

Sign of the grimes: Stormzy's Glastonbury interpreter on how to translate rap

After a video of Tara Asher doing a British Sign Language version of Stormzy's headline set went viral, the festival's interpreters for deaf fans reveal their secrets. Aimee Cliff, Tue 2 Jul 2019, *theguardian.com*

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Between the many scene-stealing moments that have been shared from Stormzy's emotional Glastonbury headline set, you might have seen a video of Tara Asher on your timeline. An audience-shot clip of Asher, a British Sign Language interpreter, went viral, showing her gunfinger-happy, head-spinningly dextrous visualisation of the grime MC's rapidfire lyrics.

10 For Asher, who also interpreted Stormzy at Glastonbury in 2017, it was just another night's work. "There's not many interpreters who interpret music and do festivals," she says. "There's a shortage nationally." And there's even fewer who specialise in grime. "I've listened to grime since the Risky Roadz days, since the very beginning, so it's easier for me, because I understand the context, the slang, all that stuff."

15 Alongside Asher, Stormzy's set was also interpreted by Stephanie Raper. Overall, 20 interpreters volunteer their time with Glastonbury's DeafZone to make sure that key Glastonbury performances are accessible for deaf audiences. With each song taking about a day's preparation to learn, it's a mammoth job – made even more difficult by the fact that interpreters don't have access to setlists before shows. This means they usually look up an artist's recent sets online, and spend weeks prepping all the songs that might be played. And if the artist goes off-script and plays something new? "We just have to go with it," says Raper. "It's about the beat, the words, the melodies, the feeling, the tempo change – it's just trying your best to relay all that."

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For most interpreters, the work begins with immersing themselves in an artist's world. Paula Cox, who interpreted Janet Jackson's set, explains that ahead of a gig, she "listens constantly – in the car, in the morning, in the evening, when I'm cooking my dinner. Part of the research is looking on YouTube, and seeing how the artist moves to this song, and what their mood is. If they've got a certain way they hold themselves, you want to try and match that."

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For Benjamin Gorman, who interpreted his very first set at Glastonbury for Bastille, preparation is more intricate. Gorman is deaf himself and performed with the support of other volunteers giving visual cues. "I had to read as many lyrics as I possibly could," he explains. "Also, when you sign in BSL, it's not the same grammar and structure as spoken English, so you need to think about how to change it, but not change it so much that you depart from the original lyrics."

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Part of what makes such translations consistently go viral is the sheer emotive power of the performances, stemming from the visually expressive nature of the language. Angela Dawes – who provided BSL interpretation for Christine and the Queens, Billie Eilish, and Loyle Carner – finds it easier to translate when she connects emotionally with a song. "Having an artist you can relate to – that really helps. We want to put that across in our interpretation: how you *feel* when you listen to a song."

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As well as covering main performances, DeafZone also provide "roaming" interpreters who support deaf people accessing other aspects of Glastonbury, such as getting a massage or watching a debate. But DeafZone's work isn't only about helping deaf people – it's also about raising awareness of BSL as a language in the hearing community. Volunteer Abigail Gorman (who is deaf herself) explains that the DeafZone tent provides free BSL classes to all Glastonbury-goers. "We talk about deaf history, culture, language. We don't want people to just come in and learn a few signs – that's tokenistic. We want people in the future to campaign on our behalf, be our allies and support us."

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When videos such as the one of Asher interpreting Stormzy go viral, it's a double-edged sword: while it raises awareness of the need for BSL interpreters at concerts, interpreters are keen to not be the focus of attention. "It all comes back to providing access for the deaf person," says Dawes. "As much as we may enjoy the lovely aspect of performance, first and foremost we're here because we're showing that this is a language. An *equal* language." Her co-interpreter Erin Hutchin agrees: "One of the misconceptions is that interpreters help deaf people. [We] provide a really important service both ways. It's to help the hearing person as well, because they don't know sign language."

The best outcome of these viral videos would be more support for interpreters at festivals – who could benefit from access to setlists and an in-ear audio feed – but also, most importantly, improved access for the deaf festival-goers. The impact of that access can be immeasurable. "The first time I came to Glastonbury, I was a punter, and I didn't expect anything," says Gorman. "I'd been to other festivals with limited access – whereas here, it's inclusive. I'm not ostracised. Festivals need to be more deaf aware. They need to employ deaf people to find out what deaf people need. I face a lot of barriers. There are no barriers here at Glastonbury."