Every generational talent has a defining feature. For rapper Pa Salieu, it is his voice, which skates eerily and gleefully on top of any beat handed to him. It is this voice that has come to define the last 18 months in UK culture; one that has been identified as exceptional since his track ‘Frontline’ dropped in January 2019, catapulting that unique guttural accented sound into the public eye. It is this same voice that declares, “I guide me / I don’t follow no rules” on ‘Glidin’’, his latest single with fellow British rapper Slowthai.

Swirling around an infectious bass and skittering drums, Pa Salieu’s voice glistens over production which touches upon multiple genres. Pa and Northampton artist Slowthai trade verses with each of their distinct modes of expression popping and fizzing with a playful menace. The beat skips with a dizzying bravado, pushing Pa further into a joyous future after a challenging past.

Over the last 18 months, Pa Salieu has guided himself through the eye of a hurricane and come out the other side stronger for it. After being shot at outside a show in his hometown of Coventry, England, he battled for his life before spending the next 12 months gracing the covers of, amongst others, Wonderland, NME and Dazed. He’s appeared on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, been crowned the BBC Sound Of…2021 while his song ‘Frontline’ was the most played track on BBC Radio 1xtra in 2020. Yet, the 23-year-old British-Gambian artist brushes it off like it's another day at the office. “To me, music is more important than the media and camera attention,” he says.

It’s an ethos that sums up his work ethic. Since the release of his widely acclaimed debut mixtape, ‘Send Them To Coventry’, Pa has been holed up in the studio. It’s how he survived a brutal winter lockdown: collaborating with the likes of genre-bending artist FKA Twigs, Manchester rapper Aitch and Jamaican superstar Popcaan while his collaborations with the likes of Ghetts and Backroad Gee have already been highly acclaimed upon their release.

“Since the start of the year, we haven’t aimed for a project,” Pa says. “But, we already have two albums worth of work. I have found more sounds than before. I’ve been building every day. It’s like I’m in a video game right now.” While incorporating elements of Gambian melodies with flecks of drill and grime interwoven with snippets of Afroswing, Afrobeat and dancehall, Pa’s sound oscillates between rhythms with no care for formulas — it’s an extension of what goes through his head.

With his music, Pa is teasing a foray into “deep house” with aspects of electronic music potentially making an appearance in his upcoming work. “You know how I say no genre?” he asks. “We’ve been focusing on every genre. Seeing what we like. For example, when I was in the studio with Aitch, we came up with mad sounds, just different things that are so exciting.”

Within the lines of his songs, the hardships of Pa’s life are on display: ‘Look, my name is Pa and I’m from Hillset / Buss gun, dodge slugs, got touched, skipped death’ he raps on the track ‘Block Boy’. Yet, despite the boisterous public personality on display, there is a certain elusiveness to the enigmatic presence of Pa Salieu. It’s a direct opposite to the raucousness present in his music. “I’ve forgotten how to do these [interviews],” he laughs to himself more than anyone. It always takes Pa a while to get speaking because he’s constantly “focused on the studio.”

Since he was young, Pa, the eldest of three, has always had a sense of greatness weighing upon him. Born in Slough, Pa was named after his father’s eldest brother, a police officer in The Gambia, who died at 21-years-old. Before Pa's first birthday, his parents sent him to The Gambia, where he would live with his grandmother and older relatives until he was 10-years-old. As he saw his auntie's career as a folk singer blossom, he credits those years as shaping him.

Back in England, the adjustment was demanding. His parents had moved to Hillfields, Coventry, a notoriously low-income part of the city. 14 percent of neighbourhoods in Coventry are among the top 10 percent most deprived in the country. In the Gambia, Pa lived life within his community; in England, he felt society and the government let him down. "At least there’s freedom back [in the Gambia]," he says. "If you ain’t got no money [in the UK], no one wants to love you. The world is different here.”

Growing up in Coventry, Pa felt abandoned by the British government. He was ostracised at school as well and turned to the streets, making life-long friends with those who he felt had a connection to because they too had slipped through the cracks. Here, Pa started separating himself from his peers. While hustling on the streets, Pa saved money. “20% of everything I made on the streets, I stashed,” he says. For a future outside of the streets, for his family and community back home in The Gambia, Pa was busy "building".

After both his grandparents and close friend AP passed in the same year, the ground beneath Pa’s feet shifted. It felt unaccommodating. It made sense to take flight. Pa had enough saved up to start taking music seriously in the tail-end of 2018 using his singular voice to soar above everything else, seeing Coventry unfold underneath him.

Depicting the grisly scenes of growing up in Hillfields, he wrote ‘Frontline’ in 20 minutes. The song’s success felt like fate confirming itself, but it was no coincidence. Pa buckled down and hit the studio harder for follow-up singles ‘Betty’ and ‘Bang Out’, showcasing his dexterity and earning plaudits from fans and the industry alike. His debut mixtape ‘Send Them To Coventry’ was an intricate tour of Pa’s life, immediately positioning his sound as wholly fresh and inventive culminating in a BRITS nomination in the *Rising Star Award* category.

“When I was in primary school,” he starts to say, “they used to give end of the week certificates every week. All my life, even in secondary school, I only had that twice. Music became my gateway. Music is my voice. I’m coming from a place where my voice doesn't matter. I didn’t think I’d ever be [nominated] for the Brits [Award].”

Pa is aware that fans are hungry for more. Coming up first though are long-awaited live performances. Pre-pandemic, Pa Salieu was performing to crowds of a couple of hundred people. With several summer festival slots booked — including one at the esteemed East London event All Points East — Pa is busy preparing for them along with the release of a new project. He’s got a few surprises in stock, hints of which have appeared on his digital performances, but he can confirm they revolve around the Gambian culture.

“Remember,” he states, “all I’ve [rapped] is Coventry. I’m pushed by my culture and everything I’ve been through. You’re going to hear what I’m going to say. You’re going to see what I want you to see. I want you to see what I saw back home [in Gambia]. I want you to feel what I felt back home. I can’t wait for everyone to embrace it. My culture is very interesting. This is just level eight. Level nine is when I start flying. Remember that.”

########################################################################

Pa Salieu is a British-Gambian artist out of Hillfields, Coventry in England. Pa has solidified his individuality among other UK talents by marrying his accented voice and staccato flow with an eerie blend of ceiling-threatening infectious beats, paving the way for a niche genre unique only to him.

A British-Gambian artist out of Hillfields, Coventry in England, Pa was born in Slough and was sent back to The Gambia before his first birthday where he lived with his grandmother and older relatives. Pa credits this first decade as influential, especially since he witnessed his auntie’s career as a folk singer blossom. After his move back to England resulted in several tough years, Pa wound up hustling on the streets before the deaths of his grandparents and close friend A.P found him seeking solace in poetry and music.

Since the release of his first major single, 'Frontline', Pa Salieu has graced the covers of Dazed, NME and Wonderland while profiles on him have been featured in many places including The New York Times. He has also appeared on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, been crowned the BBC Sound Of…2021 and was nominated for a BRITS Award.