

Obituary: Caspar Melville 1966-2025

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Caspar Melville, academic and journalist, and author of a major book on the Black music cultures of late twentieth century post-colonial London, *It's A London Thing*, died in March 2025, aged 58.

Caspar grew up in West London and did his undergraduate degree in American Studies at the University of Sussex, including a year at University of California Santa Cruz, where he was the only man in a class on Black women writers led by Gloria Hull. In the early 1990s he lived and worked as a music journalist in California and was one of a group that set up a music magazine in San Francisco, called *On the One*. He returned to London to do an MA in the Department of Media and Communication at Goldsmiths (University of London) and from 1997 worked on a PhD, *London Underground: The multicultural routes of London dance cultures*, completed in 2007 and the basis for his later book on the topic. In 2001, Caspar and I published the UK chapter in Tony Mitchell's collection, *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA* and for some years it was one of the very few academic discussions of UK hip hop.

We presented a draft of that paper at the IASPM biennial conference held in Sydney in July 1999, where we set ourselves a formidable challenge: each of us had to incorporate as many Gil Scott-Heron song references into our respective sections of the presentation as possible, no matter how nonsensical the results. This was obviously a deeply childish game, but it helped us deal with the strange world of popular music academia and made us laugh for years afterwards.

One of the reasons Caspar's PhD, supervised by Angela McRobbie (and initially by myself until I left Goldsmiths in 1998), took so long to complete was that Caspar had returned to journalism in 2001, to work at the *Open Democracy* website. Another was that he and his partner Sarah were bringing up a young son, Saul, born in that same year. In 2005, he became editor of *New Humanist* magazine, which is the magazine of the UK Rationalist Association. There he became good friends with Laurie Taylor, the distinguished sociologist and UK media figure, and Caspar

made frequent appearances on Taylor's BBC radio programme and podcast, *Thinking Allowed*. (Laurie's moving tribute to Caspar can be found [here](#)). While at *New Humanist*, Caspar published *Taking Offence: The Humanist Perspective* (2009), one of a book series on the issue of offence published by Seagull Press. This book addressed many of the debates about hate speech and free speech that are still raging today.

In 2012, Caspar returned to academia when he was appointed Lecturer in Cultural and Creative Industries at SOAS (University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies). He became a hugely popular teacher and colleague. *It's a London Thing* was published by Manchester University Press in 2020. It ranges across soul and reggae in the 1970s, rare groove and acid house in the 1980s, and jungle and its offshoots in the 1990s. It reflects Caspar's deep love and knowledge of music and his longstanding commitment to anti-racism and anti-colonialism. A record of his eloquent and informed understanding of the politics of Black music can be found online in many podcasts where he discusses the book.

In 2023, Caspar suffered terrible injuries, including brain damage, when he came off his bike in South London, not far from his home. He was cared for with enormous dedication by Sarah and was frequently visited in hospital by family and friends until he sadly succumbed to pneumonia and kidney failure in March of this year.

In Laurie Taylor's words, Caspar was a "wonderful, funny, clever companion to everyone who knew him". That was certainly my own experience of him as a teacher, as his co-author and as a friend.