

## 10 BIG INTERVIEW

### ALISON WENHAM

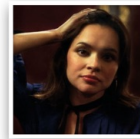
"AIM have set standards, based around fair dealing, straight talking and a belief in people"



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Your guide to what's on at this week's essential music biz conference



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### NORAH JONES

"I got in under the wire when people still bought CDs. It's a different place now"

# Mercury rising?

REVAMPED FORMAT & SKEPTA WIN SEES INDUSTRY DREAM OF RETURN TO PRIZE'S GLORY DAYS

## TALENT

BY MARK SUTHERLAND

The music industry gave a cautious welcome to the Hyundai Mercury Prize's new format, as Skepta's win raised hopes for a significant sales boost and a long-awaited grime crossover.

Skepta's *Konnichiwa* (Boy Better Know) was crowned the British & Irish album of the year in the ceremony at the Eventim Apollo in London on September 15, beating the likes of David Bowie's *Blackstar* (RCA) and The 1975's *I Like It When You Sleep...* (Dirty Hit/Polydor).

Most of the 12 nominated artists played live in a beefed-up show, with actor Michael C. Hall performing as a tribute to Bowie. Only six "finalists" appeared on the live BBC4 TV broadcast, however, with The 1975 winning the public vote to go through to the final.

Some artists were said to be unhappy with that elimination process, but most changes appeared to go down well with an industry that's been concerned about the waning influence of the prize on sales figures in recent years.

Skepta's win is seen as one that could crossover into sales and streams, particularly with the renewed media attention around the grime scene this year. *Konnichiwa* had sold 83,781 copies before the ceremony, according to the Official Charts Company, adding an extra 1,512 on the last day of the chart week, suggesting a surge in interest around the ceremony – although, on the day before the event, half of the list had still sold fewer than 20,000 copies each. The previous two winners – Benjamin Clementine's *At Least For Now* and Young Fathers' *Dead* have both sold fewer than 30,000 copies respectively.

The full effect of the ceremony won't be seen until next week, but Geoff Taylor, chief executive



Grime time: Skepta wins the Hyundai Mercury Prize

of the BPI, which has taken over the running of the Prize, said he was confident increased media attention for this year's ceremony would benefit the nominated artists' careers. TV viewers peaked at 328,000; up from 269,000 in 2015.

"The main boost always comes around the show itself," Taylor told *Music Week*. "There's more work for us to do to make sure we have a longer envelope around the prize and feature those albums for longer. But it's not just about the immediate sales figures, it's about the recognition given to those 12 albums for what they've achieved artistically – and that benefits the artists over a period of time."

At retail, HMV's head of music and merchandise Melanie Armstrong pledged *Konnichiwa* would be "front and centre" in stores to try and capitalise on the interest.

"The TV show was definitely a more focused affair and, as a result, easier to watch," she told *Music Week*. "Skepta is a popular winner and already a critical and commercial success, but there is definitely potential for a sales spike over

the coming week, with plenty of the public yet to actually buy in to grime."

Skepta's win will also help allay any indies' concerns that the BPI's involvement might make the prize more mainstream.

"Skepta's Mercury win demonstrates that being an independent artist is no barrier to success," AIM chair/CEO Alison Wenham told *Music Week*. "Skepta was awarded AIM's Outstanding Contribution award in 2015, and this win is further recognition of the UK's amazing grime scene."

The BPI will review this year's event in the coming weeks, but Taylor said the Mercury Prize will continue to have a vital role in helping to break British artists in the current tough environment for new music.

"One of the key concerns going forward is having platforms to promote new artists," said Taylor. "There's a lot of on-going consumption of existing music and we need to make sure that new music gets a focus in the minds of media and consumers."