

Valuing and preserving popular music heritage in the Netherlands

Amanda Brandellero The journey of popular music in a variety of contexts and institutional set-ups raises challenging questions about its changing meaning and valuation, both as a contemporary cultural practice and, ultimately, as cultural heritage. Either way, preserving the sonic past goes hand in hand with renewing its present-day audiences.

The definition and understanding of cultural heritage is most commonly associated with ideas of a national culture and identity (Hobsbawm 1992). Heritage has been seen as ‘intrinsically embedded with a sense of pastoral care of the material past’, especially the *things* of the past that relate to a sense of belonging, place and identity (Smith 2006, 17, 30). These ‘things’ are both material – embodied in the sites and objects preserved – but also immaterial – as in the intangible traditions and customs passed on inter-generationally.

Heritage, however, is also understood as *practice*, since the value and meaning of the past is subject to processes of legitimisation in the present day, reflecting the socially-constructed nature of what heritage is and does. At one end of the spectrum, heritage as practice has resulted in a ‘consensus version of history by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites’ (Smith 2006, 4).

Experts and policies provide an epistemological framework and discursive devices, defining the boundaries of heritage. However such a version of heritage eludes the blurring boundaries between high and low in late modernity. Indeed, the progressive legitimisation of popular cultural expressions and products as heritage in their own right is widely noted (Moore 1997; Bennett 2009; Schmutz et al. 2010).

Undoubtedly, the increasing centrality of consumerism and economic commodification in everyday life has played a role. Increasingly, expressions of lifestyle orientations, leisure choices and individual preferences manifested through music and fashion choices for instance are recognised as a cogent attestation of identity and belonging resulting in wider processes of cultural fragmentation (Chaney 2002). The practice of heritage is therefore challenged by issues of dissonance and cultural pluralism, but also by the role of

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individuals and collectivities in remembering and giving meaning to the past.

In recent years, initiatives like the European research project entitled *Popular music heritage, cultural memory, and cultural identity (POPID)*, coordinated by Professor Susanne Janssen at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, have advanced our theoretical and empirical understanding of changing notions of cultural heritage. The project examines the increasing importance of popular music as a vehicle for the expression of contemporary cultural identity, but also as a tool for remembering and framing the local and national histories of people and places.

This article starts by acknowledging the growing number of sites and initiatives preserving the material and immaterial culture of Dutch popular music. These initiatives actively engage with and challenge the traditional practice of cultural heritage in a number of ways. First, through their

insertion into the established institutional formats of heritage, like museums, archives and libraries. This occurrence broadens the knowledge and expertise preserved in museums and archival institutions. Moreover, it contributes towards diversifying our understanding of what ‘museums’ and ‘archives’ are, whether we take their social and cultural role into account. Second, by linking to and appropriating heritage discourses and practices, the more bottom-up initiatives driven by individual or group enterprise challenge accepted processes of heritage legitimation and authorisation. But how do these initiatives reflect a changing understanding of what cultural heritage is and who determines what becomes cultural heritage? What challenges and opportunities do these present for traditional cultural heritage institutions?

Preserving precious memories

Popular music provides insight into shifting understandings of cultural heritage and related practices, although heritage initiatives in this field are not unique and can be found in other spheres of popular culture. In line with the blossoming of community archives – i.e. the bottom-up efforts to document and record the history of particular places (Flinn 2007) – we see numerous online and physical popular music archives set up by individuals or communities. Speaking to the individuals responsible for some archives in the Netherlands shows how popular music keeps places alive through the sonic imaginary of communities, the sense of pride in local musical acts and scenes, and the connections to more global music phenomena (see Hoeven et al. forthcoming). These initiatives share common features, insofar as they usually emerge from within communities of consumption, which are shaped by the communality of music preferences and tastes.

Featuring prominently in these initiatives is the logic of 'DIY preservationism' (Bennett 2009). This includes the preservation activities of music enthusiasts and amateurs who take it upon themselves to safeguard the memory of specific musical acts or eras from a perceived or real threat. Such activities, emulate the collecting practices and objectives of professional heritage institutions while relying heavily on personal and financial investment, as well as a supportive circle of friends and relatives (Baker et al. 2012). In the Netherlands, Museum Rock Art provides a striking example of the verve and commitment of DIY preservationism, but also of the challenges it faces. Directed by Jaap Schut, it started as a personal collection and archive, and has evolved over the years into 'a treasure trove of Dutch popular music', now the museum's tagline. Jaap Schut's collection grew steadily from the mid-1990s through a mix of acquisitions and donations, becoming a private museum in 2007. Over the years, the museum has staged several temporary exhibitions, some tracing the sonic history of The Hague, others highlighting the local significance and impact of global stars like John Lennon. Recently, options for turning the collection into a public museum have been discussed. Part of the challenge taken up by DIY preservationists is to ensure the sonic past does not go unheard, forgotten, or worse, discarded. The sustainability of these initiatives is often bound to the resources and commitment of their initiators, with grants and public funding dwindling.

In recent years, museums have more frequently shown the tangible and intangible heritage of popular music. Within a broad spectrum of practices, we find dedicated institutions with a didactic and canon-setting mission (for instance the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland) or those offering a music act-based 'experience',

through memorabilia and interactive displays (take the ABBA museum in Stockholm). With a more socially engaged stance, the planned Danish Rock Museum will be dedicated to music and youth culture. City museums in the Netherlands have hosted a number of exhibitions centred around popular music such as the *God Save the Queen* (2011) and *Cuby & the Blizzards* exhibitions (2012) at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht; the *Geef mij maar Amsterdam* exhibition in 2006 at the Amsterdam Museum; the *Golden Earring – Back Home* retrospective at the Hague's Historisch Museum in 2011/2012; and today's *The Dutch East Indies in The Hague*, which traces the cultural connections between the Dutch city and the former colony. Crossing into the realm of tourism, we note a number of initiatives involving the recognition, making and promotion of significant sites of popular music history as destinations (Cohen 2007; Brandellero et al. forthcoming).

Efforts to map the field of practice, however, fall short of a comprehensive overview of the actors and institutions in the field. In the Netherlands in 2009, the Dutch Ministry of OCW began cataloguing and rationalising practice, exploring the potential for an online interactive portal for the advanced research and knowledge sharing of the country's music heritage. Its rationale: while the web has opened up the potential for greater exchange and visibility, the reality is that many resources remain invisible to researchers, musicians and other interested parties. The resulting document entitled *Musical heritage in the Netherlands: feasibility study for a digital portal* (Muziek Centrum Nederland et al. 2010) attempted formulating a working definition of music heritage, ranging from instruments, partitions to photos and ticket stubs – indirectly recognising the value of the material and immaterial culture of the more mundane, day-to-day experiences of music

listening and performing. The scoping exercise was carried out by Muziek Centrum Nederland (MCN) and Nederlands Muziek Instituut (NMI), both of which have since seen their funding curtailed and their resources and archives fragmented across other institutes.

The journey of popular music raises challenging questions about its changing meaning and valuation, both as a contemporary cultural practice and, ultimately, as cultural heritage. A key contention is the struggle between the official and unofficial understandings of the legitimacy of popular music as heritage and a more normative question on the value and form of popular musical heritage. What should be defined as heritage? Who determines this? The heritagisation of popular music challenges us to think outside of cultural hierarchies and rigid classifications, about how the sonic past is recalled and mobilised by individuals and communities today. The initial results of a survey of music audiences in the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia and the UK,¹ run by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication within the framework of *POPID*, highlight popular music memories as being intertwined with questions of youth, family ties, identity and the emotional experience of the passing of time. The most precious memories of popular music are often connected to a specific event or point in time.

Symbolic pieces vs. everything

The growing practice of popular music heritage raises several relevant questions. First, is there a heritage obsession? The celebration of nostalgia appears to have become part of contemporary mass culture, with memories becoming consumables. But is our attention to and care of the past stifling our ability for creativity and progression? Recent contributions to this discussion by

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Reynolds (2011) and Le Guern (2012) debate whether popular music, and rock in particular, are not becoming ghosts of their former selves, under the weight of a mania for preserving what is retro. Yet does the heritagisation of popular music, through its collection, preservation and institutionalisation, somehow ossify it? Leonard (2013) points out that there are two sides to popular music as heritage: while it reflects the legitimisation of popular culture as heritage, the process of displaying pop and rock in a museum actively shapes its broader cultural and social meaning. In other words, does the presence of popular music in the museum diminish its dynamism, giving us a preferred and legitimate reading of the sonic past?

Also, addressing the meaning and role of DIY preservationists: if they don't save it, who will? Based on interviews with people responsible for a number of archives, libraries and private museums, 'nobody'. Many collec-

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tions are at risk. In April 2013, a music archive expert meeting organised by the World Music Forum NL, a foundation promoting the economic, social and cultural significance of world music produced and performed in the Netherlands, addressed the uncertain future of the music archive of the Wereldomroep and the Music Library of the Muziekcentrum van de Omroep, to give but two examples. However, a fundamental challenge that many of these collections face is sustainability of interest and commitment. There is often not a clear prospect for passing on the baton.

Research into the curators' motivations for staging popular music exhibits in Dutch city museums raises a compelling argument: popular music helps tell the social history of a place. While the material culture associated with popular music (CDs, t-shirts) may be 'just a commodity', the meaning and the value attached to these objects reverberate more strongly. They reflect collective memories and

a sense of belonging, constructing identities and building bridges across generations. Yet museums very often rely on DIY preservationists for their exhibits. Cooperation between museum curators and DIY preservationists highlights the discrepancy between a selective curatorial approach, focusing on key, symbolic pieces versus a vocation to collect and keep 'everything'.

Shaping the heritage of popular music

Projects such as *POPID* affirm the social relevance of heritage practices in this field. In the Netherlands, Austria, the UK and Slovenia, *POPID* itself has played a key role in documenting and comparing the activities of archives and small museums in preserving the heritage of music. Its in-depth ethnographic knowledge supports the following key findings. First, the emerging field of popular music as heritage is socially produced through the practices of a range of actors, from individual collectors to public institutions and private enterprises, which might share similar practices but often have very different motivations. The motivations provide a variety of legitimising discourses of popular music as heritage, ranging from personal and collective attachment and memory to commercial endeavours rebranding and canonising the musical pasts.

The variety of practices and questions they raise points towards the impossibility of reducing the emerging field of popular music heritage by a single function or discourse. Instead, it calls for a more serious and thorough effort to grasp its complexity. Most significantly, perceptions of popular music heritage are created through interaction with institutional discourses as well as local and personal articulations of cultural memories (Roberts forthcoming). Thus, preserving the sonic past goes hand in hand with renewing and engaging with its present-day audiences.

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Note

- 1 These are the four countries involved in the POPID project.