Sarah BAKER, Lauren ISTVANDITY, Raphaël NOWAK,
Curating Pop: Exhibiting Popular Music in the Museum

Emília Barna

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/8351>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.8351

ISSN: 1950-568X

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 20 June 2020

Number of pages: 244-248

ISBN: 978-2-913169-62-3

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Emília Barna, "Sarah BAKER, Lauren ISTVANDITY, Raphaël NOWAK, *Curating Pop: Exhibiting Popular Music in the Museum*", *Volume !* [Online], 16 : 2 / 17 : 1 | 2020, Online since 01 January 2021, connection on 04 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/8351> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.8351>

Sarah Baker, Lauren Istvandy, Raphaël Nowak, *Curating Pop: Exhibiting Popular Music in the Museum*, New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi & Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019

By Emília Barna

During the last few decades, an increasing number of popular music-themed museums, both big-budget and small, have sprung up in western countries such as the US, Australia, the UK, and other parts of Western Europe, including the Netherlands or Sweden—in other words, the centre of the global popular music industries and the symbolic core of pop rock music culture, which also constitutes the focus of this book. This has taken place parallel to the gradual integration of popular music—especially rock-, blues- and jazz-based forms—and many individual popular music artists, into the hegemonic cultural canon. A further related process is the

extension—again, especially in the west—of the notion of (national) cultural heritage, and cultural policy aimed at preserving it, to include popular cultural forms, among them popular music. The growth of popular music tourism, fed by so-called place myths, evoking local “sounds” and auras of place around particular famous artists, has, moreover, provided an economic incentive to the development of popular music-themed museums and exhibitions. The establishment of such institutions, at least initially, was accompanied by questions and debates—as *Curating Pop* also tells us—partly in relation to the value of popular music and its “worthiness” of being preserved in institutions traditionally serving to preserve the “best” of human culture. And partly regarding the compatibility of popular music culture as a dynamic, ever-changing, youthful, ephemeral, and last but not least, primarily aural

kind of culture, with an institution that is about static representation and preservation, and primarily visual. Baker, Istvandity and Nowak's book, however, takes a position where these initial debates have more or less been transcended, since "[p]opular music has arguably found its place within heritage institutions" (p. 155). Correspondingly, they proceed to examine the curation of these museums and exhibitions, arguably providing the first focused and detailed academic account of this profession and practice.

The book identifies the primary structuring concepts of curation (although the authors leave this list open for future scholarly contributions) and dedicates a chapter each to their detailed discussion. These concepts are the celebration of dominant and hidden histories; the selling of "the museum experience" (which includes the aspects of economics and visitor experience); popular music and place, including local, national, and global; treating objects like art (curating material culture); telling stories (narratives of popular music's past); curator subjectivity, influence and bias; nostalgia as affective curatorial practice; and sound in the popular music museum. The discussions are rich in empirical detail: the voices of the interviewed curators are duly represented through quotations. Moreover, even though the focus is on curation strategies, we also get a glimpse—in some cases, literally, with the help of the photographic illustrations—into the exhibitions themselves. Through the analysis of the interview material and the well-conceptualized structuring concepts, we learn of the most important curating principles, the various, often competing strategies, which are also linked to cultural policy, as well as the affective aspects involved in

curating popular music, and in relation to engaging with popular music histories. The writing is exceptionally clear and precise throughout, which is unsurprising given that all three authors are primary experts in their field, with multiple previous publications on popular music culture and heritage. The volume will thus undoubtedly make a great textbook for anyone interested in curating popular music, popular music histories and memories, and the material cultures of popular music more generally, whether within or outside of academia.

Although the account is balanced in terms of the attention allocated to each structural concept, some of the chapters are breaking more new ground than others. Place, locality—in terms of local popular music histories, cities and local music scenes, place myths—as well as (to a lesser extent) nationality, have been at the core of much popular music research, including the research of popular music heritage (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2014). The theme of dominant versus hidden histories, as well as that of cultural canonization, although crucial, have also been central issues in the discussion of popular music history and heritage (see e.g. Brocken, 2010). Among the most valuable contributions, however, is the authors' focus on *affect*—partly in the work of the curators, and in relation to the experience of the audience. Nostalgia is also conceptualized as affect, as a subjective means of tapping into one's past. The discussion brings attention to the role played by popular music in remembering on both an individual and a collective level, which underlines the social significance of the preservation of popular music cultures. The discussion of curators' subjectivities in terms of their influence on the exhibition as

their creative product is also of key importance. This could have been further deepened by including a consideration of such aspects of subjectivity as social status—with a view to how curation as cultural work is deeply embedded into regimes of prestige and cultural capital. Ultimately, this aspect is also about the power of curators, although the authors do not explicitly frame it as such. Curator subjectivities could also be considered in terms of autonomy; in their relation, through their curatorial work, to cultural policy and the state on the one hand, and to the cultural industries on the other. The fact that such broader, structural aspects of curator subjectivity are missing from the analysis points to one of its limitations: namely, that it overly relies on the narratives of the curators—to what they actually said, as opposed to what remained unsaid. Social status is not something that necessarily becomes verbalized, or even made conscious; rather, it typically operates through the automatized dispositions, decisions, and so forth, that Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*. Besides presenting the discursive framework of the curators, a greater distance kept from these narratives could have led to additional conclusions. Rather than a fault of this present volume, however, this can be viewed as a possible direction for further research.

A greater and more critical distance could also have been aimed at considering the function, as well as power, of curators and exhibitions in creating or reinforcing historical narratives, including the political project of nation building (which, even though the authors seek to untie this association, has indeed historically been closely bound together with nostalgia, at least in

its “restorative” form; Boym, 2002). For instance, the national history of Australia told through the exhibition mentioned in the book (*Walk a Country Mile*) is entirely from a white western perspective: with the help of five films featured, the exhibition is structured around the placing of important moments in Australian country music history alongside “important moments in the nation’s social history” (p. 67). The films “begin [...] with ‘The Foundations 1788–1920s’, which emphasizes how songs and sounds were brought to the country by the convicts, soldiers and settlers of the First Fleet, and that ‘as settlement expanded, so did our music’, with new songs emerging ‘as our nation unfolded’” (*ibid.*) “For more than 200 years, music has told the story of the land and its people” (*ibid.*). This narrative replicates colonial histories, equating the history of white western colonizers with the history of the country, a point that would have been worth making. More generally, I would also have welcomed a reflection on the particularity of the heritage, the history that is being preserved in the museums and exhibitions in the study: that the “birth” and the “golden age” of pop rock music—the primary subject of the portrayed nostalgia and remembering—is a particular historical and geographical product, linked in social terms to the western post-war youth generation (“baby boomers”), economically to the upturn of the 1950s–1960s and the post-war establishment of the welfare state, and geopolitically to the global hegemony of the United States. In the same way that Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) tell us how the “spirit” of ’68 (its cultural demands, stripped of their structural and political aspects) fed the neoliberal reorganization of

capitalist regimes, there is merit in thinking about how the subversive power and “cool” of rock’n’roll is now being preserved and tamed as cultural heritage, serving the remembering and nostalgia of the mentioned generation (as well as forming part of the tourist industry, mostly in the global core, which is also the centre of the music industries).

At certain points (e.g. p. 128 & p. 142), the book’s argumentation is primarily situated against Reynolds’ *Retromania* (2010), on the basis that his analysis lacks the empirical detail of the present contribution; which is undoubtedly true. Yet, to me, the analysis and the conclusions of the two books operate on different levels. *Curating Pop* offers a valuable and sophisticated account of the practice and discourses of curation, the main principles and concerns involved. Through the curators’ experience, we also learn about the audience of popular music-themed exhibitions. Moreover, it is the first academic work to do so in such systematic manner. Still, it does not provide answers—it does not seek to, since its stakes lie elsewhere—to the bigger question of the function of remembering, preserving—and indeed, “hermetically sealing” (p. 138)—aspects of the popular cultural past in today’s highly digitalized, globalized, and unequal society. This broader dilemma remains for us to tackle.

Another, perhaps less difficult, future goal could be an engagement with curation in a broader sense: when the term curator is used in the music industries to refer to anything from famous stars hosting festivals through DJs to the profession responsible for compiling playlists on streaming platforms (Jansson & Hrac, 2018), and when curation is practically a synonym for the new cultural

intermediaries and/or gatekeepers of the digital music industries, there should be merit in considering the possible interactions between the two bodies of work; for instance, along the lines of representation of place and nation, affect, and subjectivities. Notably, the literature on curation in the digitalized music industries does not engage in any meaningful way with the literature on curating popular music either. This volume provides an opportunity that is hopefully taken up in the research on curation in a digital music context. Treating sound in museums is discussed as a problematic aspect for curators. However, the reader may ask whether there is indeed still a need to curate music or sound in the space of the museum in an age where music is almost omnipresent through digital and online tools—when visitors can in theory immediately turn to their smartphones and Spotify accounts to listen to something that caught their interest? Again, these are questions that could be tackled in works to come. In the meantime, many of the considerations receiving less emphasis in this particular volume can be found in previous works of the authors, so I conclude with also recommending these, in addition to *Curating Pop* (see e.g. Baker & Huber, 2014; Baker, Istvandy & Collins, 2017; Baker & Cantillon, 2018; Cantillon, Strong, Istvandy & Baker, 2018; Istvandy, Baker & Cantillon, 2019).

References

Baker Sarah & Cantillon Zelmari (2018), “DIY heritage institutions as third places: caring, community and wellbeing among volunteers at the Australian Jazz Museum”, *Leisure Studies*, 28 Nov, online : <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2018.1518173>.

Baker Sarah & Huber Alison (2014), "Saving 'rubbish': preserving popular music's material culture in amateur archives and museums", in Cohen Sarah, Knifton Robert, Leonard Marion & Roberts Les (eds.), *Sites of Popular Music Heritage: Memories, Histories, Places*, London & New York, Routledge, pp. 112-124.

Boltanski Luc & Chiapello Eve (2007), *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London & New York, Verso.

Boym Svetlana (2002), *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books.

Brocken Michael (2010), *Other Voices: Hidden Histories of Liverpool's Popular Music Scenes, 1930s-1970s*, London & New York, Routledge.

Cantillon Zelmarié, Strong Catherine, Istvándy Lauren & Baker Alison (2018), *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music History and Heritage*, London & New York, Routledge.

Cohen Sarah, Knifton Robert, Leonard Marion & Roberts Les (eds.) (2014), *Sites of Popular Music Heritage: Memories, Histories, Places*, London & New York, Routledge.

Istvándy Lauren, Baker Sarah & Cantillon Zelmarié (2019), *Remembering Popular Music's Past: Memory-Heritage-History*, London, New York, Melbourne & Delhi, Anthem Press.

Jansson Johan & Hracs Brian J. (2018), "Conceptualizing curation in the age of abundance: The case of recorded music", *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 21 June, online : <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X18777497>.

Long Paul, Baker Sarah, Istvándy Lauren & Collins Jez (2017), "A labour of love: the affective archives of popular music culture", *Archives and Records*, vol. 38, n° 1, p. 61-79.

Reynolds Simon (2010), *Retromania: Popular Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, New York, Faber and Faber.

Stephanie Fremaux, *The Beatles on Screen: From Pop Stars to Musicians*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018

Par Claire Fraysse

Spécialisée dans l'histoire et la théorie des médias et chercheuse à l'université de Birmingham, Stephanie Fremaux propose une analyse novatrice des films des Beatles, depuis *A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964) jusqu'à *Let It Be* (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1970) en passant par *Help!* (Richard Lester, 1965), *Magical Mystery Tour* (The Beatles, 1967) et *Yellow Submarine* (George Dunning, 1968). Divisé en cinq chapitres, l'ouvrage isole chacun de ces longs-métrages et les analyse chronologiquement au fil des mutations de l'image des Beatles et de leur identité de groupe ou individuelle. L'auteure vise à démontrer une cohérence dans l'œuvre cinématographique des Beatles, considérant ces films comme un cycle complet (auquel elle ajoute dans la conclusion le documentaire *Eight Days A Week : the Touring Years*, – Howard, 2016 –, chaînon manquant entre *Help!* et *Magical Mystery Tour*). L'ouvrage a pour but de montrer que l'évolution musicale des Beatles s'incarne

VOLUME!