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Resource notes

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Collections at the IPM

July 2008 saw the opening of The Beat Goes On, an exhibition celebrating Liverpool’s popular music as part of the city’s year as European Capital of Culture. Staged at Liverpool’s World Museum, the exhibition was a partnership project undertaken between National Museums Liverpool (NML) and the Institute of Popular Music (IPM) at the University of Liverpool. Two and a half years in the making, The Beat Goes On was to a certain extent a large-scale realization of the archival and curatorial thrusts that led to the establishment of the institute in the first place. As David Horn notes elsewhere in this issue the initial idea for the institute itself probably came from the late Richard Foster, head of National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMGM) and the project clearly was envisaged as involving close collaboration between the university and the museums.

This association with Liverpool museums has been a facet of the IPM’s trajectory throughout its twenty-year existence and NMGM had previously staged two temporary exhibitions curated by IPM staff (Sara Cohen’s Harmonious Relations, an exploration of musical families in the city and Marion Leonard’s Irish music and dance project Talking Traditions). The Beat Goes On continued this strand of the institute’s work whilst taking the level of involvement (and scale of the project) to another level. Marion Leonard was seconded for two years as lead curator on the project whilst various members of the IPM staff led by Sara Cohen were active in the production of an interactive map of the city used in the exhibition and a complementary online resource.

1. NMGM became NML in 2003.
Another key feature of *The Beat Goes On* was that it also made use of the IPM’s extensive collections and the final exhibition featured hundreds of objects loaned by the IPM. Items included numerous sound recordings ranging from Shellac 78s to long forgotten vinyl LPs by obscure Liverpool pop bands to demo tapes accompanied by hand-written notes from soon to be famous musicians. The exhibition also features a number of paper items such as music press dating back to the 1950s, a selection of zeroxed fanzines from the post punk era, documents relating to the advent of Beatles tourism in the 1970s and paper bags from local record shops such as Brian Epstein’s NEMS. These items show both the breadth of materials held by the IPM and illustrate something about the way in which the collections have been constructed. In turn, these specific issues have something to tell us about popular music collections more generally.

Since its launch in 1988 the IPM has built up a substantial collection of materials relating to popular music. The collection is composed of several contributory collections—from local, national and international donors—spanning a wide range of popular music genres and formats and almost the entire history of recorded sound. By far the largest element (in terms of numbers of items and physical space) is the collection of recorded sound which currently consists of some 70,000 items.

In common with many popular music archives, these recordings were not collected in any systematic way. Rather, the sound recording collection has grown through the gradual acquisition of existing collections which have been subsumed into the larger whole. The sources of these initial donations are varied and are made up from recordings originally housed in institutions such as radio stations and public libraries to personal collections often donated by the collectors themselves or their families.

The two examples pictured are displayed in *The Beat Goes On* and are indicative of the type of material from institutional sources. The first is a vinyl LP by the Liverpool band Afraid Of Mice, a record which was originally part of the record library of Merseyside’s commercial radio station Radio City. The item is typical of the Radio City donation which was given to the IPM when the station changed over wholly to the CD format at the beginning of the 1990s. As the donation was made up of records sent to the station for promotional purposes it is simultaneously very specific yet non-hierarchical. The history (it was established in 1974 as part of the first wave of UK commercial radio in the wake of the 1972 sound broadcasting act) and commercial format of the station meant that the bulk of the donation was fairly specific. That is, recordings released by Anglo-American rock, pop and dance acts signed to major or large independent record companies released between the early 1970s and late 1980s. At the same time the fact that
promotional copies were kept in the Radio City library whether they were played or not means that much of the material is non-canonic, perhaps commercially unsuccessful and ultimately forgotten in dominant histories of popular music.

Afraid Of Mice are actually fairly typical of this type of act: a Liverpool group who released one album on the Charisma label before disbanding due to lack of commercial success (their singer Phil Jones immediately recorded a solo album for the label but this was never released). Just one of the countless acts who enter the recording industry system and fail to recoup their costs. Yet, the record is part of a larger story about the recording industry and how it intersects with the careers of musicians at a local level. Despite his lack of national or international success Phil Jones had huge local popularity in Liverpool throughout the 1980s. Afraid Of Mice famously sold out the city’s largest theatre, the Empire, whilst being virtually unheard of in the rest of the UK whilst Jones’s next band Up and Running scored an enduring local hit with their single “Johnny & Marie” and sold out the 2,500 capacity Royal Court Theatre every year from the mid to late 1980s. This small example is perhaps indicative of how the specificities of an archive can have the power to illuminate the nuances of hidden histories and give a snapshot of a particular aspect of popular music practice. For example, the wider make-up of the radio city collection gives a broader picture of the signing policies and promotional strategies of UK record companies at a particular time.
The second image from an institutional donation is perhaps imbued with more traditional notions of value common within popular music culture. It is the first demo tape recorded by the Liverpool band the Icicle Works sent to the *Merseysound* fanzine in 1981. The item was given to the archive as part of a donation from local BBC Radio DJ Roger Hill which included hundreds of reel-to-reel tapes of radio sessions from British post-punk acts, demos and fanzines. The cassette has archival value in a number of ways as it is simultaneously a rare unreleased recording, collector’s item and historical document. There is clearly some biographical worth (and limited financial value in the collector’s market) to the object in the fact that the group went on to score a hit with ‘Love is Full of Wonderful Colours’, which went top twenty in the UK and top forty in the U.S. in 1983 (and in the fact that singer Ian McNabb and drummer Chris Sharrocks continue to have successful musical careers to this day). It also gives an insight into the practices of nascent bands at the time as it is accompanied by a typed letter to *Merseysound* introducing the band and giving a manifesto for their music. The cassette is also part of a larger collection of demos, some of which are by unknown bands, others including well-known local musicians. Hence, the institutional nature of the donation (the fact that they were owned and stored by the BBC) has resulted in the preservation of material that would have been seen as ephemeral at the time (indeed, we can assume that many of the same demo tapes were thrown away by recording companies).

![Icicle Works demo cassette](image)

*Fig 2: Icicle Works demo cassette*

Another example used in *The Beat Goes On* highlights the often esoteric and unusual aspects of personal collecting which can result in highly interesting material which might have otherwise been lost. Figure 3 is a handbill for a jazz concert aboard the *MV Royal Iris* featuring the Merseysippi Jazz Band and George Melly. The handbill is part of a collection of over one hundred programmes, tickets and handbills donated by the Physics professor Vin Attwood who attended the concerts which took place in the 1950s. The programmes document a variety of jazz performances in Liverpool throughout the decade. These include concerts promoted by the Liverpool Jazz Club featuring local acts such as the Merseysippi Jazz Band and leading figures of British Jazz such as Humphrey Lyttleton, Mick
Mulligan, Chris Barber and George Melly. The donation also includes programmes and tickets for US acts such as Josh White, Big Bill Broonzy and Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s appearances in the city. Such items were kept for over fifty years as they were clearly of great personal significance for Attwood. Yet they clearly have a wider significance. They provide a detailed record of these events for scholars that, for example, looking through local newspaper records could not. They also provide a more general material insight into the rich musical life of a northern provincial city in the 1950s. As such, the Vin Attwood donation is illustrative of the service that private collections of the material culture of popular music bequeath to scholarship and historians of popular music in particular. These locally produced programmes are an example of the type of materials that have not been systematically collected by institutions as they were not seen as significant or valuable at the time. In addition, as Leonard (2007: 157) notes, these types of material ‘would not normally find their way onto the collectors market... [due to their] low financial value and their “throw away” nature which means that such items are usually lost to time’.

The donations in the archive from individual collectors can also reveal hidden practices of popular music and extremely rare artefacts and recordings. The Sylvia Patterson Jazz collection, for instance, includes a multitude of one-off private vinyl pressings of recordings of jazz performances. Even more curious is the Clough Critchley collection donated by Arthur Critchley. Ron Clough was a recording engineer from Sheffield who was an early adopter of reel-to-reel technologies and owned a vinyl cutting lathe. As a sideline to his day job, Clough would make bespoke vinyl pressings. These were predominantly bootlegs of jazz recordings which were made to order for collectors around the world. Sometimes these were taken from Shellac discs (unavailable in LP format) from Clough’s own collection whilst in many they were broadcast recordings from television and radio such as the American Forces Network and Jazz on Two (a BBC TV programme). Not only does the donation include recorded material not archived elsewhere but it also sheds light on an unusual aspect of record collecting unrecognized within scholarly and popular studies of collecting (see, for example, Straw 1997; Milano 2003; Shuker 2004).

Aside from the institutional and private collections discussed above the IPM’s archives include a number of donations of the archives of journalists and academics whose life work was related to popular music. There is a large traditional and folk-rock music collection comprising the estate of the late Robert Shelton (Bob Dylan biographer), and donations from the Melody Maker writer Karl Dallas. The Shelton donation also includes a large paper archive containing important documents and clippings relating to the U.S. folk revival, a wealth of Dylan material
and a collection of political music materials from Latin America donated by the celebrated Latin American Studies scholar Robert Pring-Mill. There are several jazz and big band collections including a recent acquisition of 14,000 recordings from Johnny Dankworth care-of the British Institute of Jazz Studies. There are sound recordings and scores donated relating to the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis and a large collection of artists and recordings made by independent studios local to Merseyside.

This diversity, I think, the collection’s strength. The above illustrations go to show that although the intake of materials has been dependent on a diverse number of sources over two decades, the IPM’s collection includes recordings and artefacts of great rarity and historical importance. The fact that the collection is made up from a patchwork of donations and acquisitions (each with their own archival rationale) tells us a multitude of stories. It also offers a great opportunity to examine a variety of collecting practices that have been central to popular music culture since the advent of the phonograph.

References