

## Curating Exhausted Commodities: A Case Study of *We Buy White Albums*

### Abstract

While there has been growing interest in the curation and exhibition of popular music ephemera in recent years, such exhibitions have tended to focus on propagating canonical accounts, or on the telling of local or social histories. This article considers a different form of popular music curation, one driven not by a desire to preserve, but rather with the revaluing of what Straw (2000) calls 'exhausted commodities' – damaged, degraded, and defaced artefacts which would otherwise be discarded. Focusing upon the case study of *We Buy White Albums* – an ongoing collection and exhibition by New York-based collector, curator, and artist Rutherford Chang – this article explores the complexities associated with such notions of curation in the context of the 'music-commodity' (Taylor, 2007: 282), and the potential for curatorial recontextualizations of damaged, defaced, and degrading artefacts as a means of exploring hidden histories of popular music.

**Keywords:** Beatles, Records, Curation, Materiality, Collection, Exhausted Commodities

### Introduction

Popular music is a cultural form which has long been intimately, if not inextricably entangled with its own 'material extensions' (Straw, 2012:231). From the moment in 1877 when 'music began to become a thing' (Eisenberg, 2005: 13), with the birth of the phonograph binding sound and performance to a fixed and physical form for the first time, the mass-produced-ness of recorded music as a commodity, and the music which is inscribed upon or encoded within these commodities, have become deeply interconnected. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that popular music, and the material artefacts through which it is produced and consumed, has proven a fertile site for exploration as part of what has been referred to as the 'curatorial turn' of recent decades (O'Neil, 2007: 15). This turn towards curation describes an increased emphasis on the role of curators as cultural intermediaries, and of curation becoming seen as an 'increasingly active and creative' role in the production of meaning around materials which are exhibited (ibid).

Hantlemann has argued, in the context of the art gallery and exhibition, that if the 'actual moment of the production of meaning' occurs in the exhibition of artefacts, rather than in the artefacts themselves, 'does this not imply that the actual producer of meaning is the curator?' (2012: 43). As this article shall discuss, such a claim is taken to its extreme in the case of the exhibition of artefacts which are, arguably, otherwise worthless. In doing so, this article offers a reflection upon how, through the aforementioned curatorial turn, and its influence on the exhibition of popular music culture, these devalued artefacts, or 'exhausted commodities' (Straw, 2000), might be recreated and revalued – imbued with the sense of cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance of the artefacts which constitute other more conventional popular music cultural exhibitions of the kind described above. Furthermore, it will go on to argue that while the preservation of pristine artefacts tends to be privileged in the curatorial construction of popular music histories, that exploration and exhibition of damaged, degraded, and defaced artefacts has considerable potential to shine light on the individual and hidden histories of the people who owned those artefacts.

## Popular Music, Ephemera, and Historical Narratives

The ubiquity of music within contemporary western societies, coupled with popular music culture's propensity for producing an endless array of ephemera, has lent itself to a growing interest from exhibitors and curators over the past decade or so. The material outputs of popular music have proven ripe for curatorial contextualisation (and recontextualization), and are increasingly drawn upon as a means of constructing popular music histories in a museum or gallery setting. Consequently, the use of musical ephemera such as record sleeves, programmes, flyers and posters as a primary means for putting the popular musical past on display in museums and galleries 'has highlighted the ways in which such objects are not so ephemeral after all' (Elliot & Roy, 2014: online). When removed from the context of individual collection and consumption, and recontextualized within a gallery or museum setting, these records, programmes, and other such material products of pop music consumption take on new meaning as curated histories of sounds, scenes, and styles of previous decades.

Such acts of curation, according to Leonard (2007: 153) tend to fall into three broad categories – 'canonic representations' of the cultural significance of movements, moments, or events (for instance, the British Music Experience museum in Liverpool, or Cleveland's Rock & Roll Hall of Fame); 'curatorial contextualisations' of popular music as art within a gallery space (such as the Barbican's 2007 *Panic Attack! Art in the Punk Years* exhibition); and finally, presentations of popular music as local or social history (for instance, *Rip it Up: The Story of Scottish Pop*, which was recently exhibited at the National Museum of Scotland). Recorded music artefacts, in this context, become valuable items to be preserved, to be kept in pristine condition to be saved for posterity as items of cultural and aesthetic significance, and utilised as a means of constructing and articulating popular cultural histories<sup>1</sup>.

However, while some select elements and artefacts of musical ephemera find their way into such institutional collections and exhibitions, owing to their social function and usefulness in telling historical stories about the development of popular music cultures, or to their perceived aesthetic significance, the majority, eventually, have a far less lofty (but far more common) fate. As noted by Colloredo-Mansfield, an academic tendency towards discussion of the 'social life of things' has a habit of obscuring what happens at the end of their commodity lifespan, and has 'long squeezed out their social death' (2003: 246). Once cherished artefacts which played a significant role in the lives, routines, and sense of identity of the people who owned them, eventually become worn, damaged, superseded, or simply surplus to requirements. Some such artefacts might find themselves sold on for cheap at jumble sales or charity shops. Others, perhaps too worn to play, or too degraded as to retain aesthetic merit to a collector, are discarded, their commodity status depleted. This post-commodity phase of a record's social life, or death, tends to be referred to as *waste* – 'the absolute degree zero of value, or the opposite of value, or whatever stands in excess of value systems grounded in use' (Frow, 2003: 25). However, perhaps a more useful and telling means of conceptualising this shift comes from Straw's (2000) account of what he describes as the

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1 It should be noted that such exhibitions of popular music ephemera are an increasingly international phenomenon. Notable work by van der Hoeven, and Brandellero (2015), Cortez (2016) and Baker, Istvandity, and Nowak (2016) has explored issues relating to the curation and exhibition of popular music from the perspective of the Netherlands, Portugal, and Australia respectively.

‘exhausted commodity’, or an artefact whose material existence continues long after meaningful relationships with it have ceased. Even after objects have ceased to hold any significant economic value, they continue to exist as physical artefacts. Landfills are full of old, warped records, unravelled cassettes, and shiny fragments of shattered CDs.

Taking *We Buy White Albums* – an exhibition comprised of one individual’s extensive collection of over two-thousand copies of The Beatles’ eponymous ninth album – as a case study, this article seeks to explore the ways in which a distinctive and idiosyncratic collection of once near-identical artefacts might be considered in terms of curatorial revaluing of otherwise exhausted commodities. In doing so, this article in turn explores the complexities of curating meaning in the context of the multifarious world of the ‘music-commodity’ (Taylor, 2007: 282), and reflects upon the ways in which *We Buy White Albums* produces meaning through the organisation and display of such artefacts as an example of the kind of curatorial production of meaning which Hantleemann (2012) describes. In particular, it is concerned with the extent to which *We Buy White Albums* might be seen as a revaluing of a set of devalued objects, giving new meaning through curatorial contextualisation to artefacts which would otherwise be considered worthless ‘exhausted commodities’, and in doing so, shines a light on the hidden histories of those artefacts’ journeys through time. In considering *We Buy White Albums*, and its significance to wider discussions of the curatorial turn in relation to recorded music, this article draws upon a semi-structured interview with Chang carried out on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 2014, observation and photography data gathered from *We Buy White Albums*’ display at the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) in Liverpool, England. In addition, this article also draws upon a range of existing secondary data on the project from a range of journalistic sources.

### ***We Buy White Albums***

Occupying a conceptual space somewhere between exhibition, installation, and record collection, *We Buy White Albums* is an exhibition of (at the time of writing) 2,347<sup>2</sup> first run pressings of The Beatles’ ‘*White Album*’, by New York based collector, curator, and artist Rutherford Chang. Since first exhibited in New York in 2013, Chang’s *White Albums* have been displayed at a range of locations around the world, including a run from the 16<sup>th</sup> of August to the 14<sup>th</sup> September 2014 at FACT in Liverpool, where the observation data analysed for this article was gathered.

When exhibited, Chang’s collection is presented in a manner which borrows from the format of a record store. The space itself is sleek and minimal: white record bins, white folding tables, white-painted walls; the only real colour comes from the red-neon sign which hangs in the entrance to the space. Aesthetically, the room is far from the stereotype of ‘cluttered, jam-packed and not wholly clean’ independent record stores ‘stuffed dull with crates of vinyl’ (Pettit, 2008: 14) in which many of these artefacts would first have been sold. Neither does it resemble the ‘often basic and sometimes “shabby”’ charity shop environment (Hankinson, 2000: 213) often associated with second hand records when they arrive as near-exhausted commodities.

Instead, *We Buy White Albums* invokes a clean, functional minimalism, more aesthetically in line with the kind of ‘culturally significant, and eminently urban’ independent record stores

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<sup>2</sup> The running total is available at [www.rutherfordchang.com/white.html](http://www.rutherfordchang.com/white.html)

found in metropolitan city spaces (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015: 142). To an extent, Chang explains that this decision was influenced by the original exhibition space in New York:

‘Well, I’d been collecting these records for years, thinking about something I wanted to do with it. Yeah, and eventually I found the right space – a space called Recess. It’s actually an artist residency programme, but it’s in a store-front, which was perfect, and it was in the right location in New York and everything. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

On the wall, 100 copies are hung on display in rows of ten, with subsequent copies arranged in crates in order of serial number and thus, by extension, the order in which they were manufactured. Chang explains the significance of the copies hanging on the wall<sup>3</sup>:

‘I first showed the collection, it was much smaller then, probably when I had around 600 copies [...] and when people came in, they could choose copies to play. And those were the first 100 that were chosen.’ (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

This element of tactility and interactivity remains an important element of the exhibition. In keeping with this independent, specialist record store aesthetic, visitors are invited to browse and explore the different copies, to take them out and listen to them on the turntables provided.

Where the record store similarity ends, however, is in the function and purpose of the space. None of Chang’s records are for sale. Besides exhibiting the copies that he has collected over the years, the primary purpose of the space is acquisition. Chang describes the space as an ‘anti-store’ (Chang, 2014: personal communication) – one which aesthetically evokes a retail environment, but is geared towards the acquisition of records as opposed to their sale. While none of his *White Albums* are available for purchase, visitors can (if they feel inclined) bring and sell Chang their own first edition copy of the *White Album* to be added to the collection.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Chang, and his collection, have featured in a variety of media pieces, which have described it variously as a ‘collection’ (Steven, 2014), an ‘intriguing exhibition’ (Mullen, 2014), an ‘installation’ (Meier, 2013), and a ‘meditation on the material deterioration of mass-produced records’ (Spice, 2013) to cite but a few. The collection exists simultaneously as a museum-esque exhibition of historical artefacts, as a conceptual art installation, and as a record collection, albeit a particularly idiosyncratic one. As such, in considering the ways in which meaning is produced through Chang’s curatorial decisions relating to *We Buy White Albums*’ exhibition, attention must be given to a range of ways in which curatorial decisions contribute to the construction of meaning around the artefacts which are being exhibited. The first area to be addressed will be the use of organising principles, space, and place in the way that the artefacts in Chang’s collection are exhibited and experienced. From there, attention will be turned to the curation of damage and decay, and how *We Buy White Albums* curates meaning not through the preservation of pristine artefacts, as many other popular music exhibitions tend towards, but rather, through an exploration of the degradation of mass-produced artefacts that become exhausted commodities. Finally, consideration will be

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<sup>3</sup> Beyond their exhibition, Chang has also recorded and overdubbed these 100 copies of the album from his collection into a single recording an extension of the *We Buy White Albums* project. This ‘100 White Albums’ recording is available in the form of a double LP, with the sleeve art comprised of overlaid scans of each of the 100 albums. While this act of production out of his collection is fascinating, and merits further discussion and exploration, it falls out with the remit of this article. More information on this element of the project is available here: <http://100whitealbums.tumblr.com/>

given to the ways in which the damage, defacement, and decay of the artefacts in the collection might be seen as curating the hidden histories of the myriad owners who once possessed these artefacts, and their journeys from 1968 through to the present day.



Visitors in the *We Buy White Albums* space, August 2014

### **Organisation, Space, and Place**

It is, of course, the case with any collection that decisions relating to order, presentation, and display are crucial in imbuing a collection with meaning. Whether in a museum setting (see Pearce, 1992) or in the personal sphere (see Belk, 1995), and particularly with regard to record collecting (see Eisenberg, 2005; Shuker, 2004 & 2010), extant literature emphasises the primacy of organisational principles as being key in the construction and articulation of meaning in relation to collections. As Marshall (2016) observes, 'a collection without order is not a collection but something else – a hoard, a mass, an accumulation (2016: 64).

The organisational principles governing *We Buy White Albums*, however, acquire a significance which goes beyond that of a more conventional collection. Firstly, the artefacts which are being collected are, in essence, the same thing. As such, conventional means of organising a record collection, such as alphabetisation, or arranging according to genre, clearly do not apply here. Secondly, unlike more conventional collections both personal and institutional, the artefacts in Chang's collection are, for the most part, in varying degrees of functional and aesthetic disrepair. The capacity for a copy of the *White Album* to actually play, or even to be instantly recognisable as a copy of the *White Album*, isn't a particularly significant factor in determining its inclusion in Chang's collection. The otherwise poor condition of the artefacts in question means that their meaningfulness is intimately linked to their proximity to other artefacts in the collection. As a result, in considering the ways in which meaning is generated through Chang's curation of these artefacts, careful consideration of organisational principles is particularly significant.

The most obvious organisational principle of *We Buy White Albums* is the set of rules which govern what artefacts can form part of the collection. While the album has been repressed and reissued a number of times over the prevailing decades, Chang only includes first pressing copies of the *White Album* in his collection, primarily owing to the fact that these original pressings are numbered. Serial numbers inscribed upon the front of each copy bring a scrap of individual character and identity to what would otherwise be near-indistinguishable artefacts<sup>4</sup>. Of the roughly three million copies of the album which were first pressed in 1968, each serial number indicates both its factory of origin, and its chronological position within that pressing.

The significance of this numbering of *White Albums* has long formed part of the logic of value to record collectors and enthusiasts who seek to acquire or sell copies of the album, whereby lower numbers (and thus earlier copies) are rarer and thus worth more money. This logic is epitomised by the sale of Ringo Starr's personal copy of the album, numbered No.0000001 for \$790,000 at auction in December, 2015 (Kreps, 2015: online). While the significant sum reached for that copy was undoubtedly inflated by the fact that it was owned by one of The Beatles themselves, other low-number copies have, and continue to be sold for significant sums, with No. 0000441, for instance, appearing on eBay in 2017 for \$2,599.99 (Helfet, 2017: online).

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<sup>4</sup> There are accounts which suggest that this was a deliberate evocation by Richard Hamilton, the artist who created the cover, who discussed the idea with Paul McCartney as spoofing the idea of a 'limited edition art project' (Molon, 2008: 73).





Serial Numbers on the front of albums in *We buy White Albums*. August 2014

Beyond providing a means of limiting the range of artefacts which can feasibly be acquired into the collection, the decision to only include first edition copies provides the basis for the organisation and display of artefacts which have been collected – a key element of how meaning is curated. Within the exhibition space, the albums in Chang’s collection are arranged in numerical order, from lowest to highest. Stacked into crates arranged into groupings of serial numbers, as records in a shop would be grouped alphabetically or by genre, the serial numbers lend themselves to be grouped, categorised, and organised. For Chang, this process of organisation is a fundamental principle in the way that he, personally, understands and makes sense of his collection.

I guess I often use very simple systems of organisation, you know, like alphabetising or numbering, to reorder something that already has meaning. I dunno, I guess to show something about the inherent nature of the object. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

This ‘inherent nature’ which Chang refers to in relation to the records in his collection is their mass produced, commodity origins. The fact that each artefact is numbered, beyond its importance as an organisational principle, is closely linked to the otherwise near-identical nature of these artefacts as commodities. The serial numbers emphasise their mass-produced-ness, and act as a reminder of their homogenous commodity origins. This awareness of the commodity origin of the artefacts in the *We Buy White Albums* collection is closely tied to the other key organisation and contextualising principle of the collection – that of the physical configuration of the space that it inhabits.

The decision to configure the space to resemble an independent record store setting is also significant in this regard. Through his decision to present the space in this way, Chang provides visitors with a very specific context through which their interactions with the artefacts on display is framed. The record shop, after all, comes as loaded with cultural resonance and familiarity as the record itself as a cultural artefact. As Kruse has argued, record stores as sites of consumption often hold as much significance to the identity politics of popular music as the records themselves (Kruse, 1993). In particular, the quite specific independent record store aesthetic cultivated by *We Buy White Albums* tends to have direct connotations of its own kind of curatorial practice, as ‘*curated* cultural venues’ in which carefully selected records are displayed in such a way as to represent both the ‘idiosyncratic taste of its owner and

workers' while also adhering to the more 'specific values of the independent record store scene' (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015: 143).

As well as invoking a set of familiar norms and practices associated with browsing and interacting with the artefacts themselves within a record store context, the choice of the record store as an organisational principle embraces the records' mass-produced origins (the serial numbers which are embossed upon them) – a reminder that this is not a curated exhibition of individually distinct works of art, or bespoke, artisanal artefacts, but of items which were mass-produced as consumer goods. In doing so, this principle acts as a means of foregrounding the nuances of the collection on display, and the variegated and distinct nature of each individual artefact. As shall be discussed below, it is in establishing this context through which the records in Chang's collection are presented, and this foregrounding of their initially homogenous, commodity form, that subsequent curatorial decisions relating to *We Buy White Albums* can be understood as significant sites of the production of meaning. Furthermore, in doing so, *We Buy White Albums* might be seen as challenging dominant narratives of value within popular music cultures – that of the original, the 'real', the authentic, and the display of musical knowledge and taste that record collections can typically be seen to offer many collectors.

### **Curating Difference, Damage, and Decay**

The use of the record store format of presentation for *We Buy White Albums* establishes the basis for one of the key juxtapositions through which meaning is generated around the collection – that of the significant degree of difference which exists between each individual copy of the *White Album* in Chang's collection. Where the majority of exhibitions of popular music ephemera tend to emphasise preservation, showcasing the best preserved, or most aesthetically significant artefacts from the past, in many ways *We Buy White Albums* does the opposite, foregrounding and encouraging the visitor to reflect upon the degradation and decay of the artefacts on display. Beyond the requirement that the records acquired are first pressings of the album, no other restrictions are placed upon what copies of the album can be subsumed into the collection, and, importantly, with no requirements placed on the condition of the records being acquired. As a result, a considerable percentage of Chang's copies of the *White Album* are damaged or degraded almost beyond recognition. While all began their existence as near uniform artefacts, processes of aging, wear, and deliberate damage are all emphasised through their collection and display:

It's interesting to me because they're identical but unique. You know? I mean, everyone's like "Oh, why would you want to have a thousand copies of the same album", but to me they're all unique. I guess you have to put them all together to see that they're unique ... These will continue to age. They're physical objects made of vinyl and paper. There's no way to preserve these things forever. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

In the eyes of many record collectors, particularly those fitting what Shuker (2010: 33) has described as the 'High Fidelity Stereotype' of obsessive middle-aged vinyl geeks, many of the individual copies are worthless, with mouldy, worn, decomposing sleeves, or embellished with sketches, scribbles, and doodles. While visiting the collection, I noted one copy which was held together by sellotape and sheets of kitchen paper (illustrated below, centre). Another (illustrated below, left) was smeared with a dubious brown substance. Many (illustrated below, right) were mouldy, decomposing, or otherwise damaged almost beyond



recognition. Some are deliberately defaced, illustrated most tellingly by one particular copy which had had the tracks 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' and 'Why Don't We Do It in the Road' scratched out, apparently, according to Chang, in case the owner's parents heard the tracks playing and confiscated the record.

Beyond deliberate damage, many of the LPs are clearly degraded to the extent that they are beyond ever possibly being of any use in terms of actually playing on a turntable. By virtue of no longer being able to reproduce music when placed on a record deck, their value can no longer really be articulated with regard to their 'proper function' as artefacts for storing and reproducing music (Preston, 2000) – the hallmark of an exhausted commodity. While, as Shuker's (2010) work on record collector identities has shown, people collect records for myriad reasons, it seems a reasonable assertion to make that few would opt to acquire items which were degraded to the point of practical and aesthetic redundancy.

Reflecting upon this, Chang notes that while he feels degradation and decay are an inevitability of any collection of objects made of vinyl and paper, that this is particularly apparent and (for him at least) also particularly compelling in the case of this particular collection, primarily owing to the simplistic, minimal design of the *White Album's* gatefold sleeve:

It's because it's all white, it's like a blank canvas that collects everything from 1968 to now, and they become these artefacts where everything that's happened to them is more apparent than the original design. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)



Damaged, defaced, and decomposing artefacts at *We Buy White Albums*, August 2014

The minimalism of the album sleeve's design, and the decision to collect this particular record, then, becomes a significant one in terms of how meaning is curated. The plain, white design of the sleeve acts as a reminder of the records' uniform beginnings as consumer products, and the uniqueness and variety of each of the individual artefacts in the collection as distinct cultural artefacts which 'arrive at destinations bearing meanings which the distance of their travel and the manner of their acquisition have inscribed upon them' (Straw, 2002: 165). When looking at the artefacts within the collection, you don't necessarily see the design of

the cover itself, instead you see the degrees of difference which have developed between them.

As such, in bringing these artefacts together, there is a sense that what is being curated in this regard isn't so much the artefacts themselves as the distinctive and unique forms of damage and decay that they display. Of significance here is that the majority of these artefacts arrive at *We Buy White Albums* at the point of their exhaustion as commodities. Unable to fulfil their proper function as a means of storing and reproducing recorded music, they lack meaningful use value as a means of music listening. Similarly, through damage and decay, they no longer fulfil any conventional aesthetic value as an artefact within a personal collection. In this sense, through the act of curating this sense of distinction, damage, and decay in once-identical artefacts, Chang's collection might be seen as a perfect illustration of the kind of curatorially produced meaning that Hantlemann argues for. Artefacts which otherwise would likely have been destined for landfill are revalued through their recontextualization, shifting the emphasis of meaning away from the function or aesthetic worth of the individual record, and onto their collective meaning as a reflection on the truly ephemeral nature of such cultural commodities. In this sense, Chang's exhibition defies the norms of other such exhibitions of popular music ephemera, acting not as a site of proactive preservation in which the aim is to safeguard exceptional objects against damage, but instead, as a reflection upon the inevitability of decay as part of the materiality of such ephemeral artefacts.

### Curating Hidden Histories

This is not to say that the revaluing of these artefacts through Chang's curatorial recontextualization of them represents an erasing of their individuality as artefacts. One of the things that becomes apparent when exploring the exhibition, and even more so in conversation with Chang himself, is the way in which *We Buy White Albums* highlights and foregrounds the histories, both overt and hidden, associated with each of the artefacts in the collection. As such, through the process of curating difference between these artefacts in the manner described above, *We Buy White Albums* might also be seen as a curating of the individual and personal histories attached to these artefacts: the implied narratives about their journey from 1968 to present, and the physical traces of this journey which they have accumulated along the way. The personal histories attached to each copy is something which Chang is acutely aware of, with many of those donating albums to the collection directly attesting to the deep sentimental attachments formed with their copies of the record:

I got a lot of donations in New York once people read about it. A lot of people would come in with their album, and say like, "Oh yeah, I don't even own a turntable anymore and I don't listen to records but I couldn't part with this object because I've got a sentimental attachment, but when I read about this I wanted to be part of this project (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

As might be expected, Chang has a range of very specific, and often quite humorous, stories attached to many of the records, and the people from whom he acquired them. The nature of the project, and the open invitation for people to bring in and donate or sell their copies of the *White Album* to him, has inevitably resulted in many of those people seeking to tell their story about their particular copy of the album to Chang. 'I've met a lot of Beatles enthusiasts',

he remarks, 'especially in Liverpool!' (Chang, 2014: personal communication). While these stories are not incorporated directly into the exhibition itself, likely owing in part to the sheer volume of records in the collection, they have been well documented in media coverage surrounding *We Buy White Albums* (See Maly, 2013; Paz, 2013; Bazarian, 2018). During our conversation, Chang recounted a number of these stories:

I mean, yeah, there are ones which are funny to me, but I can't say I really have a favourite because you really need the contrast of all the different conditions. So I don't really have a favourite. I can tell you some stories about some of them though [...] A lot of people have told me, like, they skipped school on November 22nd 1968 to buy the album, and then bought it at like, what shop they bought it at and all that. Some people tell me they stole it because it was too expensive. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)

Chang's reflection on these stories acts as a reminder of the deeply personal relationships which individuals form with records as cultural artefacts, and how such records often play an important role in how an individual comes to understand their own passage through time.

As well as collecting physical copies of the album, Chang is, in effect, curating what he has previously described as 'imagined histories', implied through the condition of each individual album (Paz, 2013: online), one in which the focus shifts from the *White Album* itself, and instead to the role that it played in the lives of people between 1968 and the present day. This process might be understood as the construction of 'material biographies' (Beer, 2008: 76) – the ways in which people imbue their material possessions with mnemonic meaning, with particular artefacts taking on significance in relation to their role in remembering significant moments in that person's life. Possessions, as Csikszentmihalyi notes, can provide a sense of the 'continuity of the self through time' (1993: 23). Mass produced objects and consumer goods become sites of 'extremely variegated areas of private valuation', tied up in the complex biographical notions associated with the collector's subjective relationship with their collection (Koptoff, 1986: 88)

One of the most overt ways in which these material biographies manifest themselves amongst the artefacts of Chang's collection is through previous owners having written their name on the album sleeve. The numerous copies inscribed with the former owner's name exist as a reminder that while the space is full of copies of the same album, each specific copy within that collection was also once owned by a specific person in 1968. Reflecting upon this, Chang identified one particular example in which the way that he personally thinks about one of the artefacts is shaped by this sense of biography and history.

This one is a good story, "Bob" [pictured below, top left]. A friend of mine came to see the show, and she was asking me where I got this one. And, she said that her father, who had passed away, was named Bob, and he wrote his name on all his albums, and that looked like his handwriting! But we could never really figure out for sure. I bought it from some record dealer in Cleveland or something, so I dunno, we never knew for sure ... A lot of people have had stories like that, where people are like, they'd see a name written and be like "That's my friend! I think I went to high school with that person!", but, you know, never confirmed. (Chang, 2014: personal communication)



A selection of White Albums bearing the names of previous owners, August 2014

While one or two of the copies, such as Bob's, might hint at a specific owner, for the most part there is no way of knowing anything concrete about the stories of each artefact's previous owner(s), beyond perhaps their name(s). However, closer examination of artefacts in the collection begins to highlight the extent to which each tells a story about its former owners, their identities, and their relationships with the record itself. Some copies are covered in doodles, stickers, or maths homework. Others bear quite elaborate illustrations, offering brief glimpses into the creative minds and lives of the people who have owned them. All bear some traces of previous owners, spaces, and places in time.

The palimpsestic nature of these artefacts – the traces of previous owners, and hints at stories never quite confirmed – is definitely one of the most compelling components of the We Buy White Albums collection. This sense of an implied but unknown story attached to each artefact, with myriad hidden histories hinted at through the damage, decay, and (in particular) the defacement of many of these artefacts is a particularly potent part of We Buy White Albums' affective appeal as a curatorial project. At the point at which they were written, the names on these artefacts were a statement of ownership – a means of preventing a copy being stolen or misplaced at a party perhaps, or a coded warning to a younger sibling. Now, fifty years later, when brought together in this way, they serve as a reminder of the fact that each of these artefacts formed a part of an individual's personal biography and sense of identity.





A selection of customised or illustrated copies from *We Buy White Albums*, August 2014

A key component in *We Buy White Albums*' production of curatorial meaning, then, is drawn from the way in which displaced items from a whole range of individuals' personal histories are brought together in such a way that foregrounds the deeply variegated ways in which these artefacts have found their way from 1968 to the present. If our individual accumulation of records can be said to 'reveal things about us, about our life trajectories and histories' (Beer, 2008: 76), *We Buy White Albums* represents an exploration of where multiple life trajectories, histories, and experiences overlap. Each name etched upon a cover, each amateur illustration, each act of vandalism or vanity or creative expression hints at a glimpse of the identity of its former owner. The collection offers a snapshot of individual material biographies from a particular moment in time in the late 1960s, and the years subsequent, brought together and framed in a way which emphasises the plurality of relationships that different individuals had with different copies of the same mass-produced artefact. *We Buy*

*White Albums* as a collection acts as a visual metaphor for the uniqueness and individuality of the value relationships that individuals form with their musical stuff, and how mass-produced commodities can mean very different things to different people at different moments in time.

To this end, Chang's collection has particular implications for considering how meaning is created through the curation of popular music artefacts. The conventional collection instinct, and the perceived purpose of institutional museum and gallery collections, tends towards the preservation of artefacts, with historical narratives presented by considering artefacts as they *were* at a particular moment in time. Chang's collection highlights the possibility for curators of popular music histories to consider the role that damage and decay of artefacts can play in considering popular music histories. The extent to which each hidden history associated with the collection is revealed is directly and inextricably linked to the degree of damage and decay associated with each artefact. This is particularly the case with those copies which have been deliberately defaced, illustrated, or otherwise altered by their former owners. The names which have been inscribed upon them, the illustrations and doodles, all of these things hint at an unknowable, but compelling personal history that lies behind the material form of the record itself. The greater the level of damage done to the original form, the greater the insight that is offered into an artefact's history, its former owners, and its journey from 1968 to present. *We Buy White Albums* acts illustrates the ways in which otherwise exhausted commodities can, through careful contextualisation, be revalued as a means of considering alternative perspectives on the construction of popular music histories.

### ***We Buy White Albums* as Curatorial Production of Meaning**

This article has considered *We Buy White Albums* as an act of curatorial production of meaning of the kind that Hantlemann (2012) has described, in which meaning emerges from the decisions made in relation to the selection, organisation, and contextualisation of artefacts as much (if not more so) as from the artefacts themselves. As highlighted earlier in this article, the curation of popular music artefacts has generally fallen into three broad categories or canonic representations, curatorial contextualisations, and local / social histories (Leonard, 2007). What is interesting about *We Buy White Albums* is that it can be argued to straddle all three of these categories, while not quite fitting into any of them.

With regard to canonic expressions of popular music, the exhibition undoubtedly draws a sense of meaning and cultural resonance from the fact that what is being curated is an album by one of the single most iconic acts of all time within the dominant popular music canon. As Jones (2008) has noted, The Beatles occupy a particularly privileged position within accepted narratives, histories, and canonic accounts of popular music, both within the music press, and as part of the 'tentative canon of works apparently considered worth of academic study' (2008: 3). In choosing such an iconic album as the *White Album*, which was recorded by an act of such historical and cultural significance as The Beatles, *We Buy White Albums* undoubtedly owes some of its intrigue and cultural resonance to its proximity to a wider sense of popular music canon.

This is particularly the case in the collection's 2014 exhibition in Liverpool upon which the analysis within this article has focused. Locating the artefacts on display within a wider context of a city that has been quite successful in recent years at utilising its music heritage



as a means of driving regeneration, the exhibition further contributes to Liverpool's ongoing development of an international identity as a 'music city' (Cohen, 2005). While the Liverpool version of the exhibition was unchanged from previous iterations in terms of the artefacts and their presentation, the significance of locating the exhibition within the context of a wider Beatles heritage in the city must inevitably impact upon the curatorial meanings which are constructed, with the geographical location acting as 'a conduit for fandom and identity' (Fremaux, 2015: 144).

That said, while the exhibition is comprised of a collection of Beatles-based artefacts, the canonic significance of The Beatles and their influence on popular culture isn't necessarily an integral factor in the curation of meaning. Rather, the cultural significance of The Beatles, and the commercial success of the *White Album* upon its release, have created the conditions necessary for such a collection to exist. While the exhibition has little to say about the history of The Beatles as a band, the astronomical popularity of The Beatles, both then and now, and the fact that around three million first edition copies of the album were pressed, is certainly an important existential factor for the exhibition. The canonic significance of the *White Album* as a cultural artefact is doubtless a factor in ensuring that enough copies of the record continue to exist, and arrive at this point having acquired traces of the lives and histories of such a broad and varied range of people.

Beyond its relationship to the popular music canon, so too can it be argued that *We Buy White Albums* shares elements in common with Leonard's second broad category of music exhibition – of the curatorial contextualisation of popular music artefacts as art. Through foregrounding the degrees of similarity and difference outlined in the above discussion, it can be argued that *We Buy White Albums* as an exhibition is concerned with a sense of meaning which stems from the aesthetic qualities of the records which have been collected, and a curatorial invitation from Chang to his visitors to consider how acts of damage, defacement, and decay can, when considered in the context of once near-identical artefacts, be considered something akin to a work of art.

What is particularly interesting, however, is the way in which *We Buy White Albums* might be considered in relation to Leonard's third category of popular music exhibition – that which is concerned with popular music as an articulation of local or social histories. The choice of an album which is now over fifty years old means that *We Buy White Albums* as an exhibition is undoubtedly concerned with notions of history in its broad sense. In illustrating such exhibitions relating to popular music, locality and social history, Leonard draws upon the example of *The Hamburg Sound: Beatles, Beat and Grosse Freiheit* – an exhibition concerned with The Beatles' time in Hamburg, and the social and cultural significance that heritage has for the city. Where Leonard describes the way that such exhibitions have engaged with popular music cultural artefacts as a way of telling a particular local history, or the history of a particular scene, *We Buy White Albums* is concerned primarily with the telling, or perhaps more aptly *not* telling, of over two-thousand fragments of individual and personal histories. Significantly, it is the accumulation of physical traces of these individual personal histories in the form of damage, defacement, and decay to the once white covers of these *White Albums*, and to the discs which they house, which has ultimately devalued the artefacts collected in a conventional sense.

The telling of histories through these artefacts occurs *through* the display of their varying degrees of damage and decay. It is through their wear and defacement that the imagined histories of their journey through prevailing decades is made visible. The very thing which

makes them interesting and meaningful in the context of the exhibition is that which would make them undesirable in a different context, the very expression of the exhaustion of their commodity status. As such, *We Buy White Albums* provides a challenge to curators of popular music histories to consider the historical and aesthetic possibilities for exhibitions of popular music artefacts, and highlights the potential for the curation and recontextualization of otherwise exhausted commodities to offer insights into the more complex and variegated personal histories of those who have owned them. This means looking at such artefacts not only as a means to tell stories of established and canonical histories of popular music through the preservation and presentation of artefacts as they *were*, but also to consider the ways in which the traces left upon these artefacts, and the individuals who left these traces, are important in telling stories about how they came to be as they are *now*.

## Conclusion

In seeking to preserve artefacts – to acquire and display pristine copies of albums as a means of constructing stories about popular music histories – the mass-produced commodity origins of records, and the subsequent potential that they have to impact upon the personal biographies of millions of popular music fans, are often obscured or impeded. *We Buy White Albums* highlights the potential for the ‘curatorial turn’ to widen its consideration of exhausted commodities as a means of delving into the deeply subjective and personal relationships which individuals form with particular popular music artefacts. This opens up new possibilities for thinking about the ways in which popular music histories are articulated through the curation of records and other popular music ephemera, and for thinking about the construction of those histories themselves. Moreover, it presents a challenge to the *kinds* of histories which are told about popular music, and the individuals and events that they tend to focus on.

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