley-london-grime-scene-photography-b977194.html),[[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/28/simon-wheatley-not-all-grime-had-to-be-about-confrontation-it-was-a-celebration-of-being-here)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[5]](https://dmy.co/features/don-t-call-me-urban-by-simon-wheatly),[[3]](https://romanroadlondon.com/simon-wheatley-grime-photographer/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[2]](https://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/10534/1/don-t-call-me-urban-simon-wheatley),[[5]](https://dmy.co/features/don-t-call-me-urban-by-simon-wheatly)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley),[[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/28/simon-wheatley-not-all-grime-had-to-be-about-confrontation-it-was-a-celebration-of-being-here),[[3]](https://romanroadlondon.com/simon-wheatley-grime-photographer/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/jun/20/dont-call-me-urban-grime-photographer-simon-wheatley> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/10534/1/don-t-call-me-urban-simon-wheatley> - In this 2010 interview, Simon Wheatley discusses his book 'Don’t Call Me Urban! The Time of Grime', which documents the grime scene in London. He explains the title's intent to challenge the glamorisation of urban life and reflects on his experiences photographing the youth culture emerging from council estates. Wheatley also shares his future plans, including a book on Amsterdam and aspirations to shoot music videos with artists who dare to be different.
3. <https://romanroadlondon.com/simon-wheatley-grime-photographer/> - This 2021 article profiles Simon Wheatley, an acclaimed photographer who spent twelve years documenting grime culture. It explores his background, including his upbringing in Singapore and England, and his journey into photography. The piece delves into Wheatley's experiences capturing the lives of young people in East London's council estates and his sense of belonging in Bow. It also touches upon his time working for Magnum and his return to Bow after a decade of searching for his Asian ancestry.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/simon-wheatley-london-grime-scene-photography-b977194.html> - In this 2022 interview, Simon Wheatley reflects on his experiences photographing the grime scene in London. He shares a personal anecdote about capturing an image in Bow in 2003, which marked his first glimpse of grime. Wheatley discusses how the genre provided him with a sense of belonging in a country where he had rarely felt at home. He also mentions his friendships with individuals from the youth clubs and the warmth he feels when encountering them in the community.
5. <https://dmy.co/features/don-t-call-me-urban-by-simon-wheatly> - This 2011 feature highlights Simon Wheatley's book 'Don’t Call Me Urban', which showcases his photographs of grime's gritty birthplace and the people who made significant contributions to the music genre. The article includes an interview with Wheatley, where he discusses his self-taught photography journey, his interest in urban subcultures, and his experiences capturing the essence of grime. The piece also touches upon his future plans and the impact of his work on documenting British youth culture.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-13608668> - This 2011 BBC News article presents a selection of Simon Wheatley's photographs from his book 'Don’t Call Me Urban! The Time of Grime'. The images depict hooded youths on street corners, dealers, and gangsters, capturing the essence of London's grime scene. Wheatley discusses the paradox of grime artists associating with the glitz of US hip hop while reflecting the reality of life on under-funded housing estates. The article also delves into Wheatley's approach to gaining access to the communities he photographed.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/28/simon-wheatley-not-all-grime-had-to-be-about-confrontation-it-was-a-celebration-of-being-here> - In this 2015 interview, Simon Wheatley discusses his book 'Don’t Call Me Urban! The Time of Grime' and his perspective on the grime scene. He reflects on the genre's evolution and its portrayal in the media, emphasizing that not all grime was about confrontation but also a celebration of existence. Wheatley shares his experiences photographing artists and the cultural significance of grime in London's urban landscape.