

## **'Well-worn Grooves' – Music, Materiality, and Biographical Memory**

### **Abstract:**

Recorded music, as both aesthetic listening experience, and as material culture, has a deep mnemonic resonance for a great many people. Starting from Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) theorisation on the significance of artefacts in the structuring of 'well-worn grooves' of consciousness, this article considers the biographical function of the metaphorical (and literal) 'well-worn grooves' of music-based artefacts such as records. Building upon existing arguments from material culture studies and popular music studies, this article used excerpts from research interviews with self-identified 'music enthusiasts' to argue that an attentiveness to the complex and intertwined relationships between popular music listening, and its materiality, presents possibilities for looking beyond a broadly canonic understanding of popular music history, arguing for a greater attentiveness to the richness of the individual music-based biographies as a means of exploring the relationship between popular music and the past

**Keywords:** Music; Memory; Records; Collection; Materiality; Biography

### **Introduction**

In his (1993) reflection on the importance of 'things' to human experience, Csikszentmihalyi argued that 'objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts for future goals' (1993: 23). For Csikszentmihalyi, a key component of the meaningfulness of the things that humans choose to surround themselves with is the capacity for those things to structure ideas of the self into a kind of object-biography. They provide corporeal reassurance of a notion of the self which is at once continuous and also in constant development – repositories of mnemonic meaning whose 'familiarity and concreteness help organise the consciousness of their owner, directing it into well-worn grooves' (ibid: 23).

If the above is true of domestic objects generally then, arguably, it is especially so for artefacts through whose 'well-worn grooves' (both literal and metaphorical) we come to access popular music. Melodies, lyrics, and chord sequences, have all been well documented as providing an extremely effective means of 'cuing autobiographical memories' which are often 'affectively charged' (Baumgartner, 1992: 619). These affective, autobiographical memories are often understood in terms of what Istvandy has coined as a 'lifetime soundtrack', or a 'metaphorical canon of music that accompanies personal life experiences (2014: 136).

While the melodies and lyrics of popular music provide the 'soundtrack' to autobiographical memories, it is very often the physical artefacts through which this music is stored and accessed – LPs, CDs, cassette tapes, and more – that provide the corporeal context through which these memories are accessed are understood. As noted by Bennett and Rogers (2016), the 'material culture' of popular music acts as a rich site of memory and identity for popular music fans and listeners, who often 'signpost a life by cycles of engagement with music's physical extensions' (2016: 39). Even in the face of rapid trends towards digitalisation, with online streaming platforms becoming the dominant form of popular music consumption (see McCourt, 2005; Burkart, 2013; Morris, 2015), there has remained a recognisable 'potency' to

our 'ongoing affective relationships with music's physical extensions' (Bennett & Rogers, 2016: 39), particularly in the context of music, memory, and the past.

For many people, the aesthetic experience of popular music listening, and the materiality of popular music artefacts are often deeply, if not inextricably, entangled in the construction and articulation of memory. As such, the relationship between popular music's materiality and the aesthetic experience of popular music listening can be seen as having significant implications for how a great many people understand the relationship between popular music and the past. Existing scholarship, notably Straw (2012) and Bennet and Rogers (2015), has made the case that a material culture studies approach has a lot to offer to the study of popular music culture, and that popular music's materiality is an important but often overlooked site of social, cultural, and historical meaning. Similarly, there is a small but growing body of work which highlights the significance of aesthetic experiences of popular music listening as sites of mnemonic recollection (see van Dijck, 2006 & 2009; Istvandy, 2014 & Istvandy and Cantillon, 2019). This article seeks to build upon and extend this body of work, highlighting the complex and intertwined relationship between popular music listening, the material artefacts through which it is consumed, and notions of memory and the self. In doing so, it will argue that the individual, personal, and biographic aspects of popular music's materiality offer an important, and often overlooked means of thinking about the relationship between popular music and the past, and the significance of the personal and mnemonic to constructing and understanding notions of popular music history.

The research upon which this article is based was carried out through 23<sup>1</sup> semi-structured interviews with self-identified 'music enthusiasts' – a shorthand for a loose category of individuals for whom recorded music, and the artefacts and objects through which it is constituted and consumed, holds a significance which goes beyond that of what might be termed the 'typical' music consumer (if indeed there is such a thing). In doing so, it considers the ways in which records – taken here to refer to LPs, CDs, tapes, and other recorded music formats more broadly – and the music inscribed upon them, act as sites of biographical memory for those who acquire and collect them. For the enthusiasts who participated in this study, the relationships which they form with music, and with the material forms through which it is consumed, can be seen to play a significant, if not fundamental role in their understanding and articulation of their own identity. The entanglement of popular music as sound and popular music as artefact was a dominant and recurring theme across the responses of the participants in this study. However, it is significant to note that participants were not directly asked to comment upon the relationship between popular music, materiality, and memory. Rather, each interview opened with a broad question of whether they would consider themselves to be a 'music enthusiast', with the rest of the subsequent lines of questioning encouraging them to elaborate on the forms and practices that their enthusiasm took.

### **Autobiography, Biography, and Memory**

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<sup>1</sup> The group was made up of 17 male and 6 female participants, including 3 participants of non-white or ethnic minority backgrounds, and 2 who identify as LGBTQ+. Participants were based in the UK, although their geographic origins ranged from as far afield as Iceland and the United States. The sample also represented a broad age range, with the oldest participant aged in their mid-sixties, and the youngest aged 20.

Before moving on to address the biographical and mnemonic significance of records as both aesthetic listening experience, and as material culture, it is important to briefly address what is meant by these terms, and to issue some caveats on their use in the context of both this article, and this special edition.

The relationship between memory and history is the subject of extensive and longstanding debate. While a full account of these debates is beyond the scope of this paper (see Thomson, Frisch, and Hamilton (1994) for a detailed outline), given that this special issue seeks to question and problematize notions of popular music histories, a sensitivity to such tensions is important, and merits a brief review here. For many documentary historians, memory has been seen as an inherently unreliable historical source, as it can be 'distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia', by 'the personal bias of interviewer or interviewee', and by the 'influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past' (Thomson et al., 1994: 33). Such criticisms, while (to an extent) valid, make certain assumptions about the nature of history and the past. They tend towards the conclusion that there is a singular, fixed, and recoverable past, which can be uncovered, documented, and understood through the right kinds of historical practice. By extension, they also risk neglecting the multi-layered nature of individual memory, and the plurality of versions of the past provided by different speakers', and fail to see that 'the "distortions" of memory could be a resource as much as a problem' (Thomson et al., 1994: 34). It is not my aim to refute the subjectivity of memory. Rather, I highlight these issues in order to argue that the subjectivity of memories provide a useful and often overlooked resource for thinking about the popular music in relation to the past, particularly when considered in relation to the material forms through which such memories are accessed and shaped.

While, as Robinson (1986: 19) has noted, 'an awareness of the fallibility of memory' is 'as old as [humanity's] fascination with memory itself', arguments such as those above have found shape and have played out in the field of memory studies over the past three decades or so (see Brockmeier, 2010 for a comprehensive overview). Within memory studies, memory can be seen as 'something that does not stay put but circulates, migrates, travels' (Bond et al, 2017: 1). Rather than making claims that memory forms an objective record of moments and experiences, it is now 'more and more perceived as a process, as work that is continually in progress, rather than as a reified object' (ibid). Memory, in this sense, is not a form of documentary history so much as it is a means of problematizing 'limited notions of what (and who) matters in history, and how (and by whom) history is generated' (Thomson et al., 1994: 36).

When talking about the mnemonic power of music and records in this article, then, I am not seeking to present these memories as factual and objective histories based on acts of 'literal recall' (Bartlett, 1995: 204). Instead, as the use of the term 'biography' might suggest, I'm conceiving of memory as a kind of narrativized recollection of a person's subjective experiences of the past, and how it connects to their present through ideas of the self. In the same way that biographical writing 'narrates life', plotting 'circles of existence' in narrative form (Parke, 2002: xiii), biographical memory, in this sense, might be understood as memories of the self which create a narrative link between recollections of the past and notions of identity in the present. In considering the mnemonic power of records in this article, then, the use of the term 'biographical' as opposed to 'autobiographical' is a deliberate one. Where the term 'autobiographical' implies a 'self-life-writing' (Onley, 1980: 6), or a sole authorship of one's own personal history, this article uses the term 'biography' as a means of

acknowledging both the role of outside influences in shaping these accounts of the past, and of course the fallibility of an individual's memory as a source for reconstructing it (see Nourkova et al, 2004). If memory can be conceived of as a narrativized recollection of subjective experiences of the past, the use of the term 'biographical' here acknowledges the role of aesthetic experiences of music, and of broader historical and canonic representations, in constructing, accessing, and modifying that narrative over time.

Such questions are particularly pertinent in the context of history, heritage and memory in music cultures upon which this special issue focuses. After all, as Cantillon et al. (2018: 8) note, in the context of popular music 'the relationship between memory and history or heritage and the boundaries between them are far more complicated and difficult to define than is initially apparent'. As Long and Wall (2010: 23) have highlighted, accounts of popular music's relationship with the past has often taken the form of 'totalising histories', tending towards coherence rather than complexity, and often at the exclusion of facts, figures, and events which don't fit within a narrow and singular history. Such popular music histories have tended towards 'canonic representations' of culturally significant acts, movements, and events (Leonard, 2007: 153), or a reductive focus on 'important' recordings and artists (Inglis, 2017: xiii). These narratives of the past tend to focus on a handful of important artists who are deemed worthy of academic study – The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols, and so on (see Jones, 2008) – and accounts of their transformative effect on popular culture. However, for a great many music fans and enthusiasts, their memories of popular music are not particularly concerned such canonic accounts, and instead are more concerned with memories of that exist within the realms of the domestic, the personal, and the familial. In making the case for the relationship between music, materiality and memory here, this article represents a step to addressing such oversights by providing an alternative way for thinking about popular music, memory, and the past.

### **Biographical Artefacts and Sounds**

The idea of personal possessions as having the capacity to act as 'biographic artefacts' has been pervasive in the fields of anthropology and material culture studies for some time. A notable exploration of the biographical and mnemonic role played by everyday artefacts is Kopytoff's account of commodities as forming 'cultural biographies' (1986: 88). According to Kopytoff, mass produced objects of all kinds can come to represent 'extremely variegated areas of private valuation', tied up in an individual's subjective relationship with their possessions and the past. In other words, while an object's commodity status might explain why it was produced in the first place, it does not account for the significance that it might hold for the person who owns it. As Benjamin observed in relation to the unpacking of his now near-mythical library, 'a focus on [acquisition] or any other procedure is merely a dam against the spring tide of memories which surges towards any collector as he contemplates his possessions' (1969: 60). While, from the perspective of a historian, Benjamin's library may represent a rich variety of sources through which to conduct historical work, it also offers an important site of biographical memory and identity for him as an individual – one which cannot be captured by looking at the artefacts alone.

The biographic significance of objects exists through subjective relationships between object and owner. While the object in question may be just one of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of near-identical mass-produced objects produced and consumed as part of a system

of exchange, that *particular* object becomes individually and uniquely meaningful through the 'aggregate perception' of its owner (Kleine and Kernan, 1988: 499) as a site of reflexivity and mnemonic contemplation. Danet and Katriel describe this as a kind of 'world-making' activity, in which 'objects are removed from their contexts of use' as units of consumption, and instead 'become incorporated into a new context' as part of subjective notions of identity, memory and meaning (1994: 28). While outwardly unexceptional, the personal possessions that we surround ourselves with can play a key role in how we construct and understand identities of the self, its continuity, and its development through time. They help trace a common thread of self-ness through a lifetime of changes, growth, and development, acting as mnemonic links to particular moments – physical documents of the 'well-worn grooves' that Csikszentmihalyi describes.

It is notable, then, that in a number of key studies into the meaning of things, musical objects have been cited as particularly fertile sites of memory and meaning for their owners. In their study into the material meanings of household objects, for instance, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton identified the case of a wealthy attorney, whose home was filled with rare art, expensive furniture and other opulent material possessions. However, when asked directly what was the most special object he owned, he invited the interviewer down to his basement den, and produced an old trombone from a trunk:

He used to play this instrument in college, he explained, when life was fresh and spontaneous. Now he feels weighed down with cares, and whenever he is depressed he goes to the den to play a few tunes, and some of his worries disappear for a time. So, the trombone helps both focus attention, reducing entropy in consciousness, and vividly brings back old memories and experiences, thus adding a sense of depth and wholeness to the self of its owner. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993: 25).

While, unfortunately, their study offers no insight into the pieces of music that this attorney would play on his trombone, it is telling that in a study of household objects generally, one of the key examples offered is musical in nature. After all, as DeNora (2000: 67) has noted, 'memory is indexed by music', with the affective resonance of familiar melodies or personally meaningful lyrics offering potent sites of memory, and to an extent, nostalgia. As such, in not having asked the attorney what he *played* on the trombone, arguably Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have only uncovered half the story of that particular artefact's mnemonic significance, and its affective resonance for its owner. After all, if the power of this artefact is in its potency as a site of remembering, the musicality of the instrument can be said to form both a part of what is being remembered, and is indexical in the act of remembering itself. Music is both part of what is being remembered – forming an integral part of the attorney's recollections of youth, freedom, and aesthetic experience – and also a trigger for such memories in the present, whether through his interaction with this particular musical object, or perhaps through hearing a familiar piece which resonates with that period in his life.

The attorney's trombone is illustrative of a broader problem which faces scholars seeking to explore the role that music plays in the construction and access of autobiographical memories – a microcosm of longstanding tensions between a musicological prioritisation of 'the work', or 'the music itself' (Kerman, 1985: 18) and a popular music studies for which, at times the music itself has been argued to be seen as 'a troublesome appendage' as opposed to the central point from which it is built (Tagg, 2011: 4). Attempts to understand the potency of this artefact primarily on the terms of its materiality, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's

study does, risk neglecting the significance of the music which was performed and accessed through the artefact, and the importance of the aesthetic qualities of music playing and listening in understanding the artefact's mnemonic resonance. However, an ethnomusicological approach to this problem, which would take the music performed upon the instrument as the focus in its exploration of the attorney's autobiographical relationship with the past, runs the risk of downplaying, or outright neglecting, the significance to the attorney of the materiality of *this particular artefact* – its physical presence in the here-and-now – and the way in which such memories are accessed and affectively coloured. The mnemonic power of this musical artefact cannot be said to reside entirely in either its physical presence or the music which was performed upon it. Rather, the two are deeply entangled. Aesthetic experiences of music listening cannot exist without the material artefacts through which sound is produced.

Such entanglements have not gone un-noted in scholarship on the subject of music, materiality, and memory. As Bennet and Rogers (2016) point out, the 'material culture' of popular music extends well beyond the instruments upon which it is composed and performed, and (for many people) is dominated by the processes through which popular music is consumed. The wider 'material extensions' of popular music – in particular physical playback media – have long played a key role in how music audiences more broadly 'access and signpost their memories' (2016: 39). Musical artefacts such as records (and broader categories of music-related ephemera such as ticket stubs and tour t-shirts) become sites of mnemonic resonance wherein the meaningfulness of the musicality of a favourite song or album, and the meaningfulness of that artefact as a 'memento of the past' become very difficult to extricate. These entanglements have played a significant role in the expanding field of popular music heritage and archives (see Baker and Collins, 2015; Long, 2018) and the burgeoning music heritage industry which seeks to 'repackage, reissue and market the music of the past to original and new audiences' (Long, 2018: 130) and in doing so, reinforce the canonic perspectives of popular music history highlighted earlier in this article. They are also what makes popular music such a 'particularly interesting example of modern relations between consumption and self-identity' (Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 329). The power of recorded music in particular exists in the tension between records as homogenous, mass produced commodities on one hand, and uniquely meaningful sites of affective listening, memory and identity for an individual on the other. There is an important semantic difference, after all, between "an album" and "*my* album" in the minds of a great many music fans and record collectors. It is the difference between an album as a 'consuming subject' – a uniform product designed for the purpose of exchange – and albums as '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). Likewise, it is the difference between that record as a conventionally historical source (insofar as it captures evidence of a particular creative and cultural moment for those who produced it), and as a biographical one which connects with a specific, individual and subjective moment for the person who owns it.

The above examples, then, might be seen as illustrative of the complexities involved in considering the role of artefacts in the relationships between popular music, memory, and identity. Music is at once an object of memory, and a route to it. The artefacts through which music is accessed – be they musical instruments as in the above example, or artefacts through which recorded music is stored and accessed – are meaningful as a means of conjuring music

which gives a soundtrack to remembering, but also in-and-of-themselves as part of an object-biography of their owner, and as a physical document of a particular moment in time. As such, it can be argued that an attentiveness to the entanglement between music, listening, and materiality can be an important, and often overlooked factor in seeking to understand the mnemonic power of popular music. In making this argument, I will now turn from literature to empirics, discussing the ways in which collections of records can be understood by participants in this research as serving to construct notions of biography. From there, I will go on to explore the ways in which participants recount the mnemonic resonance of *specific* artefacts in their collections, and the role of both music and artefact in the construction of and access to those memories. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of what these insights can offer to discussions of the biographical functions of music, and their implications for further study in this area.

### Records as Biographical Collections

In any discussion of the construction of meaning through assemblages of records, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the cultural practice of record collecting, and the body of scholarship which accompanies it (see Eisenberg, 2001; Hayes, 2006; Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015). Particularly notable in this regard is Shuker's (2010) work on record collecting as social practice, which foregrounds the importance of individual relationships with records and recorded music as key means of understanding the social and cultural meanings of record collections to those who collect them. Tracing the development of record collecting from its early moments through to the modern collector, Shuker's work is, to a significant extent, a historical one, concerned both with writing a history of record collecting practice, and also the ways in which record collections are fundamentally concerned with documenting moments from a musical past.

A key contention of Shuker's work is that the 'characteristics, motivations, and practices exhibited by record collectors are *social activities*' (2010: 1, emphasis added). Shuker's account of record collection foregrounds the tension between collection driven by a love of music and those driven by a preoccupation with collection for its own sake, often bordering on an obsession. In his definition of the contemporary record collector, Shuker highlights this as a key paradox:

'A fundamental distinction emerged between the collector who 'loved music', and the collector who was preoccupied with collection size, rarity and economic value. "I still cling to the belief that I'm a fan of music first, records second" (Keir Keightley). However, use value and exchange value were commonly held in tension. Those who claimed a love of music as central to their collecting were also proud of items they had paid high prices for, or were very valuable' (Shuker, 2010: 39).

This paradox offers an important example of the tensions between recorded music's commodity status, its 'proper function' as a music playing device, and as a site of symbolic meaning, which were outlined in the previous section. It is also one which has deepened with the increasing influence of digitalisation, and music's new digital economies, which I'll come back to later in the article. This paradox is particularly significant in that it implicitly acknowledges associations between record collecting as a social practice, and what Shuker (2004) has previously described as the 'High Fidelity stereotype' of record collectors as

compulsive and introverted middle-age men who use their enthusiasm for collecting records as a substitute for meaningful human interaction.

Perhaps as a result, it is notable that a proportion of participants in this study were quite resistant to the term 'collector' being applied with reference to them and their records. An awareness of collector stereotypes was common amongst many of the participants, with one noting that 'record collecting, for me, is still associated with a particular kind of person [...] with *that* dude in a band t-shirt and a blazer' (Delilah, 2018: personal communication)<sup>2</sup>. Others, while less directly resistant to the term, were nonetheless keen to add some kind of qualification or caveats to it being used in relation to them and their collections, such as 'not a full-blown collector, but somewhere between a collector and a casual listener' (John, 2014: personal communication) or 'Maybe a small-time collector [...] a collector of sorts' (Oliver, 2014: personal communication), whose relationship with their records might be seen as enthusiastic without being exceptional or obsessive.

While there were some reservations amongst participants about describing themselves as 'record collectors', many discussions of the mnemonic and biographical relationships that they had with recorded music were framed in the context of their collections as a whole. For example:

I've been collecting vinyl records, erm, I started when I was about 17, so I've been collecting records for years and years now. And they've moved everywhere with me. They're the one thing that I've insisted move with me. [...] I'm quite specific. Like, digital music, you can just go crazy with it. The amount of digital music I've got is unreal, like, I've got gigabytes of the stuff, but records I'm very, very, very specific about what I pick to be part of the collection. When I choose a vinyl record to add to my collection I buy lots of old stuff from before I was born, or when I was younger, stuff that I can link to certain events in my life, or has some, you know, emotional currency. When I buy a record I'm not just spending physical cash on it, I'm spending a little bit of myself because that particular record means this because it represents this point in my life. (Gavin, 2015: personal communication)

In talking about his relationship with his record collection, and indeed, his motivations when acquiring new records, Gavin is explicit in connecting the materiality of the collection to a sense of connectedness between an artefact and places and spaces from his past. His records, when taken as a collection, are presented as a material and cultural biography, made meaningful in a way which extends beyond the use value of the records (which, as highlighted in the quote, is often supplanted by newer digital formats), or the exchange value of the record as a commodity item. Each item in his collection is closely associated with notions of identity and memory – an active site of how an individual understands their identity *now*, and how that identity connects with memories of moments and places in the past.

While the notion of a collection as biography emphasises a means of documenting and accessing ideas of the past, it is also important to remember that a purpose of such

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<sup>2</sup> Participants have been identified either via their first name, or via a pseudonym, depending upon their expressed preference during the process of obtaining informed consent. Those who expressed no preference have been referred to via a pseudonym.



documentation is to allow for its assimilation into understandings of the present. Amongst the participants in the study, it was common for participants to present their relationship with their records, and their mnemonic significance, not purely in terms of how they remind them of moments from their past, but also how they continue to reaffirm their sense of self and identity in the present:

Something I've noticed with all the different formats that I have is that they seem to reflect different periods of my life and my musical taste ... I think it's a bit strange, but part of the reason I keep all this is that it feels like part of my identity in a weird way, and if I didn't have these things I wouldn't really be me. You know? (Tess, 2014: personal communication)

In spite of the fact that she notes in our interview that she doesn't necessarily *play* much of the records of her collection very often, opting instead for the convenience of digital media and Spotify, these artefacts continue to be active in the way that they construct and continue to affirm a sense of self-identity. They are a site of active self-perception, and a material reminder of the continuity and development of the self through time in the way that Csikszentmihalyi (1993) describes. These discussions of the biographical function of record collections chime with existing accounts of the significance of things in signalling the continuity of ideas of the self, acting as souvenirs of past experiences, while signposting notions of the self in the present. However, as noted earlier in this article, a focus on the biographical function of collections in-and-of themselves tends to obscure the important role of music listening in forming and accessing the kinds of memories which these collections represent. While such discussions can confirm that many participants *do* see their records as at least partly biographical in nature, it is only when the accounts of participants turn to specific records *within* their collections, and by extension, the links between specific artefacts, specific pieces of music, and specific events, that the full biographical complexity of popular music entangled as both sound and artefact becomes apparent.

### **Listening to Biographical Artefacts**

While, as the previous section has suggested, there was a broad consensus amongst participants that their records represented an important site of identity and memory, a more granular approach – looking at individual biographical memories attached to individual artefacts – offers a more nuanced understanding of the biographical function of records to the participants in this study. During interviews, it was common for participants to identify specific records as being particularly meaningful to them. The significance of these records, as both music and artefact, tended to be expressed and explained in relation to a connection with specific people, experiences, and moments in time:

I remember in '95 or '96, Spiritualized had just released *Ladies and Gentlemen We are Floating in Space*, and my boyfriend at the time had told me it was amazing. So I bought it, and as you might know, it was packaged like a paracetamol, a massive pill, and you had to very carefully open it. But he got a pen-knife and just very carefully opened it, and unveiled this CD. And that was very special. (Bobbie-Jane, 2018: personal communication)

One thing that is particularly meaningful to me is a cassette tape which was given to me by a friend a couple of years ago. It was actually one of about 30 tapes that I made to give away with an old fanzine I used to produce [...] and this tape was called Maz's 80s Party and has some 80s tunes on it. I don't have a cassette player so I don't listen to it, but I think it had The Cure 'Object' and Wham 'Young Guns' on it, plus several alternative 80s tunes [...] It reminds me of all the effort me and my pals used to put into making the fanzine and the fun times we had doing it and people reading it and asking for it [...] it's probably the only thing I'd be angry or upset about if I lost. (Mazzy, 2017: personal communication)

The above examples from Bobbie-Jane and Mazzy are illustrative of the accounts of many participants. In discussing the meaningful nature of artefacts within their collections, almost every account given connected that artefact with a memory of a specific place, or specific people, at a particular moment in the past. While the music itself was always present within the conversation, it tended to be discussed in the context of *this particular artefact*, and the way in which it connects its owner to a particular moment in time. Delilah, for instance, recalled a number of artefacts from her collection, each one in relation to specific memories:

Oh, all of my CDs [resonate with a particular moment in time]. There's a Blur Best Of that I got when the fifth Harry Potter book came out. I got both of them for Christmas, and I would listen to the Blur Best Of while reading the fifth Harry Potter. Those two are forever linked for me. (Delilah, 2018: personal communication)

And to specific people:

The first Arctic Monkeys album came out when I was 18, and that was like my formative soundtrack. The first and second Arctic Monkey's albums are both very formative for me – finishing school and having a crush on a guy, like the only guy in my school who also liked the Arctic Monkeys, and he was a total dick, but it didn't matter because we liked the same music [laughs]. So that CD is pretty nostalgic for me now. (Delilah, 2018: personal communication)

In each of these accounts, the act of listening represents a fundamental part of the mnemonic resonance of the artefact, and of the memory itself. The notion of certain records as representing a 'formative soundtrack' in particular chimes closely with Istvandity's work on the autobiographical significance of music discussed earlier in this article, and offers an overt illustration of that theory in practice. However, equally notable is that in discussing each of these memories, the materiality of the record as an artefact also occupies a central position in the narrative. In her discussion of the Arctic Monkeys record, for instance, the music is a central part of the memory, but it is the CD – the artefact – which is identified as nostalgic.

As illustrated by Delilah's responses above, the meanings that participants connected with artefacts from their collections were often most explicit in discussions of youth, of youthful experiences of music, and musical artefacts associated with that moment in time. It is perhaps unsurprising, given the importance of music, distinction, and taste to adolescent formations

of identity (van Dijck, 2006) that autobiographical links were most acutely connected with moments in participants' lives where experiences, ideas, and sensations were still *new* in the purest sense of the word. For many of those with whom I spoke about artefacts which carried particular meaning and significance for them, childhood memories were prevalent in the examples offered:

[A particularly meaningful record to me is] *Best of Rainbow* – the double LP from the 80s. This version is one of the first records I was ever given. I inherited an old hi-fi stack with a record player on top that used to be my cousin's, and was desperate to have a record to play on it. My parents initially refused because they said I'd damage the records, but eventually they caved - Dad gave me a copy of Whitesnake's *Saints and Sinners* and the *Best of Rainbow* LP. I listened to them both so much, but obviously, as an 8-year-old, I scratched them... 20 odd years later I was with my Dad in Glasgow browsing through records in Missing Records (under the bridge on Argyle Street) and I found a perfect copy of the *Best of Rainbow* for £4. I told my Dad to go upstairs and bought it as a surprise and by way of an extremely delayed apology. I've got the original, one off, reduced-track-listing-due-to-damage version at home and Dad now has one he can actually listen to! (Stuart, 2017: personal communication)

The above example from Stuart, a lifelong music enthusiast and musician in his 30s, provides a useful illustration of the kinds of stories which were offered by participants about the biographical function of particular artefacts in their collection. Stuart's account is a richly illustrative real-world example of Csikszentmihalyi's theoretical account of the 'continuity of the self through time', wherein the self is both continuous but also in constant development. This record, as an artefact, is representative of a personally significant moment from Stuart's personal history. It illustrates the kinds of 'complex biographical notions associated with the collector's subjective relationship with their collection' (1986: 88) that Kopytoff argues for in his discussion of the biographical function of commodity items. However, it is also significant that this record is not simply a 'souvenir of the past', but also represents a focal point for how that past intersects with the present. The particular significance of this record is not simply that it was meaningful when he was younger, and acts purely as a nostalgic link to childhood, but rather that its biographical significance continues to be felt and plays out in his current-day sense of identity and self. He elaborates on the significance of listening, and to the music itself, later in the same interview:

I got really into those two records which turned into me asking my Dad about more artists, different bands, starting learning about all the members and guitarists and ended up getting really into classic rock at a young age. From there my obsession with the guitar started and I guess that's how I've ended up where I am now. I definitely look back at sitting in my bedroom listening to Ritchie Blackmore kick the arse out of his Strat and see it as a pivotal moment in my life. (Stuart, 2017: personal communication)

I argue that this example provides a useful illustration of the significance of this particular record as an artefact, and the significance of its materiality in the construction and understanding of an individual's biographical identity. It is important to note, however, the

role of *listening*, and of the music itself, in the formation these memories. It is the act of listening which is being remembered through the artefact, and which acts as the link between Stuart's memory of the artefact from a moment in his past and the decision to purchase a replacement copy of the LP for his father to listen to in the present. As Stuart's example highlights, listening in the present can provide a route through which to recall how and when we listened in the past. This is significant in the context of this special edition, and poses questions for the role that listening plays in our collective understanding of popular music, history, and the past. If we are to 'listen again to popular music *as* history', as the introduction to Part 2 of this special edition suggests, we might usefully ask the extent to which popular music history could, or should, be argued to be a history of listening? Or a listening *to* history? Or, perhaps, a listening *through* history?

### **Discussion: 'Well-worn grooves'**

I return, at this point, to Csikszentmihalyi's metaphorical 'well-worn grooves' of object-structured memory, identity, and the passage of the self through time. In his account of the role of objects in structuring memory and identity, Csikszentmihalyi concludes by lamenting what he sees as such a 'paradoxical need to transform the precariousness of consciousness into the solidity of things' (1993: 28). An over-reliance on material culture as a means of objectifying the self is seen as a slippery slope towards an inescapable and terminal materialism. Instead, he argues, there is a need for us to more deeply embrace a 'rich symbolic culture' of poetry, songs, crafts, prayers, and rituals that keep psychic entropy at bay' (ibid), locating notions of the self through abstract symbols as opposed to a reliance on objectified consciousness. As this article has suggested, however, Csikszentmihalyi's own metaphor highlights the near impossibility of dissociating the symbolic meaning of music or song from its corporeal context in a world of artefacts, especially when considered as part of discussions of memory and the past. Whether in the form of musical instruments such as the attorney's trombone discussed at the beginning of this article, or in the form of LPs, CDs, cassette tapes, and other material extensions, there is an inescapably material culture which to which that 'rich symbolic culture' of music and song is inextricably connected.

Furthermore, this sense of materiality demonstrates the power of the 'well-worn grooves' metaphor in providing a basis to think about the relationship between popular music, memory, and identity. Just as the grooves of an LP are at once material and musical, the examples above articulate some of the ways in which records give shape and structure to the biographical reflections of participants, and how music, listening, and materiality can come together in the construction and recollection of memories. When discussing their collections in general terms, the music enthusiasts interviewed tended to offer accounts of their records in terms of the size of collection, the kinds of things they collect, and their passion for music in general terms. However, when asked if they could identify a specific artefact from that collection which was particularly meaningful to them, the symbolic meaning of a record in relation to a particular moment, a particular place, or a particular person comes clearly in to focus. The importance attached to artefacts and collections by participants in this study was often intimately linked to formative or significant moments in their lives, providing important sites of mnemonic resonance and personal meaning.

As a result, these artefacts and the memories associated with them are used to construct, sustain, and express notions of self-identity (Larsen, et al, 2010) – providing both corporeal evidence of the continuity of the self through time and an affective soundtrack to that temporal and reflexive journey. In the brief examples presented in this article, the biographic function of the artefacts in question is made particularly apparent when the participants spoke about specific artefacts which held particular meaning to them. Accounts of biographical memories spoke to the dual significance of music and listening in the formation of memories, and the materiality of their records as a means of accessing and understanding those memories in relation to notions of self-identity.

Such observations have significance for how we might think about the relationship between popular music and the past. In the 'canonic representations' of popular music (Leonard, 2007: 153) and 'totalising histories' which emerge from them (Long and Wall, 2010: 23), the tight focus on iconic acts and important albums has often left little space to reflect upon the listening experiences of music fans, the memories that are attached to them, and the ways in which such memories are accessed and understood. As the accounts of the participants in this study have highlighted, popular music offers a fertile site for the discussion of memory acting as both a soundtrack to recollections of significant personal moments and experiences from the past, and as means of cuing or accessing such memories in the context of the present. In these accounts, the biographical function of popular music as being significant to their personal histories is far more significant than the reinforcing of a canonic narrative. This suggests the possibilities of looking beyond comfortably established narratives of popular music canon when thinking about popular music as a source for historical understanding, and for a greater attentiveness to the richness of the individual music-based biographies as a means of exploring the relationship between popular music and the past.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to explore the relationship between popular music, memory, and identity, examining the autobiographical function of popular music's material extensions and the music which is inscribed upon, and represented by, these 'well-worn-grooves. In doing so, it has made the argument that in seeking to understand the relationship between recorded music, memory, and identity, there is a need for an attentiveness to the interrelated, entangled nature of listening, materiality, and memory. Such a claim builds upon those made by previous scholars, notably Straw (2012) and Bennet and Rogers (2015) that a material culture studies approach has a lot to offer to the study of popular music culture, and that popular music's materiality is an important, but often overlooked, site of meaning in the context of popular music, history, and the past. Likewise, it cautions that such an approach cannot come at the expense of a focus on the meaningful nature of music itself, which risks seeing music in-and-of-itself become relegated to being seen as a 'troublesome appendage to popular music studies' as opposed to the central point from which it is built (Tagg, 2011: 4). In spite of the changing nature of popular music consumption, and the increasing influence of digitalisation, the interconnectedness of music as material culture and music itself remains fundamentally important in understanding its cultural meanings.

Although having touched upon it very briefly in the introductory section, it should be highlighted here that the ongoing digitalisation of recorded music, and a shift from material ownership to digital access has very significant implications for the arguments made in this

article might play out in the future. While such debates extend beyond the scope of this article – which is concerned with a historically specific relationship of music, materiality, and memory – they warrant mention at this point, as a move towards digitalisation has significant implications for what the material culture of popular music will look like in the future. It is worth remembering, however, that a move towards digitalisation is not necessarily a move *away* from materiality. Even in an increasingly digitalised music environment ‘user experiences of music are highly dependent on and mediated by music’s commodity form’, with music ‘indelibly linked to, and sometimes at odds with, the technologies and materials that carry and present it’ (Morris, 2015: 193). The emergence of new forms and formats don’t simply replace old ones. Rather, they are active in ‘formatting culture’ (ibid: 198), bringing about new cultural meanings emerging from changing technological practices, cultural meanings which, inevitably, will need to be understood in terms of the intersection between the artefacts through which we access music, the music itself, and our subjective experiences of the two.

These grooves, after all, are well worn.

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