

# **A Critical Survey of Museum Collections of Popular Music in the United Kingdom**

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Popular music has increasingly been identified, celebrated, exploited and preserved as cultural heritage by a variety of agents including heritage institutions, commercial concerns and community groups (Cohen et al 2015; Baker 2015). Museums are one of the actors who have been significant within this process through the establishment of music collections, high profile exhibitions and dedicated music museums. This marks a distinct shift in practice for museums which, twenty years ago, had not tended to feature popular culture (Moore, 1997). The shift toward understanding popular music in this way is indicative of changing cultural attitudes which have, in some areas at least, begun to dismantle formerly rigid demarcations between 'legitimate', 'middle-brow' and 'popular' taste delineated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2010: 8). Such distinctions arguably lack cogency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural context, where supply of culture has dramatically diversified through processes of globalisation whilst democratisation of culture has been facilitated by the availability of the Internet. Focussing on the UK this article considers the nature of museum popular music collections, appraising their scope and significance, and examining what the development of these collections can reveal about how such institutions select and prioritise material.

Scholarly attention to popular music collecting has tended to focus on the motivations, practices, tastes and identities of individual collectors. While some studies have taken account of collection practices related to material such as posters, T-shirts and ephemera (Fiske 1992; Cavicchi 1998), much of the work on collecting has attended to recorded sound collections, from studies of record collecting (e.g. Plasketes 1992; Straw, 1997; Yochim and Biddinger, 2008; Shuker, 2010) to bootleg collectors and tape traders (Marshall 2003), through to examinations of how individuals collect and organise digital music files (McCourt, 2005; Kibby, 2009; Magaouda, 2011). Beyond this, as Shuker notes in his study of record collectors, there is a need to investigate how institutional collections reconstruct and represent the musical past (2010: 205-6). While there is a body of work relating to the

creation of popular music collections within libraries (e.g. Wells 1998; Chang, 2008; Luyk, 2013; Wanser, 2014), comparative work on museum collections is scant (Edge, 2000; Leonard, 2007). There is a small but important amount of work on the holdings, collection management and approaches of specific music centres and specialist popular music museums (Sarpong, 2004; Maguire, Motson, Wilson & Wolfe, 2005; Henke, 2009; Moody 2012; Pirrie Adams, 2016) as well as a developing literature on community archives and museums (Baker, 2015; Baker and Collins, 2015) but a notable absence of broader reviews of collections of popular music by what might be considered to be the formal museum sector.

This discussion is based upon findings from the first review of popular music collections in UK museums. Over twenty years ago it was found that while 'modern pop music should be one of the easiest and most obvious areas to collect' it was largely absent from museum collections (Arnold-Forster and La Rue, 1993: 20). Much has changed since then and in revealing the results of our research we will discuss the nature of existing holdings and the rationale behind their collection and will also evaluate how popular music is being defined and preserved as cultural heritage. As institutions which collect and display the audio-visual and material culture which attends to popular music, museums are active in preserving, presenting and articulating the cultural worth of popular music and in representing it as cultural heritage. The cultural status of museums is critical to this work as the collecting policies and practices of these institutions, more than many other repositories, shape public understanding about cultural worth, by removing objects from circulation and framing them in aesthetic and cultural terms. As Duncan noted about the character of the gallery environment: 'through the aesthetizing lens of museum space' everyday objects 'may become art' (Duncan, 1995: 20) Similarly, it could be argued that the very act of collection and curation shifts the symbolic meaning of popular music materials. Of course the cultural worth of music is articulated, evaluated, and argued over in many other places than collecting organisations. The meaning and importance of music is asserted, rehearsed and debated within websites, magazines, television, film, and radio, as well as being promoted through re-issues and award ceremonies. However, we must not overlook the important role that museums have in defining, recording and representing our social and cultural activities for future generations. As Pearce has argued, when objects are collected by museums they are effectively removed from circulation as commodities and invested with new social meaning (Pearce, 1992: 33). In Bourdieu's terms, the accumulation of economic capital merges with an increased accumulation of symbolic capital. (Bourdieu, 2010: 285) Through a focus on museum collections we will discuss how these institutions contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the cultural importance of the popular past and shifting notions of the value of popular music in the public sphere. Moreover, as collections of

popular music have only been established within museums relatively recently, the rationale for inclusion can shed light on changing attitudes toward popular culture and approaches to institutional collecting. Drawing on primary evidence gathered through surveys and first-person interviews conducted with museum professionals we will discuss the types of material found within museum collections, the processes through which these collections have been assembled, and the multifarious ways that institutions regard and deploy their popular music collections.

### **Methodology**

The foundation for this article are the results of a questionnaire based survey of UK museums and series of follow-up interviews undertaken with UK museum professionals. The survey was distributed to 198 UK museums of varied size, geographical and typological character. These included national museums, university museums, council-funded institutions, and private sector enterprises. The geographical spread of the institutions contacted was wide, representing all four main constituent nations within the UK, as well as the Isles of Wight and Man. The surveyed institutions included social history museums, art museums, specialist music museums, and institutions of a mixed format. Depending on the size of the museum, in some cases we contacted several different members of staff responsible for different functional roles, such as conservation and collections management, so as to maximise the opportunities for responses, gather more data and thus gain a fuller picture of the museum's operation in the field of popular music.

From 198 contacted sites, responses were received from 83 unique participants, with 47 providing detailed information on their collections and exhibitions, and 65 agreeing to schedule follow up interviews. Specific collections data was gathered from across 43 separate UK museums and, together with follow-up interviews, overall 62 different UK cultural and heritage institutions were directly consulted or contributed information to the research project – with multiple respondents from some of these sites. The geographical split of those either interviewed or surveyed saw the largest concentration of respondents located in the north west, where the research team was based and we had most pre-existing links with the museum sector. This area constituted 34% of our survey. The other areas more prominently represented in the survey are the south east and London (25%), the midlands (13%), the north east (9%) and Wales (8%). Invariably, those institutions that possessed significant music collections, had hosted exhibitions addressing the topic, or had an interest in developing collections and/or exhibitions in the future responded more readily, meaning there is a case of positive identification and reinforcement in the survey results.

The 65 interviews conducted for the research took place between September 2010 and July 2011, with the majority being conducted face-to-face in the respective museum. On average, discussions lasted for approximately one hour, although some interviews were over two hours in duration. A small number of telephone interviews were conducted on occasions where it was not possible to meet in person. Museum professionals from a range of roles within the sector were consulted, including curators, educators, conservators, and museum management. The discussions initiated were broad-ranging, encompassing all aspects of museum engagement with popular music. In conducting these conversations, we found that many of the issues raised by museum professionals relating to popular music could equally apply to the curation of other popular culture material. Therefore, we should keep an awareness of the potential of popular music as a conduit for discussion of contemporary issues in the museum.

The typology of museums that responded to our survey equally gives a useful snapshot of the sector: 42.5% were local authority museums; 20% independent museums; 10% nationals; 10% university museums; 7.5% were responses from archival collections with some museum displays; 5% specialist music museums; and 5% other. Within each of these broad categories there is considerable diversity also, and we should note for instance that a university museum which specialises in contemporary art may have more in common with independent museums of this genre than with fellow university sites. Nevertheless, the spread indicates roughly the depth of institutions addressing popular music through their programmes.

### **Definition of Terms**

The issue of how 'popular music' might be defined and indeed how (and why) it should be demarcated from the broader category of 'music' has been an ongoing debate within the field. This issue of definition is felt in very real terms by archivists and curators of popular music as they wrestle with decisions over what to include in or exclude from their collections (Nannyonga-Tamusuz, 2006). The term popular music, Fabbri argues, 'is an expression that covers a very wide semantic space' but is useful 'for distinguishing very broad musical tastes or interests, as opposed to 'classical music', 'traditional/folk music', 'jazz' (though anyone knows how tricky such distinctions become at the multidimensional borders of those cultural units)' (Fabbri, 2013: 16). Wicke has cautioned against trying to 'fix... [the term] in a generic way', arguing that while not all music is popular music, nevertheless, 'there is not much left which couldn't become popular music given the present alliance of social and cultural forces, technological and commercial structures.' (Wicke in Frith et al., 2005:143). Moving away from genre categories, Frith has offered a more open way of defining the term, arguing for

its use in identifying 'Music made commercially, in a particular kind of legal (copyright) and economic (market) system; music made using an ever-changing technology of sound storage; music significantly experienced as mass mediated; music primarily made for social and bodily pleasure; music which is formally hybrid.' (Frith et al., 2005: 134). Yet despite this useful and broad definition, even these parameters may seem restrictive, excluding some music which could also be placed within the category of 'popular music'.

Within our survey, we chose not to define the term 'popular music' from the outset for participants, instead allowing for a discussion of how music is classified and enabling us to discover how museum professionals and institutions make such definitions within their collections and programmes. It became clear that museum classificatory systems could accommodate popular music within a surprisingly expansive range of positions, as we shall examine in more detail. Museums tended to define popular music from an institutional basis influenced by the history and contexts of their own collecting policies and impulses; for instance, an industrial museum justified their popular music holdings as offering a perspective on the music industry. Most of the institutions we consulted discussed popular music across a time period from the Second World War to the present day, with many paying particular attention to issues of contemporary collecting. However, this was not the case in all collections surveyed; in at least a few instances, we encountered popular music collections featuring material from Edwardian and even Victorian eras.

Our research into what kind of institutions to contact began by assessing members of the MLA's scheme of museum accreditation (now under the auspices of the Arts Council), which had over 1500 sites listed. Therefore, our working definition of a museum was taken from professional standards agreed nationally. From this long list, we conducted further research and identified those museums that were most likely to have collections or connections with popular music topics. Thus, the survey may have inadvertently omitted some relevant institutions, if they were not listed as accredited or as seeking accreditation at the time of the research. Nevertheless, the range and diversity of sites that were consulted gave us some confidence that the sample was broadly representative of the UK professional museum sector as a whole. The sites surveyed included national, local and commercial organisations.

### **Surveying the Collections**

The survey aimed to identify how many music items were held within museum collections and what proportion of these could be classified as being related to popular music. However, an accurate record could not be established because of incomplete cataloguing or because of the way that entries were

made within records management systems. Not all institutions who responded had a permanent collection of any sort, with several running rolling programmes of exhibitions which were externally curated or dependent on loans. However, the responses from some of the museums that did hold permanent collections highlighted the problematic nature of museum documentation. Only two-thirds of those answering the survey were able to accurately quantify their music collections. Some indicated the difficulties of making such estimates when collections were not fully catalogued and limited time was available for collections research. The difficulty of identifying the material was in some cases also exacerbated by the way in which their holdings were categorised.

Rigorous systems of classification are of course imperative to the work of museums but the way in which classification practices have developed has resulted in very rigid modes of describing and recording museum holdings. As Cameron and Mengler (2009: 191) comment, the evolution of documentation categories has come at the loss of 'their original flexibility and plasticity, as well as the ability to respond to new patterns' which in turn can 'severely constrain the individual's ability to communicate with the system in a meaningful and productive manner'. As a result, popular music related material may be documented under a range of different classifications making it difficult to identify within a simple search. For example, a curator from the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester explained that many of their music objects such as a barrel piano, gramophones and record players were not originally collected to form a music collection but instead were part of collections focused on technology and domestic appliances. Similarly, National Museums Liverpool holds popular music material under several different categories; some items are within their social history collections, while other objects, including stage costumes, are categorised under fine and decorative arts. Objects were stored and assigned primarily based on their material qualities, and where the expertise existed to care for their condition. While all of the material was carefully documented, the way that it had been originally classified made undertaking a simple search more problematic, and highlighted the importance of strong collections knowledge among staff members in order to bring out the affinities within and between separately stored collections.

The survey highlighted some 27,000 music related objects held within the UK museums that could identify a (precise or estimated) proportion within their collections. Those responding ranged from a specialist music museum with approximately 10,000 objects to institutions with only a dozen items connected to music. From these 27,000 objects, around 12,300 related specifically to popular music – ranging from 4,000 to just two discrete artefacts across the various museums contacted. Across all the collections

surveyed, popular music represented just under half of the music objects that museums held. If we remove specialist classical music instrument collections from this statistic, in all other museums, popular music objects were the dominant section within music collections, composing a little less than three-quarters of music-themed holdings (72%). Therefore, it transpired that popular music is the most widely collected of music-based material in the majority of museums. The overall balance of popular music material does not necessarily mean that contemporary collecting was to the fore in all of these institutions – for example, one of the significant holdings featuring popular music material documented in the survey was that of the Imperial War Museum, who have collected several thousand (c. 2,500) examples of popular song in a number of formats from both the Great War and the Second World War. A further caveat would be the need to consider what constitutes a discrete artefact in a museum collection. A fan scrapbook filled with cuttings, concert tickets and other memorabilia (such as a fan collage based around Sting found at Tyne and Wear Museums) holds a wealth of different popular music ephemera each of use and interest, yet the book would be listed just once on museum catalogues.

### **Nature of Collections**

In assessing the collections relating to popular music developed by UK museums, it is worth noting that these holdings exist in parallel to the national repository of popular music recordings at the British Library. The presence of this collection could be seen to have a direct impact on the scope of collecting undertaken by other institutions. The recorded popular music holdings at the British Library aim toward comprehensive universal coverage of all popular music releases in the UK and in this respect mirror the library's primary function as a deposit library for UK printed material, although lacking the legislative formal framework in place for book deposits. With this totalising collection available and accessible elsewhere, museums collecting in popular music fields can in theory focus on other types of material culture related to music. The presence of a national collection has also meant that museums have focused on acquiring objects that particularly chime with their broader institutional collecting remit - as we have argued elsewhere, with reference to the V&A's emphasis on performance and design, and St Fagans' exploration of Welsh social identity via popular music (Leonard and Knifton, 2012). Museums have further used popular music collecting to serve immediate display requirements for either permanent or temporary exhibition, or with specific reference to the locality and community within which the museum is situated.

One of the primary strengths of museum collections of popular music is the wide variety of objects they contain. While library music collections tend to be restricted to documents (Chang, 2008) and/or recorded sound (Watson, 2003;

Krzyzanowski, 2013; Wanser, 2014), museums are able to accession a broad range of materials because of their mission to preserve a spectrum of cultural objects for the good of wider society, their need to present diverse artefacts for public exhibition, and their capacity and expertise to house and conserve items with a wide range of material qualities. The material culture of popular music encompasses multiple forms that frequently span museum classifications. Items held within UK museums range from paper-based ephemera such as gig posters and tickets, through recorded music and music-themed merchandise, to elaborate stage costumes and instruments; Pete Townshend's smashed guitar and jeans worn and ripped on-stage by Alex Kapranos from Franz Ferdinand being two illustrative examples from the collections of the V&A Museum. Music periodicals, music related film and video, and musical instruments used in the making of popular music featured within just over 40% of museum collections. Just over a third of museums held private mementos and keepsakes, as well as objects falling under the rubric of fashion such as the iconic 'Frankie Says' T-shirt promoting the band Frankie Goes to Hollywood found in National Museums Liverpool's collection. The size of accessioned items is also very varied, ranging from badges and gig flyers to oversize items such as the fixtures and fittings of venues including, for example, the loading bay doors of the Hacienda club collected by the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester and the church stage tied into the story of the Beatles accessioned by National Museums Liverpool (Leonard, 2014).

The presence of sound carriers in collections highlights a key distinction between the emphasis and purpose of museums and sound archives. These items featured heavily within collections of surveyed institutions: nearly 70% of respondent museums held vinyl records; over half had compact discs and tapes; whilst 30% held other types of sound recordings, ranging from wax cylinders and organ rolls to reel-to-reel tape, metal masters, MiniDiscs and DAT. Sound archives such as those held by the British Library and Smithsonian include vast collections of sound carriers stored for the value of their sonic materials (complemented by an ever expanding digital sound collection). By contrast, sound carriers held within museums are primarily collected as physical objects rather than for their audio content. Thus, these items are appraised by curators for their use as display objects with an emphasis on what they can represent rather than on the sonic materials they contain. We found that they were often considered to be of low visual interest and so were less likely to be selected for display: sound carriers of any type were twice as likely to be in storage than to be on exhibit. Despite this, we witnessed strategies of physical display developed by several museums, including the use of these sound carriers within wall-mounted timelines; the use of box frames to create multiple levels of display for album sleeve



artwork; and the placing of archival materials within established period tableaux illustrative of a specific music scene.

### **Oral Histories**

There is evidence that museums are making an important contribution to national holdings of oral history material. In addition to developing collections of popular music objects, museums have been pro-active in building oral history collections by seeking out music industry respondents and commissioning interviews with a wide cross-section of popular music figures. Almost half of those who responded to the survey indicated that popular music interviews or oral histories featured as part of their collections. In some cases a temporary music exhibition had provided a rationale for commissioning music related interviews to add to a pre-existing broader oral history project. The oral history material recorded was valued by museums as a chance to document unique experiences not found in published accounts. Moreover, the recording itself was valued as offering a different contact point for visitors, encouraging an increased emotional engagement with the historical narrative. As the oral historian for Museum of Liverpool commented, 'in the past you see objects and sometimes when the objects are outside of your own frame of reference it doesn't really have an emotional impact on a person. Whereas when you pick up a pair of earphones and you hear someone talking about that time it makes it more real.' (personal communication, 5 January 2011).

Around two-thirds of museums who collected oral histories had used the material within specific popular music based exhibition projects. The lower figure for exhibitions here is to be expected, given that the majority of such histories do not feature a visual stimuli – although some institutions are blurring this line by recording documentary interviews as video rather than purely sound recordings, a practice which is part of a growing trend within museums across all topics (Stephens, 2011). The exhibition strategy of the British Music Experience, a museum focussed on British popular music, provided an example of the way in which this material has been presented. At the time of interview the museum was operating in London but closed in 2014 and is due to relaunch in Liverpool in 2017. A number of different 'zones' within the museum featured interactive 'Table Talk' exhibits. These consisted of four television screens positioned around a roundtable, facing one another as guests do at a dinner party. Each screen presented an edited interview with a musician, music industry figure or fan. The films were edited in an integral fashion, so that the talking heads within appeared to be engaging in conversation with each other, rather than with the (absent) interviewer. The exhibition curator argued that the films were especially effective because they offered alternative narratives and voices that could complement or contradict the content found elsewhere in the museum: 'What I think is really nice about

them is that most of the rest of the museum is me and the content team telling you, the visitor, what happened, but with these it's the people who made the music telling you what happened.' (personal communication, 16 November 2010). The example highlights how each of the elements within an exhibition contributes to its overall meaning making and how the inclusion of oral history material can introduce new perspectives, create interest through the immediacy of a personal narrative and place emphasis on the need to attend to how culture is practiced, produced and experienced by individuals. The commissioning of such films for exhibition has created a valuable resource of audio-visual material which has a different focus than other films made for broadcast media.

### **Collecting Policies and Practices**

The collecting policies of most UK museums did not make any direct reference or specific provision for popular music. Of the 62 different institutions which participated in the research project, just seven placed popular music within a specific area of their collecting policy, and only one gathered materials specifically for popular music as a standalone category. The small number of institutions that did discuss it generally placed it within wider areas of collecting like social and local history, or made reference to specific collections based around individuals that were popular music oriented, for example, Rochdale Museums Service's Gracie Fields collection. Despite not being expressly identified within policies, participants often commented that popular music materials were valued for their versatility as they could be used in numerous exhibitionary contexts. Popular music as an area possesses an unusual degree of ontological malleability that has enabled it to traverse the traditional museological boundaries of objecthood. The most typical museum narratives which featured popular music were concerned with local history, social history, and science and technology – although, beyond this, popular music stories and objects have been adapted to a rich and diverse range of uses, illustrating everyday experience and the exceptionalism of talented individuals. For example, the V&A's display of the stage costumes of the Supremes used music as a way to address dimensions of social history and the civil rights movement in 1960s America (The Story of the Supremes), a Spice Girls exhibition in Leeds considered commercial and tabloid culture in the UK in the 1990s, and popular music was selected as a way to examine cultural expression and social experience during decades of conflict and social dislocation in Northern Ireland (Ulster Museum, National Museums Northern Ireland). For the majority of UK museums, popular music collections were not viewed as a discrete entity or area of focus, but were instead valued for their ability to speak to and enrich the stories attached to other collections already within the museum.

One of the challenges to the development of popular music collections is that museums are not perceived as the natural 'home' for such material. Most of the participating museums were not regularly offered popular music objects, even though over 40% of the consulted institutions indicated that they would actively collect such material. While a specialist music museum could point to regular donations of objects at a rate of three to five per month, the most common response was that such offers happened rarely, perhaps once or twice a year. One local authority museum noted that no popular music object had been offered in donation for over three and a half years. The staging of music exhibitions and displays frequently acted as a catalyst in generating more donations. For instance, a curator at Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM) commented that their temporary exhibition *North East Beat* had been utilised to achieve a spike in popular music donations, although converting the loans arranged for the displays into donations was not straightforward. Despite writing to lenders to encourage them to consider gifting their material, the response was minimal as 'there hasn't been a huge amount of people wanting to make their loans into donations.' (personal communication, 7 September 2010). Museum staff at TWAM surmised that many private collectors of popular music materials were either too personally attached to their objects emotionally, too aware of their prestige and financial value at memorabilia auctions, or too unfamiliar with the processes of the museum to consider donating their popular music collections. On the few occasions when items were offered, the museums surveyed reported very variable accession rates, perhaps reflecting the contingent and ad hoc nature of collecting policy in popular music as an area.

The collecting policies of the majority of the participating museums placed an emphasis on collecting material with a direct link to the surrounding locality. In some instances this can be understood in the context of a more general trend whereby city museums have repositioned themselves to place an increased emphasis on their immediate environs: 'The city museum is increasingly focusing on the city itself. The city has become the artifact' (Jones, 2008:5). This overarching geographic directive has informed popular music collecting decisions. For example, a curator at the Museum of London explained, 'we don't have a specific policy in relation to collecting music, because our collecting is informed by the history of London in general...popular culture is essential to the social life of the capital and in a very real sense this is a social history museum fundamentally' (personal communication, 26 November 2010). This emphasis on the local directed many museums to collect dimensions of popular music which went beyond canonic and commercially successful artists. While not ignoring prominent local musicians, these museums also developed more grassroots, community-focused approaches to collecting popular music culture. This can be seen in the flyers for gigs and club nights collected by curators from National Museums Liverpool and in the

Welsh language fanzines centred around student communities in Aberystwyth that featured in the collections at St Fagans. Geographically demarcated popular music objects often display a high degree of identification with specific community groups and everyday experience of music within local settings. The collection of this material often heavily relied on the personal connections fostered by museum professionals, meaning that their own interests could be over-represented in some instances. This, however, remained preferable to the alternative of not collecting artefacts from such sources in any form. In addition, the emphasis of many city museums with telling a local story enabled collaborations between independent heritage practitioners and formal museums. The activities of Manchester District Music Archive (MDMA) provides one such example. MDMA is a user-led digital archive initiative which celebrates the music of Greater Manchester. The online interface has allowed thousands of individuals to post images of gig posters, flyers and other ephemera. The concern of museums to reflect local culture has provided the context for successful collaborations between this archive and Salford Museum and Art Gallery in 2009 and The Lowry, Salford in 2013.

### **Star Items and Everyday Objects**

A number of participating museum professionals voiced concerns regarding the challenges around effective collection and display of popular music artefacts. Music exhibitions have often enticed audiences with the display of rare objects which hold the promise that visitors can experience a form of proximity to a star performer or an insight into the practices and performance of popular music which are normally only viewed from a distance. The tension between collecting 'star' items and representing everyday experiences was one which several curators acknowledged. Some raised the issue that often the popular music material within museum collections might be considered quotidian in character and lacking in visual resonance in terms of exhibition. For example, a curator from the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston remarked that their collection of material related to popular music in theatres and music halls was 'a box of ephemera, music posters and that kind of thing and they're very difficult to display' (personal communication, 11 October 2010). Similarly, a curator at the Museum of London explained that the museum had 'often collected what our visitors have collected themselves' (personal communication, 26 November 2010), objects such as flyers and tickets. However, museum professionals who had used such everyday objects in prominent settings commented on the efficacy of empathetic connection they generated with audiences. For instance, the curator who assembled the Welsh music exhibition *Pop Peth* at St Fagans related the following story, about how the connection of a specific object to a recollected past could give an audience a connected feeling of cultural anamnesis: '...we had ten posters from...Welsh pop gigs from the 60s to the present. As we were setting that up, a visitor came by and said, 'Oh, I remember that gig', and that made me feel,

wow, this is what we're trying to get, that emotional attachment or remembering.' (personal communication, 13 September 2010). Another curator, with considerable experience of working on popular culture exhibitions as Head of Creative Programmes at Urbis in Manchester, developed this theme by arguing that the value of an object is not necessarily in its collecting rarity, but rather stems from the narrative impact it can deliver: 'You take an object and when it's wrapped up and in a box in the attic it means one thing, and when you take it out and put it in a gallery context it means something else, but it's the stories behind those objects that bring them alive.' (personal communication, 3 September 2010).

### **Financial Constraints**

Several curators and museum directors expressed the desire to collect rare music items which would have more impact but were unable to do so because of budget constraints. Objects such as musical instruments played by acclaimed musicians were generally too expensive for UK museums to afford. A number of institutions were attempting to avoid prohibitive market prices by adopting a strategy of contemporary collecting in order to bring popular music objects into their collections before the memorabilia market determined their value beyond that attainable by the museum. While material related to well established music stars has proved to be beyond the reach of UK museums on the whole, it is easier and more affordable to acquire material relating to artists who are at an earlier point in their careers. However, the attendant risks of this strategy are the challenges it presents for curators, who need to identify objects from contemporary music culture they believe will retain interest for museum audiences in the future as well as attempting to find the best artefacts at affordable rates. As a curator from the Museum of London explained, this was far from an easy process: 'it's very difficult when developing a gallery that theoretically is going into the present...it's very difficult to make a gallery future proof, particularly in relation to popular culture...if you put someone in who's very much about the present that can become very dated very quickly.' (personal communication, 26 November 2010).

Maintaining popular music collections also brought particular challenges in the field of collections management. A few key issues emerged: uncertainty over copyright, plastics degradation, the ephemerality of many popular music artefacts, maintaining access to outdated music formats, storage of new digital media, collection duplication elsewhere, and issues of space. Judging from subsequent discussions with conservators and other museum professionals, it appears that popular music captures several problematic and emblematic debates within current conservation practice.

### **The Significance of Museum Collections**

Museums have a signal position within our understanding of the nation: they shape public understandings of heritage by preserving materials which act as foundation for debates on who we are, what we stand for, and what we do. As open, public, non-commercial and accessible exhibiting sites, they can also mobilise objects in ways which are not possible elsewhere. This is because their function is not only to collect and care for objects but also to interpret and display them, allowing the material to 'speak' in ways that objects within many other collections cannot. For instance, a curator from the Museum of London, reflected on how a display of material about a band might open up a set of related issues:

'You look at a band like the Pogues who were either first or second-generation Irish immigrants. If you were looking at the Pogues in an exhibition as a famous London band, you couldn't help but discuss the experience of immigration and the experience of a cultural identity that was formed in London but also had links elsewhere.' (personal communication, 26 November 2010)

Through exhibition of their collections museums can thus explore the multiple social and cultural dimensions of music, effectively showing how the material connects to a wide array of topics and providing a way to open up subjects to many different audiences. In this respect museums are important sites of meaning making through the curation of material both from within and outside of their own collections.

Moreover, these institutions have the capacity to collect tangible and intangible materials which might otherwise be lost were they not acquired by museums. For example, The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester holds part of the archive of Factory Communications Ltd. Factory was of interest to the museum because of its key place in the history of Manchester's music industry, both as a record label releasing material by the Durutti Column, Cabaret Voltaire and Joy Division and as the force behind the celebrated Hacienda nightclub. The archive mainly relates to the Hacienda club and the bar that Factory established in Manchester's Northern Quarter, Dry Bar. It includes detailed information about these business operations including financial records, door takings and correspondence. Music business archives are rare research resources and so documents such as these are valuable primary source materials. As Gronow observed over thirty years ago, the scarcity of such material can, in part, be accounted for because documents were often destroyed by music companies 'in their haste to throw away useless old material, and by professional archivists and librarians who have frequently rejected and even destroyed catalogues and other ephemeral printed materials related to the industry' (Gronow, 1981: 276). Moreover, their presence within a museum collection is significant because even where

archival documents do exist, these materials have often not been made publicly available (Gronow, 1981; Grenier, 2001).

The eclectic nature of museum holdings related to popular music is testimony to the value of museum collecting. Museums have an interest in acquiring a wide range of objects because they are primarily focussed on the collection and preservation of material culture which can be presented to the public through processes of display. This necessarily informs decision making about what to collect. Returning again to the example of the Factory archive reveals that this emphasis on display encouraged the museum to appraise the archive not only in terms of its cultural value but also its visual impact. The museum was concerned that the paper documents within the archive were not very dynamic in terms of display and this in turn led to the preservation of a wider set of material culture related to these business ventures. The museum took the decision to collect some large objects related to this collection, including the loading bay doors of the Hacienda, paint-spattered stepladders used at the club, and a purple costume rhino head, from the video of an Acid House version of 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' that was never released. As a museum that holds substantial collections of heavy industry, they had the capacity to store large scale pieces like the loading bay doors and the expertise to conserve these large items. Thus, the museum is able to offer a narrative of Factory Records through a diversity of material which might otherwise have been dispersed or lost.

The range of objects held by UK museums that relate to popular music is particularly diverse and growing significantly, yet remains ad hoc and piecemeal in character. Museums are increasingly recognising the important role that popular music and its attendant material culture has on our everyday lives, and they are taking steps to collect the objects that will permit them to explore in the future how music is not only a significant cultural form in its own right but is also woven into our personal lives, memories and identities. Museum collections aim to preserve objects for the long term so that the popular music culture of today has the possibility to be displayed and interpreted in settings and modes not yet envisaged. However, challenges to collecting remain, especially in encouraging private collectors of popular music objects to convert loans to temporary exhibitions into permanent donations to museum collections. Inevitably this is a delicate and lengthy process, with relationships to lenders established and nurtured over years. Such tentative moves are beginning to bear fruit for a number of institutions, and awareness and acknowledgement of popular music heritage as a topic that is dealt with by museums is still spreading.

With the majority of popular music material dating from after 1945 (with notable exceptions) we are reaching a critical point for collecting, as a

generation of private individuals who possess the key objects to narrate such histories decide what will be done with their collections when they themselves pass on. The crucial work museums do through the exhibition and preservation of material culture, the networks and relationships established within popular music circles through this work, and the increasing awareness that popular music histories are being represented in museums may persuade private collectors to consider donating their music objects.

## **Conclusion**

Our review of UK museum collections has revealed the considerable levels of activity which have taken place in the past two decades to build popular music collections as records of artistic endeavour and cultural life, and as dimensions of social history. The shift in collecting practices for popular music is indicative of broader trends around the democratisation of subjects and the broadening of cultural experience addressed by the UK museum sector. There has not been room within this article to discuss these collections in detail or to examine their particular emphases but instead we have discussed the scope and range of the material and issues which attend to its collection. Examination of approaches to accessioning found that collections were often developed in an ad hoc fashion, contingent on infrequent offers of donation, and often in the absence of a joined up understanding of other institutional holdings within and beyond museums. The result was that while collections could inevitably offer only a sample of material, the national holdings lacked any strategic planning. We must acknowledge that a limitation of this article is that it does not cover recent developments and a number of UK museums have actively developed their music collections since this survey was undertaken. Our focus here has been on collections; the growth of temporary exhibitions of popular music, both free and fee-paying, are equally shifting the perception of museum's role in the presentation of popular music heritage. Since the survey the museum sector has also had to adapt to reductions in budgets and staffing which may impact on the capacity of museums to develop or prioritise their music collections. At the time of the research we did not find that museums were initiating their own digital collecting of popular music material; although this may be an area for considerable expansion in the future, given the prevalence of digital music consumption.

Museums are just one of the repositories for the wide range of sonic and material culture which has association with popular music. However, as public bodies responsible for the safe keeping and exhibition of our tangible and intangible heritage, they have a significant role to play in defining what is documented and how it is remembered. As Dyson (2002) has argued, objects gathered formally into museum collections take on a different power to those informally kept by individuals as memorabilia. Within museum collections



'things function synecdochally' (Dyson, 2002:129), the collections stand in for and are used to represent our histories, shaping our understanding of collective memory and identity. Although we have focussed specifically on museum collections we do of course recognise the many other places of music collection from libraries and archives through to commercial owners and individual collectors. These collections extend beyond holdings of physical objects to digital archival projects, often initiated through social media and websites of 'activist archivists', which crowd source recollections, digital images and knowledge about music scenes and histories (Collins and Long, 2015). However, it should also be noted that issues of sustainability and vulnerability accompany many of these collections and archival projects (Baker and Collins, 2015). In relation to this, the standards of professional care and the relative permanence of museum collections marks them out, alongside libraries, as important repositories for our popular music heritage now and in the future. The function of museums as exhibiting sites should not be underplayed as they have responsibility not just to care for objects but in fostering debate about the substance, value and meaning of our cultural lives.

This article has focussed on the volume, nature and range of popular music materials within UK museum collections. Separate consideration needs to be given to the processes of curation, examining how these materials can be worked with and presented in ways which reveal their connections to a wide range of subjects and allow for different emphases. Thoughtful interpretation of popular culture material within exhibitions allows it to be moved beyond simply standing for leisure, as Moore (1997) advocated nearly twenty years ago, and instead permitted to develop a full and complex position within social, political and economic representations of the museum. Museum collections are thus significant public resources for collective and individual memory as well as markers of institutional understandings of cultural heritage.

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