Remediating Lost Pop: The Recirculation of North American B-Music.

Wendy Pringle
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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the role of older North American pop music as cultural waste in new media environments. It builds on existing scholarship examining the political implications of collecting, recirculating and archiving cultural ephemera. I argue that as discredited and obsolete media, the discarded physical remains of failed or forgotten music—such as old vinyl records—provide personal and alternative ethnographies of North American mass culture. Crucial to this research is the concept of remediation, whereby media are made and remade in new conditions. In particular, I examine an assemblage of music I call 'B-music' (from B-movie) that is revisited primarily for its weirdness. Failed eccentrics, forgotten trends, indecipherable outsiders and other such curiosities are viewed as transgressive or revelatory after having been excavated and re-articulated as such. While such content has conventionally been relegated to the secondhand stores and donation bins that have constituted the networks of recirculation, they are increasingly accessible to less serious collectors and listeners through digitally mediated channels. I argue that remediating such content, or converting it to digital formats, making it available to global audiences via the internet, performs a valuable process in revisiting and reshaping the history of cultural industries.

Cette thèse examine le rôle de « déchet culturel » que joue la musique populaire nord-américaine des générations passées dans le contexte des nouveaux médias. En m'appuyant sur des études existantes des implications politiques de la collection, de la remise en circulation et de l'archivage des biens culturels éphémères, j'argumente qu'en tant que moyens de communication discrédités et désuets, les supports physiques de musiques oubliées ou sans succès, tels que les disques de vinyle, fournissent des ethnographies alternatives et personnelles de la culture de masse nord-américaine. Le concept de remédiation, c'est-à-dire la retranscription des anciens médias dans de nouveaux contextes, est crucial. J'explore en particulier un type de musique que j'appelle « de série B », dont l'intérêt réside principalement dans son étrangeté : excentricités hermétiques, tendances oubliées et autres curiosités sont considérées comme révélatoires ou transgressives après leur exhumation et leur réarticulation. Bien que de tels contenus aient traditionnellement été relégués à des magasins d'occasion et des organismes de charité formant des réseaux de recirculation, ils sont de plus en plus accessibles par voie numérique aux collectionneurs et auditeurs moins sérieux. Je soutiens que la remédiation et la conversion en format numérique de ces contenus, en les rendant disponibles à un public global via Internet, contribue de manière importante à la réévaluation et à la révision de l'histoire des industries culturelles.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Those curious to listen to the same sounds heard by the last several generations of North American listeners need not dig for long to find them. The Internet Archive's "Old Time Radio" section currently houses close to 2500 different digital streaming excerpts of radio broadcasts from as far back as the early 1920s.[1] This particular forum, which relies heavily on uploaded contributions from individual users, hosts a wide variety including mystery theatre, variety shows, comedy, news and science fiction themed radio shows. Contemporary listeners, including those born long after the era of dramatic and variety programming on radio, can 'tune in' to these digitized broadcasts and imagine what their grandparents might have heard on an average evening at home.[2] Those who grew up in North America might be familiar with more famous broadcasts like Orson Welles' famous radio drama "The War of the Worlds," but until the advent of the Internet Archive it would have been fairly difficult to hear these more banal and ordinary audio fragments.

The practice of excavating such material rests on an implicit argument about the importance of correcting gaps in aural histories. The Internet Archive—a user generated archive for free and public domain media of Alexandrian proportions—and other similar projects appeal to the ideal of free (meaning both *libre* and *gratis*) and universal access to a broad range of cultural material. These projects implicitly claim that such access is a necessary facet of a functional liberal democratic society. In these preservationist discourses, radio, television and digital resources are viewed as especially vulnerable to loss (both intentional and accidental), since they are more ephemeral than other media. This same desire to recover lost sounds is driving a movement to recover lost and forgotten recordings produced by the popular music industry (and alongside the industry in parallel music

[1] http://archive.org/details/oldtimeradio
[2] The overwhelming majority of the programs are from American broadcasters.

economies) in North America in the twentieth century. For years, record collectors have treasured unique and interesting sounds contained in vinyl, acetate and wax cylinders. Vinyl reissue practices have duplicated some of this music, compiling and reselling it to new generations of listeners. A third method of sharing is gaining popularity in recent years. Online communities are ripping, streaming and sharing old and interesting pop music, choosing this networked practice as their own mode of redistribution.

The confluence of these three kinds of collecting practice has unearthed a rich repository of recordings. I have grouped rarer and lesser-known instances of (mostly North American) recorded pop music into a category I call B-music. This term is designed to invoke the qualities associated with the B-movie. As with B-movies and 'paracinematic' films, "B-ness" can variously denote cheapness, authenticity, campiness, raw expression, marginality, and subversion.[3] As I discuss in chapter three, these qualities situate B-music as apart from the recordings typically regarded as representative of an era or decade. I argue that B-music's *unfamiliarity* to the majority of audiences also encourages its fans to work to expose it to new listeners. These fans rip physical recordings into digital files with the express purpose of making albums of B-music universally accessible. They view the audio as an integral part of history, as important as already established forms of cultural documentation like literature and film.

Crucial to this research is the concept of remediation, whereby media are made and remade in new conditions. Remediation occurs through these practices of recording conversion, a process viewed by some as capable of helping old media to meet new ideals. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin first defined the concept of remediation for use in media

[3] See Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy, Davis, *Battle of the Bs*, and Sontag, "Notes on Camp."

studies.[4] Since then, different strains of media and cultural studies have variously credited practices of remediation with shaping cosmopolitan subjects[5] and creating and sustaining sites of cultural memory.[6] Remediation has been hailed as a practice in which we might observe the strategies of non-Western cultures for dealing with globalization.[7] In this latter application of remediation, new incarnations of older cultural practice evidence the rewriting of media history wherein it is centred on (and extends out of) local culture. In its original formulation, remediation was conceived as the straightforward transference or refashioning of old media into new ones.

> A medium is that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real…[8]

In this original interpretation, flow *within* a culture (rather than *between* different cultures) is foregrounded. My use of the term, although applied to the networked environment of online media consumption takes a similarly *intra*cultural focus, within North America. This project explores how remediation contributes to alternate sonic histories and follows the flow of culture between decades.

In addition to utilising remediation as it has traditionally been understood, I am interested in recuperating some of the word's lost etymological cues, specifically its roots in the Latin *remediatio* (from *remediare*), meaning to heal, cure or remedy.[9] This is how the term is used in the environmental sciences, where it denotes the repair or reversal of pollution and soil damage in natural ecosystems. Yet these different etymological formulations are not so very distant, since media theory rarely looks at a single medium in isolation, favouring

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[4] *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.
[5] Novak, "Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood." 41
[6] Erll and Rigney, *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*.
[7] Silvio, Teri, "Remediation and Local Globalizations."
[8] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*. 68.
[9] http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/remediation?q=remediation

mediated *environments*. The practices of remediation outlined in this work are not radically different from those described in Bolter and Grusin. In many examples they refer to the retextualization of art (paintings, photographs and films) or news media (radio, newspaper) in their journey to the World Wide Web. In these examples of retextualisation, we witness the transfer of contents from one format to another. In a similar fashion, this thesis deals with a process of retextualization in which recorded music moves from vinyl record (and sometimes cassettes) to MP3. I explore how this movement between formats bears the promise of *remedying* older technological shortcomings when remediation is seen as recuperative, or as rescuing valuable contents from fallible containers.

Chapter two offers a short chronology of these practices of collecting. I stress that collecting valorizes strange and obscure sonic content. The chapter covers albums produced (roughly) between 1950 and 1970. The section on reissue record labels (section 2.2) chronicles efforts to revisit those instances of recorded North American music viewed as abandoned by conventional industry. Tracing the remediation of music from one form to another allows us to track the migration of interest between generations of music fans. In other words, converting music formats is viewed here as a kind of cultural excavation by which interest in old media is reignited and new readings make media new.[10] The eccentric and idiosyncratic content exposed in such practices is hailed as providing precursors to better known instances of innovation and experimentation in musical performance and production.

In the next stages of this work, I move towards elaborating on the specifics of the category of B-music and ask why such music is particularly ripe for remediation. Specifically, I ask what happens to B-music if we follow it from its humble analog past to digital reincarnation. Chapter four seeks to develop an answer to the question of who pushes

[10] A reconfigured application of remediation as David Novak applies it in "Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood."

B-music through such changes (in format and in meaning). In the later stages of this research, a discussion about digital sharing infrastructure became necessary. The B-music blogs relying on one-click hosting services had begun to deteriorate around 2012-2013. This deterioration led to my interest in the resilience and rupture of networks (4.2); the disappearance of these services inspired a section of this study dedicated to the potential for fallibility and impermanence in digital sharing environments. The blogs (at least while still functional) provided a place for likeminded collectors to connect and they also allowed for the retroactive reconstitution of pop musical history. They excavate forgotten recordings and revalorize material once viewed as trash.[11] This stage of work also provided the opportunity to look at how a 'networked listenership' positions itself toward such "rediscovered" music.[12] By exposing and sharing music on these websites and blogs, collectors make available a kind of music that is at once old and new.

The volatility of fashionable popular media also played a factor in this study. In 2011, for example, the *New York Times* reported that blogging was beginning to fall out of fashion, suggesting that other newer platforms were coming into favour.[13] Whatever the reason for the decline in the blog-as-personal-archive sites, bigger operations like the Free Music Archive were beginning to flourish. These larger scale projects promise to preserve unique music and make it available to anyone. Across these varying approaches there is an investment in the idea that old and (almost) forgotten offshoots of the pop industry and other peripheral/paramusical recordings are able to offer alternate aural ethnographies of North American modernity. Larger scale projects, such as the Free Music Archive, are attempting to bring such efforts into a more prominent and public position. Public archives of Creative

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[11] See Thompson, Michael, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*.
[12] Another approach reconfigured from Novak.
[13] Kopytoff, Verne G. "Blogs Wane as the Young Drift to Sites Like Twitter," New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/technology/internet/21blog.html?_r=1&

Commons-licensed and public domain music make the claim that contemporary sound culture relies on the universal accessibility of such content. In lobbying for such material to remain audible to anyone curious enough to dig it up, the Free Music Archive and others engaged in remediating and recirculating outmoded and unusual recorded music—B-music—also posits recorded music as essential to a thorough historiographical understanding of North American popular culture.

2 COLLECTING AND RECIRCULATING POP MUSIC RARITY

In 1993 the editors of *RE/Search* declared the work of vinyl crate diggers a political act, heroic for its recuperation of "amazing endangered records as well as insights as to their genesis."[14] With the shift to the CD format, vinyl records no longer served the interests of the recording industry. With their sudden drop in dollar value, the sheer volume of records in second hand stores and warehouses had made the act of sifting through them a pastime or practice in itself. For the editors, digging and sifting through these records was a political act, one of subverting "the invisible, tight reins by which society controls us."[15] Their two volume series, *Incredibly Strange Music*, is dedicated to telling the stories of those who dedicate a great deal of their time, income and storage space to amassing enormous personal libraries of rare and unique recordings. Their emphasis is on the labour done by the enthusiasts, not only in the pursuit of the physical artefacts, but in the extensive *listening* required in extracting the most exceptional and interesting recordings after acquisition. The implication made here is that the tireless pursuits of record collectors not only preserve and protect an independent archive of the unusual, but that they also make possible the re-imagination of pop culture more generally: "They aid us in developing our *own* aesthetic about pop culture phenomena."[16] The albums and artists featured in the volume are lauded for their innovative disregard for conventional style, but also as exemplary of naive or misguided attempts at commercial success. This chapter is dedicated to elucidating the particularities of vinyl collecting and to reflecting on its influence in the persistence and recirculation of weird, commercially unsuccessful and confusing music in new media conditions.

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[14] Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 3.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

The Incredibly Strange Music series exemplified a practice of collecting that, while not extinct, was tied closely to the conception of music as physical commodity. In its physical state, music was to be held, displayed and coveted in addition to fulfilling an auditory experience. What was particular about the moment in music consumption culture represented in Incredibly Strange Music was that listeners who collected music and honed their tastes in the second-hand vinyl record economies relied on a particular set of economic conditions, one in which engaging with such rarities depended in large measure on the actual perusal and purchase of albums in retail spaces. As with any collectible item, the vinyl record's value is unstable; the price of an album is subject to the whims of collectors, whose interest can cause its value to spike.

The *Incredibly Strange Music* volumes allude to a crucial tension within the recuperation of weird recordings. On the one hand, there is a celebration of the mastery of styles that is enacted in impassioned collecting. In delving into what Will Straw calls "the natural wilderness of discarded styles and eccentric musical deformations,"[17] the collector requires an encyclopedic knowledge of canonical genres as well as of the conditions of the failed stylistic hybrids, the dedicated musical misfits with small but loyal cult followings, and the detailed backstories that make strange music all the more interesting. On the other hand, the same editorial suggests a certain relinquishing of the listener/collector's agency. This side emphasizes the uncynical curiosity of the collector who, as a listener, is finally stumped, unable to classify, contain and categorize such music within their collection. Bewildered by style, execution or uncertain background the collector has to ask with genuine curiosity: "what were they *thinking*?" This response imagined or presumed the existence of outsider misfits who, lacking a certain kind of self-consciousness could produce music that with time

[17] Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," 637.

could "be viewed as important and revelatory."[18] Within this formulation, the collector cherishes B-music's variety and unique characteristics, but also serves as a kind of steward, preserving these qualities for future listeners. Both these tensions are firmly rooted in the culture of the vinyl record. *Incredibly Strange Music* encapsulates that moment in which independent vinyl collectors hunted down rare and exciting recordings in order to preserve them *in their original form*, for the sake of an individual collection.

Today, the albums discovered and repurposed by collector-compilers—those most highly valued for their originality or peculiar beauty—are made accessible through a variety of online file sharing networks. They are subject to collaborative archivization by networked online publics. A particular distilling of tastes and styles occurs in the remediation of strange musics. In straddling multiple media formats, online publics dedicated to the circulation of B-music retain characteristics of vinyl collecting and yet are also subject to particular conditions of networked practice. The question of how this music is remediated and recirculated calls for an inquiry into what David Novak terms "an emergent public ethics of new media,"[19] where new and sometimes divergent positions on the remediation and redistribution of old music occur. I ask how networked fan communities deal with these changes and I also look at those people—primarily collectors, but also those running reissue record labels and blogging about music—whose efforts greatly influence the sustained availability of B-music in both digital and analog settings.

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[18] Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 3.
[19] Novak, "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media," 617.

2.1 RECORD COLLECTIONS AND THE HUNT FOR THE OBSCURE

Critical literature on the subject has addressed the specific characteristics of vinyl culture and of the DJs and writers who make fulltime work of their passion for collecting.[20] These kinds of studies have been useful in the preparation of this research; however my focus is not on vinyl collecting itself, but rather on the focus that such practices put on obscure recordings and lesser known genres. I am also interested in exploring how those who collect such records position themselves towards this type of music.

The vinyl record collector who sifts through mountains of discarded artefacts representing music industry failure and obsolescence, in search of gems, also takes on a new importance as a kind of independent archivist of older and lesser known recordings. Culling selections from second hand markets, collectors have a great deal of influence over secondary economies of music. As "repositories of cultural waste," argues Straw, these second-hand markets house the physical artefacts which can offer rich histories of national music cultures.[21] Instead of simply navigating these informal economies of music culture for the gems of rarity, the collector also influences the kinds of shifts that revive the outdated and undesirable for cult status. In their pursuit of variety, collectors refocus attention towards the styles, albums and artists otherwise relegated to the status of cultural residue.

2.1.1 *Libraries and Retrospection*

The selection and purchase of an album for a personal collection simultaneously enact—by influencing its cultural-economic value—a re-valorisation of the album on a larger scale. Taste-making practices have much in common with the practice of collecting. In particular, the careful assembly of treasures in a personal collection includes the thrill by which the value of the obscure, unknown and unreachable is recognized. A more perfect

[20] See Shuker, Roy, "Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures," and Vályi, Gábor. "Digging in the Crates."
[21] Straw, "Exhausted Commodities."

collection often comes through the specific pursuit of the most scarce and unique candidates for inclusion. In Walter Benjamin's essay, *Unpacking My Library*, he confesses that the hunger to expand his book collection only developed once books became more difficult to obtain. After long holding himself to a rule whereby only books he had already read could enter his library, Benjamin suddenly developed a thirst for expanding the collection for its own sake.

> Thus I might never have acquired a library extensive enough to be worthy of the name if there had not been an inflation. Suddenly the emphasis shifted; books acquired real value, or, at any rate, were difficult to obtain.[22]

The shift in the market compelled Benjamin to change what had been a physical record of his passion for reading into a trophy case where he could exhibit the fruits of his collecting labour for fellow enthusiasts. Soon the pursuit itself became the sport. Boasting his knowledge of particular publishers and illustrators, Benjamin cites a case in which his expertise had unveiled the last remaining copy of a work by a famous German illustrator. The volume had been previously unknown to bibliographers, explains Benjamin, making a case for the historiographical importance of lay expertise through his own unveiling of the obscure.

Benjamin celebrates the passion of the collector as possessing a "tactical instinct,"[23] as being able to sniff out the best sources for new collectible content, and to combine expertise in "dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings, and the like,"[24] to determine "whether a book is for him or not."[25] The analogy to the record collector could not get much closer than this. In precisely the same manner, the passionate record collector knows to weigh the importance of 180 or 200 gram vinyl, first pressing, special edition or

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[22] Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," 62.
[23] Ibid., 63.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 64.

factory seal against the price of the record and to gauge the relevance to their personal taste repertoire and the associated prestige. In this way, the collectors archive their own version of the history of their medium.

In "Sizing Up Record Collections," Straw reflects upon the record collector's complex status, in which specialized expertise is freighted with political and cultural justifications. These include, "...the connoisseurship which furnishes historical depth to musical practice itself, and through which canons and terms of judgement take shape."[26] Within the record collector ethos, there is the implication that a historical depth worth preserving requires the guardianship provided by collectors themselves. Speaking to the parallel phenomenon of retro, Christian Thorne assigns the retrospective impulse to post-industrial society. The new scarcity of cultural objects produced in and belonging to *home* produce an impulse to undertake the safekeeping of what remains. In his eyes, retro is "a vision of a world in which commodity production has come to a halt, in which objects have been handed down, not for our consumption, but for our care."[27] Although Thorne's argument is distinctly political—his critique is that retro is essentially an incarnation of cultural nationalism under capitalism—the category of care he introduces carries isolation from the political charge that suffuses the majority of his critique. To really care for a song, a record, or a genre in a way that seeks to guarantee their persistence for future generations—in essence to canonize them—is, if we take seriously its etymological cues, to declare it sacred. Would we think of the record collector/curator as a steward of contemporary culture? Vinyl reissue culture posits a somewhat paradoxical approach to cultural stewardship. While to collect is to valorize the obscure, to reissue is to remedy obscurity. I turn now to the tension between these two practices in the hopes of getting at a better understanding of how they influence the

[26] Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture," 636.
[27] Thorne, "The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded," 114.

availability of lost and obscured popular music recordings.

2.2 REISSUE, RECUPERATION, RECIRCULATION

The Mississippi Records label, which releases "African highlife, psychedelic Thai music, spectral folk, blues and gospel, UK post punk, Greek rebetika, and soul jazz,"[28] aims to showcase obscure recordings through vinyl reissues. The co-owner of the label, Warren Hill, cites the reissue label Sublime Frequencies as an influence upon its approach, along with several other labels, including Smithsonian Folkways, Yazoo, Arhoolie and Herwin.[29] Hill situates his own label among broader practices of reissue, explaining that these labels have guided Mississippi's selection process. Hill explains that this often means they choose to feature music that hangs together by sharing a measure of artistic intent, rather than having stylistic similarities. Mississippi Records prefers to release "Any music that is just an attempt to communicate with other humans and help make us all feel less alone."[30] The label initially favored analog releases, staying true to the original format of the recordings in which they are interested. As I elaborate in greater detail below, however, the two men running the label are less concerned with preserving the tradition of the vinyl format than with broadly disseminating important music to future listeners. At one level, the *disseminatory* role of reissue labels like Mississippi Records suggests a kind of investment in an ethically redeeming activity. In seeking to perpetuate a music that is more honest—more true to its time and place of origin, or perhaps more revelatory about ours—the curating efforts of these labels also stake a claim to conducting a form of cultural archaeology. Bishop and Hill stress the importance of their work in correcting and filling in gaps in musical histories. The hyper-specialized nature of their pop cultural knowledge takes on a kind of heroism that departs

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[28] Grimmer, "Mississippi Records: You Can Get There from Here."
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

from more familiar forms of this specialization that passes as nerdish or self-interested.

A defining feature in the circulation of other music by labels like Mississippi[31] is that its success is heavily rooted in the status of the vinyl record as the bearer of sub-cultural capital. In other words they repackage old music, increasing its prestige or simply making it more appealing to customers. To many less serious record buyers, for example, a new compilation of recordings lavishly packaged with new cover art and detailed liner notes is a great deal more appealing than attempting to find those same recordings among heaps of withering or unremarkable discs. The appeal in the repackaged recordings has been the foundation of labels like Numero and Mississippi's businesses. Repackaging the recordings makes them both old and new; they are glossed over with the importance of being key artefacts of another era. At the same time, reissue labels invigorate interest in areas of popular music culture, directing attention towards outlying styles and marginal forms. This 'outward bound' direction of interest accelerates the rate at which treasures once obscured by time and geography are brought to the surface. Will Straw argues that the internet has the effect of regenerating popular interest in material artefacts otherwise destined to obsolescence and obscurity. The restoration of value to long lost cultural artefacts (cult films, perfumes long out of production etc.) not only occurs as a boost in the commercial value of the material good, but, as is further described in "Embedded Memories," the magnification of significance occurs through the restoration of the artefact's intelligibility as well.[32] The revival process would not occur without the artefact in question being documented and inscribed with the cultural-historical details from its past life.

[31] And also others like Sublime Frequencies, Numero Group, Finders Keepers and Dust to Digital.
[32] Straw, "Embedded Memories.," 4.

A telling anecdote from the formation of the Mississippi Records label—another reissue focused outfit—speaks to the interconnections which have formed between collectable vinyl and niches of Internet specialization. As legend has it, Hill bought an original acetate recording of the Velvet Underground at a yard sale in Chelsea in New York for seventy-five cents, eventually selling it on Ebay for over $25,000 dollars.[33] The record figures as something of a holy grail for collectors, containing songs from the band's first studio session. It included lost versions of several songs which were eventually rerecorded and released as *The Velvet Underground & Nico*.[34] The dollar value of the disc, inflated by the recording's rarity and also by the digging practices of vinyl collectors, was enough to fund the first reissue project under the Mississippi label, *What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?*, an LP of recordings by gospel performer Washington Phillips.

Figure 1 Velvet Underground Scepter Sessions Acetate, blog.wfmu.org.

Hill explains in an interview that he and fellow co-founder Eric Isaacson put together the *Last Kind Words, Mississippi* compilation EP while on a cross-country record buying trip.[35] Sleeping in a van at night, the pair drove across the American South in search of rare recordings and obscure folk sounds. Their passionate pursuit attests to what we might think of as the stereotypical collector persona, that of those who make record collecting a life-long

[33] Dirks, "The Velvet Underground Play Portland."
[34] "500 Greatest Albums of All Time | Rolling Stone."
[35] Grimmer, "Mississippi Records: You Can Get There from Here."

dedication. It is, according to Straw and Reynolds, a pursuit in which the act of collecting becomes a practice of unveiling and preserving obscure treasures.[36] But does the pursuit of lost gems of Americana by Hill and Isaacson enact something more than the average personal practices of collection? While we might see their valorisation of the obscure as expressing the collector impulse (wherein filling ever-elusive gaps in one's collection is a driving force), there is another layer at play in the ethos of Mississippi Records. Specifically, their work as collectors is extended to the curation of recorded music to be reissued for circulation and exposure. As such, in addition to rounding out personal collections, their excavation enacts the kind of rewriting of musical history that can be summarized as a practice of curation. That is, in reissuing the records, the label curates a repertoire of musical work, making it available to those who would not otherwise encounter it. I'll turn now to the ways in which the practices of Hill and Ericson are different from those of the typical collectors of obscurity exemplified in Incredibly Strange Music.

The Mississippi Records story is interesting because it has affinities with the kinds of listening practices chronicled in *Incredibly Strange Music*, while evidencing a more contemporary perspective. The sheer abundance of inexpensive albums at the time they produced Incredibly Strange Music shaped their project in important ways; at that time, the collectors' work lay in excavating what was important from the piles of discarded and uninteresting waste. A decade after the publication of Incredibly Strange Music, vinyl records were somewhat less abundant and accessible to Isaacson and Hill, the founders of Mississippi Records. Most notably, however, while Mississippi Records also struggles to distill and preserve recordings, their hunting activities are also influenced by an impulse to disseminate (and not simply to collect in private libraries). In an interview for Analog Edition, a zine

[36] Reynolds, *Retromania*; Straw, "Sizing Up Record Collections: Gender and Connoisseurship in Rock Music Culture."

dedicated to vinyl collector culture, Isaacson explains that its cheapness and availability initially drew him to vinyl. He is nostalgic for a time (nearer to the era of Incredibly Strange Music) when records were more abundant and cheap than they are in recent years.

> ...I got into records in the 80s, they were the cheapest way to get music and they were the most available. It wasn't about sound quality or how they looked. It was about what was the cheapest and what was around.[37]

The collectors throughout *Incredibly Strange Music* articulate a similar enthusiasm for the cheapness of vinyl; many explain how they would buy stacks of LP's for under a dollar. For these collectors, the real work would not begin in the store but rather at the turntable, where they could listen carefully for uniqueness among the unremarkable. As Isaacson further remarks, while their label releases only physical albums and mixes, a great deal of their listenership comes from ripped copies, downloaded and shared through the internet. A mix tape series that the label releases receives particularly wide internet circulation. The series of upwards of seventy mixes is sold in limited runs for five dollars each at the Mississippi Records store in Portland. The complete series is available to anyone willing to navigate a handful of popular music blogs. The site's owners rip the tapes, convert the files to MP3 and attach scans of the hand-drawn cover art. Isaacson explains that this practice is particularly rewarding to witness.

> The fact that people are listening to those on MP3s all over the world makes me really happy actually... It's supposed to be this intimate music sharing experience. The fact that it's all over the web is really an honor.[38]

The mixes, which are eclectic assortments of tracks ripped from vinyl records, are arranged by theme, mood, genre, or in some cases by no logic whatsoever. It is only through the remediation of the tracks, from decaying vinyl to cheap and portable cassette, to cheaper and more portable MP3, that the music is recirculated in a much more successful fashion. When

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[37] Carr, "Analog Edition: Interview with Eric Isaacson of MIssissippi Records," 31–32.
[38] Ibid., 32.

the material receives widespread dissemination and international attention this is due exclusively to the nature of its circulation through the internet. While the physical cassettes can be bought through re-sale websites like discogs.com, currently they sell for only a dollar or two more than the original price. We can assume that for those who collect cassettes from the series with serious dedication the physical artefact is an important part of its value, while for many others the novelty of a cassette is less interesting that the content of the mix itself.

Although the mix tapes are in one sense highly collectible, their significance is much more closely tied to their *portability* in digital format. The music featured in the mixes begins a kind of second life revived in a novel medium, but its significance is magnified primarily once it reaches online sharing communities. Here, users collaborate to reinscribe significance onto the tracks; they share knowledge about the artists' backstories and more complete information about the original releases. Making the mix available for sale perpetuates its availability, but it is through the network of sharing that the meaningfulness of the music is magnified and distributed. In acknowledging the advantages that the ripped versions of the tapes have in circulating the music they wish to share, Isaacson's words suggest an ideological investment in securing the availability of the music over an interest in profit.

A part of what makes *Incredibly Strange Music* so interesting is its firm grounding in an era just prior to digital media connectivity. The two volumes of *Incredibly Strange Music* are both a celebration of the sharing of musical knowledge and experiences and a lament for the ultimate failure of this practice. Juno and Vale worry that the unique beauty of the strange music catalogued in their volume will disappear within a generation or two.

> ...much of the music mentioned here won't be preserved for future discovery—it was never printed on sheet music, the master tapes have probably been lost, and when all of the vinyl albums wear out it'll be gone forever![39]

[39] Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 3.

The release of a compilation album on CD accompanying each volume of the series attempts to remedy the eventual decay of the treasured music, but the mood remains decidedly grim with respect to its long-term future. In light of today's practices of digital archiving and reissue, the resignation of Juno and Vale to the decay of recordings seems almost quaint. They are correct, however, in their prognosis for a great deal of the music covered in the volumes. Much of the content covered in the volume may indeed disappear from memory. The volumes of *Incredibly Strange Music* represent a moment in which the physical preservation of the record as artefact seemed very urgent. Many of the interviewees articulate what they see as their part in protecting a part of pop cultural history in danger of extinction. As guardians of an endangered species, these collectors presided over their personal hip repertoires of obscure culture, but they were also able to preserve a small corner of would-be hits and pop near misses which hang together as an alternate version of twentieth century North American music culture.

While many of the interviewees in the *Incredibly Strange Music* volumes reminisce about a bygone era in which weird and wonderful records were dirt-cheap and omnipresent, there is no attempt to think through how this might play out in differently mediated contexts. The introduction of the MP3 itself would not be sufficient to secure the longevity of the music in question, but might be seen as changing the way in which such music moves between generations of listeners. It is in relation to these changes that the figure of the curator-compiler becomes of interest a figure engaged in determining *which* musical curiosities are preserved and recirculated, and in exercising the aforementioned mastery of styles. I am conceiving of this figure as increasingly prominent in newer media contexts, wherein one may find the availability and omnipresence of a seemingly infinite supply of borrowed and recycled pop content.

2.2.1 *The Rise of the Curator-Compiler*

In a 1995 interview, Brian Eno reflected on the ways in which the role of the curator has assumed increasing relevance. As with many aspects of Eno's career, in embracing the curator he was embracing a feature of the art world and drawing it in to the realm of popular culture. The opening up of art history, not only to new parts of the world, but also to a broader conception of art, has heightened the relevance of the curator, he argues. "This is why the curator, the editor, the compiler, and the anthologist have become such big figures. They are all people whose job it is to digest things, and to connect them together."[40] This broadening of definitions, he continues, has the effect of positioning the curator as a new kind creator.

> To create meanings - or perhaps "new readings," which is what curators try to do - is to create. Period. Making something new does not necessarily involve bringing something physical into existence - it can be something mental such as a metaphor or a theory. More and more curatorship becomes inseparable from the so-called art part. Since there's no longer a golden line through the fine arts, you are acting curatorially all the time by just making a choice to be in one particular place in the field rather than another.[41]

Eno's convictions regarding the curator might be seen as an extension of a philosophy developed around his role as studio producer, one which argued that the studio can be used as an instrument and the producer as artist. Recording studio composition, he argues, is no less a creative act than composing a song in the traditional sense. The studio composer is "working directly with a material, working directly onto a substance, and he always retains the options to chop and change, to paint a bit out, add a piece, etc."[42] Eno re-imagines a role once figured as that of technician as one with a great deal more agency. In his re-conception of the producer Eno also positions the technician as having a kind of agentic advantage over the performing musician; in designing a piece for a record, the producer has the advantage of a

[40] Kelly, "Gossip Is Philosophy: Eno."
[41] Ibid.
[42] Warner and Cox, "The Studio As Compositional Tool," 129.

medium with more predictability and fewer "transmission losses."[43] Eno underscores the creative work done in the recombination of sonic materials, and in the task of selecting certain elements while excluding others. Eno conceives of the studio producer in the same manner as he does the curator. The two figures create new readings of cultural material, providing important links between items and thereby rewriting the significance of the material in question.

Pop music historian Simon Reynolds has also written about the rise of the curator. For Reynolds, the recent elevation of the figure of the curator is strongly tied to collecting vinyl records. Reynolds's curating figures are not quite the same as the ones that Eno describes (those working with sound as producers or as multimedia artists and gallery professionals). Instead, they are those creative types—musicians, critics, and others—who are called upon to deploy their knowledge as consumers of culture to offer their take on what music *counts*. Reynolds reflects on the role of reissue record labels like the Numero Group, which reissues rare American soul and folk but also American-foreign hybrids and series that focus on individual towns or nightclubs. Their repertoire has expanded to encompass multiple genres, highlighting the inventive and the amalgamated.

> We've even crossed the street from time to time to deliver hidden worlds of unsung power pop, kitchen-sink New York disco and rap, kid-group soul, fiery rockabilly gospel, Franco-Belgian electro-samba, phantom blaxploitation funk, psychedelic heartland pop, orchestral UK chanteuse folk, decaying art-soul and Southside funk-blues club life…[44]

Numero, argues Reynolds, is one example where reissue is done right. Their motivation is to give recognition to "music that barely even came out in its own day"[45] and to tell the story that goes along with the music. It is less a business, they argue, than an activity providing

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Numero Group. "About Numero."
[45] Reynolds, *Retromania*, 156.

fodder "for the library of the future."[46] Many other labels, explains Reynolds, operate with profit as a priority. "Reissuing, in the 2000s, is increasingly bound up with the creation of markets for invented genres and exotic sounds. It is about stirring up desire..."[47] But in worrying so much about the profit motivations for vinyl collector/dealers, Reynolds leaves out the possibility, which Thorne elaborates, that cultural phenomena is handed down "not for our consumption, but for our care."[48] If reissuing and recirculating once obscure and nearly long lost music is truly an issue of care and not profit, then the most crucial stage of caring for these musics must instead lie in their remediation from one form to another for the sake of availability alone.

In Eno's formulation, a curator-as-artist assembles music to produce a new art form. For Reynolds the result sought is, in most instances, profit through reissue. Neither of these approaches acknowledge the role such activities can play in archiving music, increasing its accessibility and intelligibility to the public. My interest is in a third configuration, wherein activities of curation and reissuing are directed towards the archiving of older and lesser-known albums, an archiving made possible by new media. The figures of the vinyl record curator-compiler and the related reissue label serve as gatekeepers in the sense that they link analog collecting practices to the networked sharing that the Internet facilitates.

It is significant to note, however, that this "connection maker, who is the new storyteller, the meta-author"[49] works to shed light on fragments from a past that does not belong, for a variety of reasons, in a normative conception of cultural memory. The circulation of styles through recuperation and reissue works to solidify bizarre and unusual peripheral musics. The reverence for obscure sounds that plays out in this recuperation—

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 153.
[48] Thorne, "The Revolutionary Energy of the Outmoded," 114.
[49] Reynolds, *Retromania*, 130.

wherein music's material and digital availability facilitate encounters—negotiates a form of 'listening in' to difference. Those who aim to retell versions of pop music's history, by circulating overlooked and forgotten sonic content, also contribute to a broader reimagining of recorded pop music.

As the following sections will demonstrate, it is the collector/curators who take on the authority to bestow importance upon older music viewed primarily until then as merely bizarre or off-putting. The privilege to make such assessments—to authorize the re-articulation of cultural value—amounts to both the exertion of the curator's existing cultural capital while also reinforces their status as eligible to make such judgment calls. While the mechanics of establishing and maintaining such status are not central to this project, Eno's formulation of the role in particular is useful to understanding how old and discredited music comes to be seen as transgressive.

2.3 NEW MEDIA ETHICS: TOWARD AN OPEN SOURCE CULTURE OF OLD POP MUSIC

The reissue activities of labels like Numero Group and Mississippi Records, which strive to bring once inaccessible recorded content to light, deal primarily in material obscured by time. That is, the recordings released by these two labels sound new and unfamiliar to audiences despite having their origins in North American popular culture. The efforts of these labels to make old and obscured material available to new generations of listeners uphold two different, but related imperatives: to revalorize overlooked recordings and to promote audience interest in "new" areas of North American music history. In so doing, their practices stimulate the formation of taste and expertise around a corpus of recordings once derided as excess or as mere by-products of pop music proper. Numero and Mississippi are valuable examples because they are contained versions of the recuperation and recirculation of pop music hat I am going to trace in online spaces. In a way, reissue efforts such as these are

precursory to the networked sharing I describe later, but insofar as these labels continue to release new old music, the practice is in fact complementary. Before providing details about the music in question, however, a comparison with a parallel phenomenon in the area of world music may provide some insight into the stakes involved in recuperating and recirculating old media as "new."

In David Novak's study of world music, he argues that old pop music sourced largely from Asian and African countries provides communities of North American underground listeners with "direct access to raw uncirculated material"[50] that fulfills audience desires for fresh sounds. The Sublime Frequencies record label and other "new" world music labels deal in recordings for which the primary barrier to Western audiences is geographic distance. Novak raises the question of a new ethics of recirculation and remediation, one that is tied closely to the changes brought about in user-centred networks of digital connectivity. These users contribute to the *intelligibility* and *accessibility* of world music not only by helping to make this music available through sharing practices, but also by acting as independent researchers, volunteering the information necessary in reconstituting artist histories and album backstories. Novak's take on these practices as rooted in do-it-yourself punk ethics, as well as his investigation into the view of reissue as supplementary archiving, are particularly useful in their relevance to similar practices occurring *within* cultural borders.

The Sublime Frequencies label's roots lie in the experimental listenership of the founding brothers' onetime band, Sun City Girls. In the early 1980s, fans of the group exchanged cassettes of the most obscure sounds they could dig up, through a network of mailing addresses. The "North American experimental groups juxtaposed with tracks of

[50] "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media," 606.

Tuvan throat singing, Bollywood film music, or Inuit versions of Rolling Stones hits"[51] circulated by the network lay the foundations for the label's philosophy of exploration and exposure. The founders also borrow DIY ethics and experimentation from punk, underscoring their belief that worthwhile content necessarily comes to light in the hands of individuals, not large profitable record labels or institutions.

We might look at Sublime Frequencies' founding as an attempt to shift the locus of experimentation from avant-garde-rooted composition to a quest to find unknown treasures from beyond borders. As Novak puts it in a section titled "From Weird Music to World Music," for the founders of Sublime Frequencies, the "anything, as long as it was surprising and unknown" [52] aesthetic forced the scope of interest outwards, fostering the kind of trans-cultural, intergeneric adventures that dig up "Ethnic Minority Music Of North Vietnam," "Proibidao C.V.: Forbidden Gang Funk From Rio de Janeiro," and "Bollywood Steel Guitar."[53] A crucial feature of the Sublime Frequencies and Sun City Girls spirit is what Novak calls "a punk transcendence of meaning."[54] Novak's suggestion is that the music intends to be confusing, to collapse categories and to stage an encounter that sometimes and hopefully leaves the listener mystified. As Novak demonstrates, however, where labels leave out details about the context of a recording, the fan communities that congregate online as a result of the releases often reconstitute them. By offering a snapshot of the socio-cultural context of the albums' release and initial reception, fan input renders these more confusing aspects of the listening experience more intelligible to the listening community.

In the case of labels like Sublime Frequencies and Mississippi Records, while the practice of record collecting and listening begins in a familiar way, it ends in many instances

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[51] Ibid., 613.
[52] Ibid., 613.
[53] "Sublime Frequencies."
[54] Novak, "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media," 614.

with an altogether different collecting/listening practice for those listening in to the labels from the other end. When Alan Bishop records several hours' worth of Thai pop fusion radio broadcast as material for a Sublime Frequencies release, or Warren Hill makes a 78 from a yard sale in Louisiana available as a part of a compilation on Mississippi Records, the recorded content is only at the earliest stage of its newfound recognition, in a kind of second adolescence. In many cases, the reissues are sold in a very limited run. These are usually vinyl records, but also cassettes, CD's and, on Sublime Frequencies, sometimes DVDs. These limited runs fuel the collectability and dollar value of the releases, but with networks of bit torrent sharing and one-click downloads, the lifespan and listenership of the records are more likely to flourish through networks of uploaders, listeners and torrent reseeders.

Ripping the audio contents of cassettes and vinyl records to digital files is becoming an increasingly common practice. In 2005, the Crosley Radio who had been manufacturing "vintage-inspired" radios and record players since 1989[55] released a relatively inexpensive turntable model that was capable of ripping audio from vinyl and converting it to digital MP3.[56] Other manufacturers like Stanton followed suit, releasing a broader variety of equipment with a USB interface capable of linking turntables to personal computers.[57] These manufacturers encouraged home collectors to convert their collections to digital files so that they could be played back on portable devices like ipods, or just to back up their collections to their computers 'just in case.' The release and growth in popularity of freeware like Audacity[58] facilitated the mixing and editing of raw digital files, such as splitting the two sides of an LP into individual tracks for example. As a result of such conversions, large fraction of the music released as a new vinyl reissue on the aforementioned record labels is

[55] The company has a much longer history, however. In the 1920s, Crosley released of one of the first cheap radios in America.
[56] http://www.crosleyradio.com/about.html
[57] See http://www.stantondj.com/stanton-turntables/t92usb.html, for more examples.
[58] The software has been available since early 2000. http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

also available for free online. These MP3 files often come as large collections of several albums, bundled into compressed zip files using one-click hosts, through peer-to-peer networks, or as multi-gigabyte download files through bit torrent networks. In addition to the portability of the MP3 format, this variety of methods of dissemination further reinforces the accessibility of the content.

The priorities of audio playback in digital circumstances are well articulated in Jonathan Sterne's study of the MP3. Specifically, he explains that while domestic listening was once promoted for its "immersion and transcendence through contemplative listening"[59] the MP3 signals a moment at which "...portability, modularity, malleability, access"[60] are the new desirable standards attached to music playback. The vinyl record comes to signify something of a status artefact by comparison to the MP3. So while, as Sterne observes, MP3s are viewed as portable, malleable and accessible, I would add that vinyl records have come to seem big, delicate, costly (or as having a volatile dollar value), slow, static and elite. Thus those who cherished vinyl records for the benefits they offered over CDs were again forced to consider whether the newest audio format could offer more than vinyl. Some collectors, as I explore in chapter four, went about converting large portions of their collections for the sake of sharing. A decaying 7-inch record, transformed into digital album, takes on a new life once it becomes more portable and more easily duplicated. Jonathan Sterne writes, "…chances are, if a recording takes a ride on the internet, it will travel in the form of an MP3 file."[61] What the networks of digital sharing of reissue record label content demonstrate is that the recorded content is many times more likely to reach ears as MP3s—taking a ride through circles of online sharing—than it was in any of the physical formats that constituted its past lives.

One example of the increased resilience offered in the sharing of B-music through

[59] *MP3*, 238. Original citation: Keightley, "'Turn It Down!' She Shrieked," 150, 156.
[60] Ibid., 239.
[61] Sterne, *MP3*, 1.

networks of digital sharing is the reposting of content after links expire. Often after the original download link to an album has expired, readers request access to the content from others. Over the years, as interested readers come across a blog post documenting a rare 1970s Japanese psychedelia album with expired download links, they can scroll through the comment section below where other visitors will often have uploaded the recordings anew. In one example from the popular website Mutant Sounds, a user offers supplementary info about the previous owner of an LP and offers to upload bonus tracks from their own version to anyone interested in hearing them.[62] In other instances, when the one-click file hosting websites, such as megaupload.com or rapidshare.com, no longer host the content, commenters request a 're-up' or re-upload of the entire album to make it available again—effectively *reissuing* it to the networked public that is the online fan community. These re-uploaders secure the availability of a release for future readers and guarantee the music's continued recirculation if only temporarily.

2.3.1 *Recirculating Music in the Digital Era*

The persistent effort of reissue and recirculation to stabilize and preserve music are a good example of the kind of stewardship or care that Thorne ascribes to late capitalism. Yet contemporary modes of listening have splintered in several directions. While resurgence in the popularity of vinyl records among younger audiences reified its position as a viable format in the digital age,[63] few music fans listen exclusively to physical records. Many couple their vinyl listening with the variety of listening options presented in the MP3 format via the web; streaming audio, podcasts, digital 'mix tapes,' YouTube clips and recommendation services such as Songza, 8tracks, Pandora, Spotify and Grooveshark. These new modes of listening not only demand a re-conception of intellectual property law; by

[62] Mutant Sounds, "IKE REIKO-Kokotsu No Sekai, LP, 1971, Japan."
[63] Hayes, David. "'Take Those Old Records Off the Shelf.'"

curating an enormous volume of old and new recorded music, they also shape pop cultural preservation and memory. Many of these services offer alternative content—with streams dedicated to "Appalachian Hillbilly," "Western Swing," and "Lounge Exotica" for example—and can function remarkably like the college and independent radio stations that have been broadcasting sonic esoterica into the wee hours of the morning for decades.[64]

Lawrence Lessig builds much of the analysis and argumentation in his book *Free Culture* around large-scale projects of digital archiving such as The Internet Archive. He suggests that if such preservation practices are to meet the goal of providing universal access, then legal definitions of intellectual property cannot remain in their current iteration.[65] A new ethics of digital media has become the ideal for many of those whose cultural consumption practices occur primarily in digital environments.

B-Music, the lost (and otherwise peripheral) audio artefacts of North American popular music, has been making a comeback in the last ten years. When juxtaposed with the new ideals for audio playback (portability, access etc.) the cultural significance of B-music recordings is put to the test. Ripping audio from old records—and thereby also tearing it from its original context—proves distinctly challenging to the appreciation of rare music. As documented in previous sections, collecting old and rare recordings could turn common trash into valuable artefacts, but, once digitized, the value of old pop recordings becomes uncertain once again. Digitizing recordings reverses the rarity that had made them special to fans and collectors. It forces us to evaluate and further explore the entangled categories of recorded music and digital sound technologies.

The success of the aforementioned reissue record labels suggests two things: that the

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[64] Without the benefit of multimillion dollar buyouts from companies like Amazon, as is the case with Songza.
[65] *Free Culture*. 114.

concerns about the disappearance of strange and interesting recordings that Juno and Vale[66] had in 1993 persist into the 21st century, and that there is an appetite for "new" old music among younger listening audiences. These younger audiences are willing to buy albums of such music, but they also pursue it through digital means. I turn to the mechanics of these newer sharing technologies and variations in individual strategies for recirculating music in chapter three. First, however, I will detail the kinds of discarded North American pop music (which I call B-music) revalorized and recirculated by practices of remediation.

[66] Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 3.

3 B-MUSIC

3.1 WHAT IS B-MUSIC?

In the era of the widespread digitization of music, near-limitless access to a full spectrum of styles, genres and eras of pop music is available to any listener with an internet connection. Despite the fact that the policing of copyright protections and changing technological considerations keep the conditions of online music sharing in flux (a phenomenon more thoroughly explored in the following chapter), increased access to an ever-diversifying pool of musical content thus far continues to prevail. Such access has arguably fuelled a deepening of musical tastes, particularly among younger listeners. Music's increasing accessibility is duly influenced by greater numbers of listeners and collectors who themselves become invested in working to make obscure sonic content accessible and intelligible. B-music is a term designed to encompass the corpus of recordings dredged up by experimental listeners who are interested in revisiting past and parallel versions of the North American pop music economy. Together these recordings constitute untold histories of pop music. When the vinyl objects themselves endure beyond the easy intelligibility of their contents these records bear witness to pop's rejects. The long-dead micro trends, forgotten anti-heroes and peripheral non-musical audio are subject to revalorisation and reinterpretation.

The recordings counted as B-music involve an assortment of musical categories that include field recordings, spoken word records, song-poems, holiday music, homemade tape collage, North American exotica, corporate promotional recordings, singing children, singing animals, exercise records, celebrity crossover attempts, mismatched hybrids and poorly executed cover albums, among others. I have grouped these somewhat disparate styles into three loose categories: failed pop music, eccentric variations on pop and 'paramusical'

recordings. Most of these examples are from vinyl pressings released between 1950 and 1970. The majority of them are from the United States and are thus often interpreted by contemporary listeners as providing insight into practices of domestic listening in the mid-century American living room.

Figure 2 Christmas with Colonel Sanders, bizarrerecords.com

Significantly, however, interpretations of such content have been distilled by two sets of collecting/interpreting publics: one which scours second hand markets for physical copies to be held in personal collections (and also reissues new copies of old recordings on vinyl), and another that rips recordings into digital files to be shared and discussed in networks of online sharing. Overlap between these groups exists and the following descriptions draw on musical content represented in both strategies. In the following sections, I go into detail concerning the ways in which that the world of B-Music is distinct from that of mainstream pop music. The conditions that position it as apart from a pop cultural centre resonate with overlapping discourses on B-movies, paracinema cinema and the category of camp (as deployed across the arts) more generally. I retrofit instances of musical ‘B-ness’ with

analyses borrowed from these discourses on other media to establish a better way of understanding why B-music is revived and how its significance evolves in the process. Categories devised to describe other media like film are mobilized to offer insight into B-music's banal and ordinary beginnings. These techniques borrowed from the study of film aid in exploring possible reasons as to why trashy vinyl records (like the promotional Kentucky Fried Chicken LP pictured in Figure 2) became fodder for later instances of reincarnation and remediation beginning in the early 2000s. What is apparent across all three of these categories of old recorded music is that they experience a life cycle. Beginning as unknown, cheap, trashy, failed, confusing or just bad, they are given a new life when the attention of collectors re-inscribes them as being interesting and valuable.

3.2 COMMERICAL FAILURE CELEBRATED: MUSIC THAT MISSED THE MARK

Statistically speaking, only a small percentage of albums ever achieve commercial success or critical acclaim; most pop albums fail. While failure is more often the norm than an exception in the recording industry, it is still unclear how certain failed songs and albums come to garner the attention of connoisseurs, reversing their status as the stuff of the "cutting room floor." This reversal normally depends on the passage of time and on a certain distance (sometimes geographic, but also ideological) in order that a cultural artefact form the past be ripe for repurposing. Arguably, in order to become interesting once again, music that has failed must belong to another time and cultural environment. This process functions much in the same way as does Camp, as Susan Sontag describes it.

> Thus, things are campy, not when they become old—but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of being frustrated by the failure of the attempt.[67]

Sontag's suggestion about failed attempts refers, of course, to the naive and not the deliberate

[67] "Notes On Camp."

version of camp (as in the intentionally campy cinematic style of John Waters, for example). Thus the failure in question comes from a *genuine* attempt, however botched it may have been. As spectators, we are able to enjoy the attempt without feeling complicit in its failure. Not being involved in the moment of the attempt, as Sontag explains, can therefore make something interesting to us, rather than annoying.

These examples demonstrate what can be interesting about music that began when artists took a genuine shot at big time success but landed somewhere else entirely. Some, like the soul and R&B put out on Numero Group only narrowly missed their chance at a Billboard hit. Others like the tracks produced in the American song-poem industry fell short of the mark a by wider margin. The passion with which devotees celebrate failed pop music demonstrates a positive engagement with the failure itself, with the message left undelivered upon its first attempt. Multiple versions of failure are at play throughout these cases, however, and they are not strictly related to the music being bad. There is the failure of naives to recognise a scam and failed record labels and careers. As is often the case with cult films, commercially failed B-music allows for a feeling of having *rescued* a treasure from the fate of remaining unknown. We present day listeners can feel we are reversing some unseen wrongdoing. Further, the persistence of such music decades after its initial failure denotes a belief among North American listeners in the special beauty and *rawness* of such music. B-music that is failed attempts at mainstream success allows for the imagining of alternate courses of American pop history. We listen for what might have been a big hit, had events played out differently, as well as for the cues as to why the music missed its target.

3.2.1 *Numero Group and Soul Revival*

Genuine, but failed attempts at pop success in music are everywhere, but such music is especially interesting when it comes from another era. The rerelease record label Numero

Group proves an excellent example of this phenomenon. The label capitalizes on this aesthetic by releasing old American folk, soul and R&B albums from the 1950s, 60 and 70s. The music from these defunct American soul and doowop labels bear witness to the particular conditions of the music industry during another era. Their impetus to "rescue" such failed albums from obscurity becomes a part of its aesthetic appeal when it comes back around with a second chance at success. Here failure is a by-product of industry misfortune as often as it is a result of the style or delivery. The Eccentric Soul series, for example, compiles Soul and R&B tracks that enjoyed little or no success upon their initial release. The songs were released on labels that never successfully distributed and promoted them, or that went out of business before being able to do so. Thus many of the tracks sound a lot like the mainstream hits of their day. The Eccentric Soul series appeal lies "at the nexus of story and song." The knowledge that they went for decades without being heard (or that they very nearly went undiscovered as a result of lost or decayed master copies) enriches the experience of listening to them today. Borrowing notions from Susan As Sontag, we might say that contemporary listeners were never "involved" with the initial failure of the tracks to reach mainstream success and so we are free to enjoy them as rediscovered treasures rather than as banal mediocrities.

Songs recorded for the "lovingly mishandled"[68] marginal record labels also offer further depth to the field of 60s Soul, challenging the traditional markers of the genre. Another series that Numero releases is entitled Local Customs. Dedicated to smaller, family run and self-built record labels of the 1960s and 70s, these albums assemble low budget attempts by artists trying to 'break into the business.' In salvaging these tracks, Numero seeks to preserve and archive the rich stylistic variety that cheap and quick production conditions

[68] Numero Group, "About Numero."

fostered. Once such example is *Downriver Revival*, a compilation of tracks recorded at a label in Detroit satellite town Ecorse, Michigan.

> Double U's backlog of released and unreleased recordings (300 reels of tape) offers a cross-section of virtually the entire musical activity within one black American community over the course of a decade.[69]

Numero's exhaustive coverage of such content and their drive to catalogue even the material not fitting onto the LP format[70] makes it possible to hear *all* of the unlikely candidates for Top 40 success, right along with those who narrowly missed out on stardom by sheer chance. These recordings include hundreds of minute variations on the conventional sonic signifiers of 1960s Soul and R&B as we understand them now. As a result, modern listeners are able to interpret Numero releases as inspiring further creative innovation.

Such a dynamic between the mainstream pop economy and those low-budget smaller operations celebrated by Numero Group nicely restonates with ideas which have come to circulate within a body of scholarship that has formed around B-movies, paracinema and cult film.[71] In particular, the volume of films released by the lower budget and "poverty row" studios in the mid-20th century[72] proves a fruitful point of comparison. As a low-budget product, B-movies "satisfied a marketplace need for increased quantities of cinematic entertainment."[73] B movies— conceived in the broadest sense—had a tendency to bend genre and transgress norms. This feature is related to the low-budget, hurried style of their production, though early B-filmmaking was less often an attempt at mainstream success than were the efforts of midcentury American recording artist hopefuls. The tendency of cult films to flop at the box office and be reincarnated in celebratory fan communities carries a great

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[69] Simon Reynolds "Retromania." p. 158.
[70] This particular release is accompanied by a "digital tape vault" of two hundred bonus audio recordings that didn't make it onto the album but were deemed important enough to document by the
[71] See Davis, Sconce, Mathijs and Sexton.
[72] Poverty Row referring to the pre-Paramount ruling of 1948, though other low budget studios reformulated the B picture afterwards. See Davis, Blair "The Battle of the Bs."
[73] Davis, *The Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema*, 1.

deal of similarity with the particularities of the music economy that Numero draws on. Conversely B-films were more often conceived right from the start as antithetical to a blockbuster Hollywood aesthetic and thus today they evoke an "anything-goes vitality."[74]

The legacy of B-movies has been cultivated by generations of fan communities who celebrate their unique features and the industrial history to which they bear witness. Viewed in retrospect, cult and B-films are seen as providing spirited variations on otherwise homogenous cinematic style. Numero Group's aesthetic resonates with this same celebration of the quirkiness and vitality of failed and low profile films. Their releases are 'B' because they failed to achieve industry success and they are 'B' because they sound just slightly *off*, mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar. Having successfully 'rebranded' commercial pop failure and successfully built a (profitable) label aesthetic around it, Numero prove a good self-contained example of what is in fact a larger phenomenon. The efforts of other labels, such as Mississippi Records, as well as the efforts of individuals who archive and recirculate lesser-known corners of pop are a part of broader revival efforts. The soul and R&B detailed in this section, however, differ from the following examples of failure in that their delivery and style are not the primary reasons for their failure. I turn next to music that missed its target by a much wider margin.

3.2.2 *Song-Poems*

"Poems Wanted For Songs and Records," read the ads printed in the back pages of comic books and popular interest magazines. "Hollywood needs your poems!" The ads were designed to attract would-be songwriters and pop star hopefuls. Mostly in the 1950s and 60s, but also as late as the early 2000s, individuals submitted their poems, or song lyrics by mail for assessment by the studio. The hopeful writers invariably received a glowing response,

[74] Sterritt and Anderson, "The B-List."

assuring them of the star quality and hit potential of their submission. After receiving their 'free assessment' the hopefuls were led to believe that only thing left standing between them and a shot at song writing success was a small start-up and recording fee, typically ranging between two and four hundred dollars. The recordings—which today are called "song-poems" although they went by different names then—that were produced from these practices became highly collectible.

The studios were located all over the United States.[75] During the period of their existence, thousands of respondents sent in their words and paid the up-front fees to have their words sung by a professional and set to music played by a backing band. Sometimes these bands were full pop ensembles and other times a singer worked with a set of backing instrumental recordings selected according to genre checklists mailed out along with the glowing acceptance letter. The writer would choose: "Rhythm and Blues, Fast Swing, Waltz, Sacred or Gospel, Country & Western, Patriotic or Blue Grass." Otherwise, "If you have no preference," reads one ad, "we'll use our best judgement". Some of the deals could be bumped up and for a few dollars the recording in question would be released on a compilation LP, in addition to the 45-rpm record. In most instances, however, the studios mailed a test pressing of the recording (either a 45-rpm record or a cassette) to the songwriter and never gave them a second thought. Without any press or distribution efforts, the demo recordings were never typically heard by anyone save for those involved in their production.

The songs themselves are fascinating artefacts of mundane American daily life. The lyrics are about the banal and familiar; television, Jesus Christ, hamburgers, dancing and unrequited love. But they also frequently take up less common subjects; digging for ginseng, extraterrestrials, goats, deadly static electricity and octopus woman kidnappers. The lines

[75] I don't yet know of any in Canada.

often do not rhyme, or sometimes rhyme at the expense of any other logic. Given the professional studio treatment, the bizarre words are coupled with an ultra-standardized instrumental treatment. The result is an unholy marriage of the bizarre and the overly familiar. This is the uncommon mix many aficionados are after. Fans of the songs explain that while they have trouble pinning down the exact aesthetic appeal of song-poems, they mostly just appreciate that "there's just nothing else like it."[76]

One of the most frequently cited sources on song-poems is saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, the son of Rodd Keith, one of the song-poems business's most prolific performers. Rodd Keith worked for one of the most visible song-poem labels, MSR records, from the early 60s through to his death in 1974. Eskelin explains how although the recordings his father produced seem to have everything wrong with them—cheapness, artifice, and exploitation—something special comes through nonetheless. "It's like: you want to cringe, but you're laughing, but you're really attracted to it at the same time."[77] Yet most song-poem writers were genuinely hopeful for their creations; they truly believed that they had star potential and some demanded answers when their tracks never charted or appeared in record stores. "I will not be left wondering about this strange situation any longer," wrote song-poem writer Jon B. Gaither to Sunrise Records, Inc. in 1984, "I demand to know about this album through and through."[78] (See Fig.1) Listening to the music today—and keeping in mind its failed fate—it is difficult to imagine that the writers ever believed they could 'make it big.' The bizarre lyrics coupled with the extra standardized, mass produced instrumentation make for a messy and also interesting variation on more commonly heard popular music produced during the same era.

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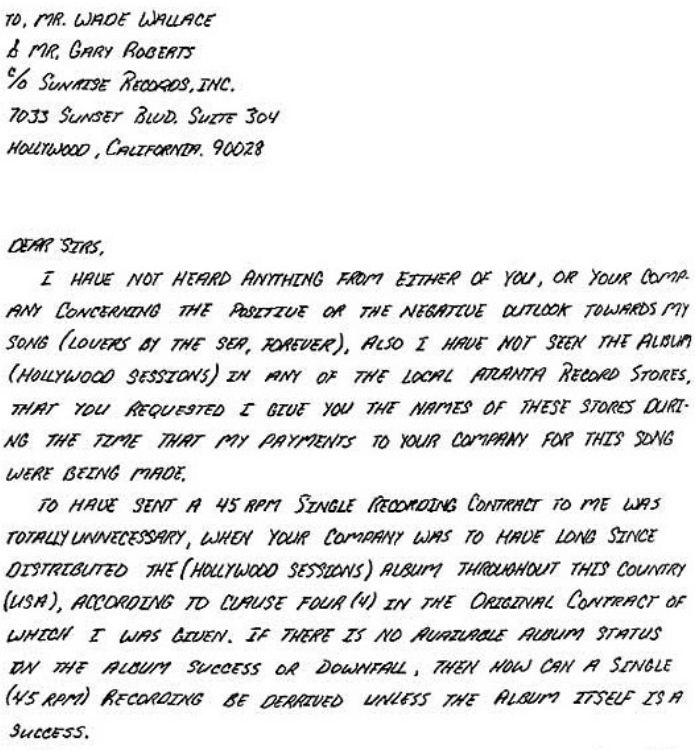
[76] Qtd in Meltzer, *Off the Charts: The Song-Poem Story*.
[77] Updike, "Blame It on Art | This American Life."
[78] "American Song-Poem Archive."

The multiple variations on failure that exist among recordings of B-music can provoke equally varied reactions among listeners. Some of the song-poems, particularly those from the MSR era of the industry, sound just like more familiar catchy doo wop and mid-century pop crooner hits. Many of the studio professionals who made their living producing the music were in fact quite talented and when the lyrics aren't offputtingly bizarre, the songs could probably sneak into the playlist of an oldies radio station unnoticed. What reinforces the status of song-poems as a traded commodity of connoisseur culture, however, is the history that accompanies them in their role as a part of a parallel music economy. In these spaces, failure and bizarre arrangements are read by B-music fans for their raw purity and innovative interpretation, rather than being derided as trash.



TO, MR. WADE WALLACE
& MR. GARY ROBERTS
C/O SUNRISE RECORDS, INC.
7033 SUNSET BLVD. SUITE 304
HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA. 90028

DEAR SIRS,

I HAVE NOT HEARD ANYTHING FROM EITHER OF YOU, OR YOUR COMPANY CONCERNING THE POSITIVE OR THE NEGATIVE OUTLOOK TOWARDS MY SONG (LOVERS BY THE SEA, FOREVER), ALSO I HAVE NOT SEEN THE ALBUM (HOLLYWOOD SESSIONS) IN ANY OF THE LOCAL ATLANTA RECORD STORES, THAT YOU REQUESTED I GIVE YOU THE NAMES OF THESE STORES DURING THE TIME THAT MY PAYMENTS TO YOUR COMPANY FOR THIS SONG WERE BEING MADE.

TO HAVE SENT A 45 RPM SINGLE RECORDING CONTRACT TO ME WAS TOTALLY UNNECESSARY, WHEN YOUR COMPANY WAS TO HAVE LONG SINCE DISTRIBUTED THE (HOLLYWOOD SESSIONS) ALBUM THROUGHOUT THIS COUNTRY (USA), ACCORDING TO CLAUSE FOUR (4) IN THE ORIGINAL CONTRACT OF WHICH I WAS GIVEN. IF THERE IS NO AVAILABLE ALBUM STATUS ON THE ALBUM SUCCESS OR DOWNFALL, THEN HOW CAN A SINGLE (45 RPM) RECORDING BE DERRIVED UNLESS THE ALBUM ITSELF IS A SUCCESS.

Figure 3 Letter from Jon Gaither, (songpoemmusic.com)

3.3 THE ECCENTRIC, EXOTIC AND OBLIVIOUS

Many of the albums counted among the broadly varied B-music are 'B' because of their indecipherability and incompatibility with contemporary mainstream tastes. These types of music are the product of extinct short-lived trends, or of the blundering singular vision of passionate but perplexing outsiders. Examples include albums released during the mid-century exotica craze by artists like Les Baxter, Martin Denny and Yma Sumac, but also

some more bizarre cases. Among the weirder recordings there are albums by outsiders like folk singer Abner Jay, girl group the Shaggs and country blues performer Hasil Adkins, all of whom are hailed for their originality however unintentional it may have been. These albums are some of the stranger examples, but their unique origins have demanded new readings. These sonic curiosities prove excellent examples of how B-music is recuperated for sue by new listeners in digital settings.

As with the instances of commercial failure listed in the previous section, many of these albums become interesting again, once the public is no longer involved in them and can enjoy rediscovering and reinterpreting them. In contrast to those instances of commercial flops and misfires, however, these albums sometimes enjoyed brief success at the time of their release. They are grouped together here because all require that they be accompanied by in-depth explanations when they are revisited and excavated decades after their original release. Having been briefly popular but then fallen out of favour and losing popular interest shortly thereafter, some of these records were a common sight in second hand stores for years. Mid-century exotica, outdated holiday music and visionary outsiders are cited as examples here, but it could also be argued that pop music from other continents and cultures fits this categorization also, being similarly characterised by reappropriation and reinterpretation by younger generations of listeners. For the present discussion however, the scope of music will be limited to a North American context.

Being the product of short-lived trends or the singular visions of erratic individuals, these instances of B-music are read as interesting and transgressive because of their stylistic difference from more common content. Explanations detailing the context of the trend (in the case of exotica) or abstruse creative persona (with oblivious, eccentric outsiders) become necessary to enjoying the music. Aficionados take pleasure in re-inscribing meaning and

intelligibility into confusing and challenging music. Within collector culture, excavating obscure cultural forms comes to be associated with having good taste and demarcating prestige.

3.3.1 Exotica and Holiday LPs

When the popularisation of the hi-fi stereo system in the 1950s made vinyl records a staple in suburban recreation and living rooms, lounge and exotica music capitalised on the massive buying public hungry for new sounds to fill their homes. Acts like Martin Denny, Yma Sumac, Les Baxter and Arthur Lyman released dozens of albums of exotic instrumental pop music to satisfy the post-war American cocktail lounge craze.[79] The trend came at a moment when fresh and foreign sounds were welcomed with little to no emphasis on fidelity to source content, or concern about misrepresenting a non-western other. Korla Pandit is one of the more interesting figures of exotica. Pandit was born John Roland Redd and was of black American, African and French descent,[80] but claimed to be from India. He played live organ renditions of 'oriental' and 'eastern' music, dressed in silks and a turban. Nevertheless, Pandit's albums sold well and his TV show, *Adventures in Music with Korla Pandit* (see fig. 1), was widely popular among viewers.[81] For present day listeners, the idea that a man from Columbia, Missouri could dupe American audiences with his reverb-soaked electric organ arrangements which, however virtuosic, have little in common with Indian music or eastern scales, elicits derision. Pandit's story offers rich insight into the climate of the industry in the early 1950s[82] and listening to excerpts from the broadcasts of his show (many are presently available on YouTube) lends insight into what middle class living American living rooms

[79] Leydon, "The Exotic Music of Les Baxter and Yma Sumac." 45.
[80] Smith, "The Many Faces of Korla Pandit," 77.
[81] Ibid., 74.
[82] There was little work for a man of Redd's background and description, but Pandit adopted his new persona (after first trying out 'Juan Rolando') and found great success shortly after. Smith, "The Many Faces of Korla Pandit."

Figure 4 Adventures in Music with Korla Pandit, YouTube video.

sounded like on a given afternoon (when *Adventures in Music* usually aired) in the 1950s or early 60s. Pandit's music may be read as symptomatic of the preoccupation with certain kinds of foreignness in mid-20th century American culture.

Holiday LPs offer another snapshot of a moment in cultural history and of the conditions motivating the release of recordings from particular periods. Christmas novelty albums in particular are abundant in circles of online B-Music sharing. There is a great deal of variety in Christmas LPs because of the simplicity with which they could be released (with simple, familiar arrangements and public domain source material). Being so perpetually out of place (by definition, it goes out of fashion in a matter of weeks) holiday music is easily one of the most easily identifiable camp genres. The abundance of seasonal pop compilations and Christmas cover albums speaks to the popularity of such recordings.

There is a wealth of audio content that could fall under the holiday and exotica category. Other examples include 'spookified' Halloween renditions of pop standards, tropical versions of pop classics and summer holiday compositions. In offering seemingly endless variations and hybrids, these albums are particularly well suited to filling holes in a record collection. Collectors who peruse second hand stores today are likely to come across albums like these frequently. They are generally priced cheaply and, being tailored to particular seasons and holidays, they can offer campy alternatives variations to more conventional holiday material likely to be playing on the radio.[83]

3.3.2 Oblivious Outsiders

The following artists have been treasured by collectors for their creative (though perhaps unintentional) disregard for conventional standards of recording and performance. These albums often perplex listeners. Although many of them can be difficult to listen to, this draws the interest of those who understand their weirdness as innovation. The Shaggs, a 1960s pop sister act from Fremont, New Hampshire may be one of the most often cited examples within the category of oblivious or naive outsider musicians. Their debut album, *Philosophy of the World*, was recorded live with limited takes. Only a small number of original LPs were sold, although the album became popular among collectors within a few years. Having been disparaged and rejected during the band's active years, only to be praised as original and inventive many years later, the infamous album exemplifies the unique kind of momentum that accompanies musicians viewed as being visionary misfits. In the fallout of their short-lived career, the Wiggins sisters have "received fan letters from Switzerland and Texas, been interviewed for a documentary film, and inspired a dozen Web

[83] Author of the Music for Maniacs blog, Mr. Fab, notes that the highest levels of activity on his site coincide with holidays.

sites…"[84] The album was a favourite of Jonathan Richman, Frank Zappa, and American Jazz composer Carla Bley. "They bring my mind to a complete halt"[85] explains Bley. Blues singer-songwriter Bonnie Raitt's enthusiasm for the group lies in their departure from conventional style. "They're like castaways on their own musical island." The Shaggs eschewed norms of style and delivery to such an extent that they *excited* certain listeners, who viewed their music as refreshing rather than frustrating. In providing such an alternative to the common codes of pop composition and performance The Shaggs and the limited fruits of their short-lived recording career became icons of originality to musicians and other enthusiasts who identified with a taste-making vanguard aesthetic.

The deliberate pursuit of aesthetically disorientating art is not a new practice. German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn was one of the first to celebrate the creative work of outsiders, collecting and writing about the paintings of his mentally ill patients and publishing *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* in 1922.[86] Prinzhorn wrote that such art produced in the beholder "disquieting feeling of strangeness."[87] Many interviewees in *Incredibly Strange Music* gesture towards a similar experience. When asked what makes a record truly strange, Mickey McGowan collector and independent curator of Marin, California's "Museum of the Unknown," explains, "It has to be different—that goes without saying. It should be challenging, unfamiliar, even intimidating. It has to take you to *another* level."[88] Such challenging or disquieting experiences serve as an occasional thrill or curiosity for collectors like McGowan, many of whom express boredom and disgust at any versions of pop music that are too straightforward or obviously catchy.

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[84] Susan Orlean, "Meet The Shaggs."
[85] Chusid, *Songs in the Key of Z*. 2.
[86] Jean Dubuffet is another notable example. Dubuffet collected 'art brut,' composed experimental music and painted in a style mimicking mentally ill or socially isolated artists.
[87] Beveridge, "A Disquieting Feeling of Strangeness?," 596.
[88] Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 118.

Most listeners, however, would not share McGowan's enthusiasm for challenging and unfamiliar music. Amateurish or perplexing music—particularly attempts to fit in with vernacular pop music—is often derided as simply *bad*. In his writing on bad music, Simon Frith takes aim at this curious disconnect between those who are fascinated by it and those who are simply repulsed.[89] He stresses that bad music has always been important to critics, who rely on its existence as a category against which to develop their own criteria for identifying good music. Frith distinguishes between music that is considered bad because it is heard too often (such as Top 40 singles loathed for their familiarity) and that which listeners are drawn to because of its failures (as with The Shaggs). He raises the important point that evaluations of bad music depend on the *knowingness* of the listener to solidify its distance from other music.

> Anthologies of bad music thus offer listeners tracks at which to laugh, to regard with affection, and above all about which to feel *knowing*: we, as listeners, understand this music—and what's wrong with it—in a way in which its producers do not.[90]

Frith is writing about music that is overly familiar, ridiculous in its "genre confusion," and "misplaced sentiments or emotions,"[91] thinking through what it means to listen to music for the sake of establishing how and why it is *wrong* and to reinforce the *rightness* of its contemporaries. Conversely, listeners like McGowan and those who collect the music of oblivious outsiders listen to music that most would consider bad *because* of its distance from a common vernacular. This category might also be extended to include bizarre or poorly executed actor crossovers, such as albums by William Shatner, John Travolta, Leonard Nimoy and Ted Cassidy, who capitalized on spikes in their popularity as public figures to moonlight as recording artists. These short-lived careers fizzled out quickly not unlike some seasonal pop hits. We have a hard time imagining why actors believed themselves to be

[89] Frith, "What Is Bad Music?".
[90] Ibid.18.
[91] Ibid.

capable of singing careers and so their performances seem comical and campy in retrospect.

This perspective—in which the bad or sloppy becomes interesting and avant-guard—resonates with the reading protocol that Jeffrey Sconce observes in cinema (which is developed further in the following section). Director Frank Henenlotter points to misdirection and inept renditions in film as capable of producing uniquely exciting audience experience.

> …you're sitting there shaking your head, totally excited, totally unable to guess where this is going to head next, or what the next loony line out of somebody's mouth is going to be. Just as long as it isn't stuff you regularly see.[92]

The "anything, just as long as it is different" attitude dictates a particular network of collector tastes, ensuring that those who value oddity preserve it in personal collections and anthologize those oddities seen by the majority of audiences as mere trash. Evaluating music in this fashion fits with a punk aesthetic of experimentalism, allowing for "weird" or "bad" to be read as transgressive and transformative rather than as blunt failure. Across varying approaches to analyzing the bizarre and challenging music of outsiders, there is a shared sense that it can produce powerfully positive affective listener engagement. In this way, the otherwise perplexing recordings put out by artists like Tiny Tim, Lucia Pamela, Joe Meek and Jack Starr and the Cherry Sisters become treasured artefacts of untold musical histories.

3.4 PARAMUSICAL RECORDINGS

Recent developments in critical film theory have advanced the term 'paracinema' as a way of encompassing those instances of film not conventionally assigned to formal categories within the world of cinema. The term refers to a diverse assortment of filmic content providing a means of extending a theoretical approach to more marginal content. In the practices which surround cult and paracinematic study, 'badness' is viewed as being established in the various stylistic distances of certain films from 'A' Hollywood films. The

[92] In Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy." 385. Original citation: Vale, Juno and Morton (eds) *Incredibly Strange Films*. 11.

sub-standard production techniques and taboo or corny content of the former mark such films as exterior to stylistic norms and as outside of the traditional scope of academic critique. Jeffrey Sconce, from whom the term originates, describes the variety of material that can fall within the scope of paracinema.

> Japanese monster movies, beach party musicals and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft core pornography."[93]

Changing attitudes towards the critical value of these marginal films over the last several years have welcomed the insight they offer, particularly in enriching discussion of the politics of taste. Sconce and those who have drawn on his ideas look to paracinema so as to devise different accounts of the popular and of the affective attachments it produces in audiences. At the same time, the very enshrining of the category of paracinema within connoisseurist formations devoted to film proves an excellent example of the Bourdieuian leveraging of taste, whereby "subcultural formations" reclaim content marked as trash by elites "to establish their outsider credentials."[94]

These same subcultural impulses to reclaim discarded content and recuperate pop cultural trash are also at work in cultural economies of music. A series called "Lost & Found Sound" that aired on NPR (the American network, National Public Radio), for example, documented audio ephemera recorded in the homes of middle-class America in the twentieth century. The recordings featured on the series were made by families to document memories or by hobbyists as a pastime. The show broadcast recordings from old shortwave radio transmission, interviews with dust bowl refugees of the 1940s and audio lessons on how to mimic a loon's call.[95] The show offered new 'readings' of these ephemeral forms, elevating them from junk to valuable artefacts of twentieth century American sound culture.

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[93] "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," 372.
[94] Mathijs and Sexton, "Cult Cinema: An Introduction." 90.
[95] http://www.npr.org/sections/lost-found-sound/

This same practice of extending new readings to recordings is at work in the recuperation of vinyl records. The connoisseur collecting cultures described in the previous chapter have unearthed multiple underworlds of found sound recordings, amateur performances by children, spoken word records, animal sounds and promotional releases by car manufacturers, among others. This is music recorded and released outside of the conventional pop economy and once it's been left to mature long enough, the critical potential of its marginal status is established anew. The following examples of the 'paramusical' within B-music extend the logics of observing marginal, 'trashy' content from film theory into pop music. The strategies described above, prove useful in making sense of the increasing interest in revisiting strange, unconventional versions of pop music.

3.4.1 *Spoken word LPs*

Contemporary sound collage projects make frequent use of old spoken word LPs, mixing vocal narratives from midcentury audiobook albums, guided meditation and self-improvement mantras with a multitude of other music and miscellaneous sonic content. 'Experimental folktronica' duo The Books were perhaps the most notable group to have incorporated spoken word (particularly from older sources) into pop collage. However, the sampling of spoken word from film and television dialogue, public service announcements and radio broadcasts (among many other sources) is increasingly visible in digital 'mix tapes,' podcasts and pop collage across electronic genres. The availability of these recordings to be used as raw material by contemporary musicians is due to the increased accessibility and portability of such material that the networked archiving and recirculation practices foster by a '2.0' web climate (more thoroughly developed in the following chapter).

One such spoken word album is *Supershrink,* (see Fig.1) a political comedy recording by comedian Alen Robin. Robin plays the part of a psychologist, pretending to analyze

former U.S. presidents by playing excerpts of public addresses and offering glib and humorous advice. The album is novel to present day listeners, who can imagine the fascination of its original audience with knowing hindsight. The album is available as a digital file on the archival music blog, Music for Maniacs. The tracks are accompanied by high-resolution scans and detailed explanations of the tape technology Robin would have used to perform the skit for a live audience. "Mr. Fab," author of the site, explains that the record is available "in approximately 84% of American thrift-stores."[96] The grainy recordings and overly exuberant laugh track sound particularly dated, evoking imaginary past versions of American domestic entertainment, the nuclear family gathered around the hi-fi system.

Figure 5 "SuperShrink" Vinyl LP, Alen Robin. Janus Records.

Another popular spoken word album, frequently sampled in mixes and collage, is *Bess Rothman's Charm With Sense*, a self-help album, offering girls and women advice on

[96] Mr. Fab, "Supershrink!".

"The Importance of Speech," "Visual Poise," and the "Theory of Color" to improve their chances of getting a date or impressing their husbands. The album is interesting to us because it offers an audio snapshot of the variety of domestic uses of the vinyl record. We hear the album and imagine the part it may have played in reinforcing gender roles, or conditioning bodies. The compressed MP3 files of outdated spoken word content provide glimpses at the variety of paramusical sonic detritus produced in midcentury practices of cultural consumption. They are often used as raw material for further audio creations, but also offer novel listening experiences as standalone artifacts. Spoken word albums were cheap novelty items at the time of their release and their value rapidly declined as such material became increasingly common in secondhand markets and charity sales. The albums were never meant to be music, but they were pop and as such they can lend insight into American domestic culture.

3.4.2 *Corporate Releases, Children's Music and Animal Sounds*

Among the record collections featured in the *Incredibly Strange Music* volume, many feature albums released outside of the traditional networks of the American pop economy. Among these are albums like *Music to Make Automobiles By*, *The Canaries: The Songs of Canaries with Music by the Artal Orchestra* and barnyard animal sounds rearranged into pop standards (such as *Jim Fassett's Hear the Animals Sing*). As with the spoken word albums, these records were not produced for consumption in the same manner as conventional pop music, but were produced in parallel economies made to meet demands for quantity (rather than quality). *Music to Make Automobiles By* was put out by the public relations department of Volkswagon of America as accompaniment to an educational film released by the manufacturer. United States Steel commissioned *Rhapsody of Steel*. These private pressings were often very expensive, sometimes employing entire Broadway orchestras and choruses,

performing original content.[97] There are similar advertisement and promotional albums for feminine hygiene products, dog food, General Electric, recliner chairs and innumerable others. Some are more explicitly titled for use by establishments selling specialized goods; *Music to Sell Wood Paneling By*, *Music to Sell Valves By*, *Music to Sell Bread By* (See Fig. 2).[98] These remnants of 1950s and 60s consumer culture have formed their own countercultural following, where bad, cheap and disposable artefacts are enhanced and enriched[99] by the knowing analyses of those countercultural forces with an investment in recuperating them.

Figure 6 Music To Sell Bread By: Tastee Bread That Is!

To extend to my earlier analogy to Jeffrey Sconce's conception of paracinema, the importance of the revalorization of trash at play in paramusical fandom is worth

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97 Juno and Vale, *Re/Search #14*, 106.

98 Beyond their musical qualities, many of these are cherished for their kitsch cover art alone. Scanned images are chronicled in depth on websites like http://lpcoverlover.com/ and http://phoneyfresh.blogspot.com/ without necessary reference to their sonic contents.

99 Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy." 389.

underscoring. Schlock—a Yiddish word referring to merchandise of inferior quality or characterized by shoddiness[100]—is a term Sconce uses to identify the kinds of films recuperated by paracinema discourse. It constitutes a newly desirable aesthetic category leveraged against conventional hierarchies of taste. Sconce observes the process as taking place in the border territories between the academy and mass culture, a space occupied by graduate students who navigate between opposing factions, marrying strategies from one and insights from another. For Sconce, paracinema is less about identifying a distinct group of films than it is a call for a new approach, "…a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus."[101] In the new protocol, there is an imperative to make room for the importance of cultural sediment, alongside the existing reverence for canonical and avant-garde cultural forms within the study of film.

Those who 'read' paramusical artefacts for their revelatory abilities seek the insight that such items can provide into ordinary cultural experience. Within paramusic, there is an impulse to document and valorise those cultural artefacts that favor economic over aesthetic imperatives. In addition to the aforementioned corporate and spoken word releases, this includes recordings made for children, cheap compilations made for domestic easy listening, novelties like albums to train your canary to sing and animal sounds rearranged into symphonies. Just as paracinema (as Sconce understands it) was a call to engage with film's excessive and aesthetically corrupted forms in pursuit of "producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation"[102] so too do the marginal forms of recorded musical trash offer alternate 'readings' of popular culture. But the politics of representation

[100] "Schlock." http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/schlock
[101] Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy." 372.
[102] "'Trashing' the Academy." 393.

are less a factor in the reclaiming of paramusical forms than is a revisiting of the practices of listening itself, of 'reading' musical texts for the clues it holds to deconstructing past versions of the North American pop cultural ecosystem.

Paramusical recordings in particular gesture towards the *functional* role that vinyl records assumed when they became cheap and broadly accessible, around the apex of their popularity. None of the earlier mentioned paramusical albums were designed for deep listening experiences, but were instead designed to accompany banal domestic life, or to market the products that make it possible. As one collector interviewed in ISM explains of a compilation LP entitled *Music to Live By*,

> …You would put this on to create these moods inside your perfect home. But what's this family doing—they're all sitting on the couch; they aren't exactly *living it up!* The album contains a couple popular selections, a couple jazz, a couple classical—this is the only record you'll ever need![103]

Of course all recorded music serves to accompany daily life in some formation or another, but what the attitude above suggests is an engagement with the contextual issues surrounding the history of the American recording industry and the listening practices it catered to. Not unlike those who tune in to old radio broadcasts, contemporary collectors can revisit such promotional recordings to get a fuller picture of the role the vinyl record played in mid-century American culture.

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[103] Juno and Vale, "*Incredibly Strange Music*." 173.

4 NETWORKED LISTENERSHIP

In this section, I elaborate on the mechanics of digitization that are at work in online spaces. I look at music sharing and recasting the meaning of that music for an 'audience' of readers, users, and listeners to access and enjoy. I explore the practices of sharing music, mostly through blogs, as a way of following the trajectory that recorded music can take, from traditional secondhand economies, through digitization and into networks of sharing. Recent scholarship has looked to secondhand economies of music as a way of establishing the particularities of their role in the circulation and accumulation of music culture (in the formation of scenes, as a practice of consumption, or as the cohesion of genre and taste categories).[104] These stories about collecting outdated vinyl and cassette recordings provide a precursor to the kinds of sharing on which I will elaborate here.

My overview of the ways in which online users position themselves towards B-music suggests that they view their online sharing practices as supplementary to older practices of collecting. Some argue that it becomes a matter of ethics. Others view online sharing as a way to liberate recorded music from the tight grasp of copyright protections and industrial interests; they view it as a form of democratization of music. Certain members among these online outlets consider this kind of recirculation to be a way of rectifying unjust limitations that industry pressures have put on the visibility of eccentric music or of repopulating pop histories with a fuller, more exhaustive knowledge of the outsiders left off the record (and sales charts) the first time around. Still others view it as only a pastime; they merely enjoy discussing the music and passing it along to others. Among all of the online spaces in question, there is a strong sense that the amount of material available for recirculation is

[104] Straw, "Embedded Memories."; Vályi, "Digging in the Crates. Practices of Identity and Belonging in a Translocal Record Collecting Scene"; Davis, "Going Analog: Vinylphiles and the Consumption of the 'Obsolete' Vinyl Record"; Hayes, "'Take Those Old Records Off the Shelf'"; Pearson, "Standing at the Crossroads Between Vinyl and Compact Discs: Reissue Blues Recordings in the 1990s."

infinite.

The effect of such practices, I argue, is to contribute to a wealth of secondary resources available to anyone interested in accessing them. In these spaces various versions of countercultural knowledge develop and are maintained. This wealth of knowledge becomes available for casual perusal, no longer dependent on years of purchasing and discussing albums, artists and backstories and honing the mastery of hip expertise and language. More importantly, however, a measure of reframing is at work. A great deal of the music in question became important because of its unavailability to broader audiences. Rarity of certain items fuelled their fetishistic status as countercultural capital, yet some argue this relegated them to stagnation and unnecessarily reinforced their obscurity. At work in the networked practices I describe here is something quite different. There remains an impulse to expose and preserve rare cultural forms, but the doing so in the context of networked listening catalyzes certain other impulses with regard to how such music is consumed. This has to do with the portability of digital music, at the level of both the individual and across and between social strata. These changes speak to the potential for broader changes in how we conceive of the practice of listening itself.

The B-music that circulates in these networked environments poses a challenge to those who encounter it. Increasingly, conventional modes of listening to old and rare music (on vinyl records, and using traditional stereos) no longer satisfy the networked listenership's desire to make it universally available. Music fans are questioning the merits and shortcomings of the physical vinyl format, once crucial to the appreciation of old and rare music. The warm analog sound and familiar rituals of vinyl listening satisfy certain positive associations, but those who turn to Internet listening view (at least for a time) its benefits as outweighing those of pursuing a personal collection. That some of the most passionate of

collectors work to convert and share their rare treasures suggests an investment in the ideal of "open source culture,"[105] where music collected by individuals can be shared and heard by many other listeners simultaneously with the help of new technologies. As later sections detail, however, personal archiving sites began to dwindle and go quiet around 2010 and took a sharp drop in 2012. I argue that the recent prosecution and takedown of several one-click hosting services have played a part in this decline.

4.1 LOGICS OF CARE AND APPROPRIATION

In chapter two, I argued in reference to vinyl reissue culture that an effort to canonize something is essentially an attempt to declare it sacred. My intention was to try to establish a way of thinking about *why* it matters to listeners that the music described here survives to be heard by at least another generation. By invoking Thorne's vision of cultural objects handed down as an act of care, rather than of consumption, I mean to expose a kind of dual logic at play in such discourses of cultural preservation. Within the practice of reissuing a vinyl record there is the impulse to shift attention towards overlooked and obscure recorded music and also to rectify that obscurity by duplicating the recordings and aiding in their dissemination. New practices of networking and digitization add a further layer to the practice of reissuing music, making it a great deal easier for curious listeners to access new content. The self-proclaimed guiding strategies of those who work to make "new old" music available reveal an investment in sustaining the ideals of universal access and open dialogue within online networks of listening.

In exploring the approaches taken by active members of online communities of B-music listenership, I develop here a clearer understanding of how they position themselves in relation to B-music and to the practices of remediation that reinforce B-music's availability.

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[105] Novak, "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media."

Their approaches to preserving and recirculating music have a great deal to say about what it means for obscure and otherwise discarded music to become accessible to new listeners. In making use of new technical platforms, these B-music devotees juxtapose their personal tastes and collecting impulses with a seemingly contradicting impulse to share content and to expand networks of access for the enjoyment of unseen others.

These next sections speak primarily to the networked practice of listening to B-music: the logics that revalorize it and the individuals who work to make such material broadly available. I ask what happens to music that undergoes the change (where trashy excess is recast as subversive content, capable of challenging dominant versions of pop history) and take a closer look at those who work to push it through such changes.[106] Following B-music through some of the changes it has undergone since the early 2000s reveals a great deal about how conditions of taste formation, intelligibility and access have shaped its meaning and movement. It offers insight into the ways our practices of listening are shaped by the limitations and possibilities offered in new technological platforms.

4.1.2 *Reclaiming Unwanted Music*

Bloggers and other contributors who maintain web sites dedicated to preserving B-music have created a wealth of resources for accessing B-music online. These sites are, as one collector phrases it "part shrine, part ego preening."[107] They showcase both the wealth of music available and the hunting skills of the collector. There is a variety of attitudes among the bloggers about what is most important about such practices, and how music should be recirculated. Recirculating music in such a way reignites issues of copyright and intellectual property, but these issues can be cast into different terms. Typically, the music present on the

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[106] David Novak's "Cosmopolitanism, Remediation, and the Ghost World of Bollywood" provided inspiration for my conceiving of B-music as being 'pushed though' changes.

[107] Oliver Wang quoted in Roy Shuker, "Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice." 134.

blogs is out of print, or no longer available in other avenues. Some of the content—all of the songs available on the freemusicarchive.org, for example—is cleared for legal download before being posted online. This latter approach, however, is less common than that of other sites which usually feature a disclaimer regarding copyrighted material. These 'one-click' download blogs are neither peer-to-peer technology, nor bit torrent clients, but personal blogs which ordinarily combine links to compressed albums hosted by a third party server, with a background write up and review of the album.

Having gone out of print (or never having been commercially released), a great deal of B-music is sourced from older media that is no longer a part of the standard world of commercial licensing and distribution. Many bloggers view this kind of content—meaning anything 'B' enough to be viewed as subversive or marginal— as ideal candidates for reposting on their sites. Some are exclusively dedicated to this type of music. "This blog exists as a means to share some fantastic music that has unfortunately gone out-of-print," writes Kevin Sartori, the author of the site *Psychotic Leisure Music*. "...If something I've posted becomes available again commercially, please let me know and I'll gladly take the share down."[108] The possibility of Esquivel making a living from sales of *See It In Sound* is out of the equation, leaving only the music's cultural currency to reckon with the status of its availability. In most instances, the disclaimer invites concerned claimants to contact the author/administrator for the immediate removal of the content in question. In this way, there is a safety net of sorts in which in the event a breach of copyright is claimed, the site can maintain a position of having made an error and discretely remove the content without losing credibility with its readers.

[108] Sartori, "About Me."

Figure 7 Psychotic Leisure Music, "About Me."

Sartori's approach is congruent with that of many other bloggers, for whom out of print music provides a safe option for sharing content without the threat of legal retribution or complaints from concerned readers. The logic these bloggers follow is that sharing music through one-click download blogs makes available content that would otherwise go unheard. At stake in standard discussions of copyright and intellectual freedom is the ability of artists to maintain access to and claim over the content that provides their livelihood and also that of consumers to re-valorize music through their practices of consumption and selection.[109] But the parameters of discussions of this kind depend, for the most part, on a concerned claimant with an investment—whether it is regarding a financial or intellectual infringement—in maintaining control over a song or album. Nearly all of the music featured on blogs like *Psychotic Leisure Music* is out of print, or remains unwanted and unclaimed by its copyright owners, leaving it to recirculate freely once it is digitized.

As networked outlets of sharing and consumption, these blogs disrupt traditional economies and also designate a space for the circulation of music where, because of the music's perceived loss of commodity value, there would not otherwise *be* any circulation. In answering the question of how to characterize the practices of circulating B-music, there

[109] McLeod, "MP3s Are Killing Home Taping"; McLeod, *Owning Culture Authorship, Ownership, and Intellectual Property Law*.

emerges the distinct presence of a desire among the reader/listeners and writer/uploaders to provide spaces for its preservation. By virtue of the music's status as largely unwanted or unclaimed, however, these online spaces also serve as a way of asserting a multitude of alternate histories and solidifying counter-canonical versions of popular music. Several aspects of this approach show an ideological investment in the notion that cultural content should be available to anyone. These sites claiming to offer access *only* to content not licenced to anyone else also yield to copyright and intellectual property law designed to limit such access. In the following section, I address some bolder approaches to recirculating music, where there is a clearer investment in the availability of recordings online.

4.1.3 *"Heard Not Hoarded"*

The development of personal taste can motivate bloggers like Sartori and Mr. Fab to maintain their sites. Yet the sites visited as a part of this research are all public and directed at a broad audience and so disseminating the content is as important to the sites' authors as is preserving it. The sites unanimously suggest that the refashioning of recorded music from analog media to digital files will also produce a broader benefit to society. These claims are rooted in a heightened faith in the ability of the digital format (usually MP3, but sometimes also Free Lossless Audio Codec, or FLACs) to serve a function that more directly meets the need for music to be accessible to those listeners who could benefit from it. Those who convert and upload the content are implicitly signaling a belief that such acts fill a void. They view it as contributing a corrective to the existing structures of the western popular music economy.

Pop music and culture commentator Simon Reynolds has helped popularize a term describing this impulse to make certain music freely available through the Internet. "Sharity,"

he explains, functions as "a three-way pun on 'share' + 'charity' + 'rarity.'"[110] Sharity, for Reynolds, represents an entirely new approach to consuming music. Those collector / bloggers[111] that he had observed viewed sharity as a fundamental shift in their practice. The up-loaders who work to make these new areas of old media available to site subscribers (and also to casual readers) celebrate obscure content, but also work to make the obscure available to anyone. Many of the sites I explored reflected this same attitude, but they also worked to supplement the audio with a great deal of accompanying images, videos and in-depth biographical detail. The authors[112] also provide commentary and conduct (sometimes extensive) independent research on the artists so as to contribute to its intelligibility. Reynolds offers the following summation of these conflicting attitudes:

> The impetus behind record collecting used to be: 'I want to have something that no one else has.' But with the advent of sharity that's shifted to: 'I've just got hold of something no one else has got, so I'm immediately going to make it available to EVERYBODY.'[113]

In part, this is a matter of individuals experimenting with the possibilities offered in the interactive abilities of the digital media newly made available in the last decade. The technologies necessary for the ripping of vinyl LPs to digital audio and for high resolution scanning of their cover sleeves, for example, are significantly cheaper and better developed for use at home. It is also a matter of the writers and users developing new attitudes and strategies about how the meaning of certain music is made and remade. Implicit in these approaches is a kind of reinvestment in the value of music as belonging to public culture. As such, there is a kind of *repositioning* that occurs between those who work around the music (ripping the MP3s, writing about the music, and sharing it online) and the music itself. This

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[110] Reynolds, *Retromania*, 105.
[111] Including the authors of the sites www.time-has-told-me.blogspot.com, and www.mutant-sounds.blogspot.com
[112] Usually a single author, but occasionally run by a small collective.
[113] Ibid., 106.

repositioning, as I will argue in the following sections, follows a particular set of logics which themselves work to form new listening subjects.

Here, as with other debates addressing file sharing and copyright in situations of digital connectivity, there is an impulse to look at such conditions as catalyzing an *opening up* of the accessibility to more diverse styles of music and to broader reaching. In certain ways, the phenomenon described here parallels the kinds of disruptions of traditional music economies that typically accompany discussions of changes caused in major label music industries and traditional pop economies by the digitization of music.[114] There is a tendency to view the newfound accessibility of broader varieties of music as a kind of *democratization*, where everyone has an equal shot at experiencing the pleasure of listening in to a wealth of fresh content.

Do those who frequent these online spaces as a venue for expanding their musical tastes feel a closer engagement with the music they discover as a result of its endorsement by a community of networked listeners? Many of the sites reviewed for this study (See Fig. 6) maintain a broad readership, with dozens of comments and responders to every new post. "On a mission to preserve music, art and culture..." reads the header of *Listen Recovery*, a site that specializes in posting download links for South and North American fusion pop and esoterica.[115]Their mandates furthers the sentiment, explaining that the affiliated writers work with the intention of "...Upholding the belief that music should be heard not hoarded. Helping to preserve the audio time capsules of our past."[116] Many other sites make claims of a similar kind. Here, as with other instances of remediation, there is an investment in the ability of the new medium—here, compressed digital audio files usually coupled with scanned digital

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[114] Such as McLeod, "MP3s Are Killing Home Taping."
[115] "LISTEN RECOVERY Biography." In addition to music, the site also documents images and other paraphernalia, primarily from Bolivia, Peru, Argentina and Colombia.
[116] Ibid.

images—to fulfill the ideals of a new kind of listening. This new listening ideal values the collective over the individual; it promotes broadcasting over personal and contemplative listening experiences. This same logic is motivated by the notion that remedying the scarcity of the recordings (and thereby increasing the visibility of the artists themselves) is a beneficial act that promotes musical innovation and provides a general benefit to public music culture.

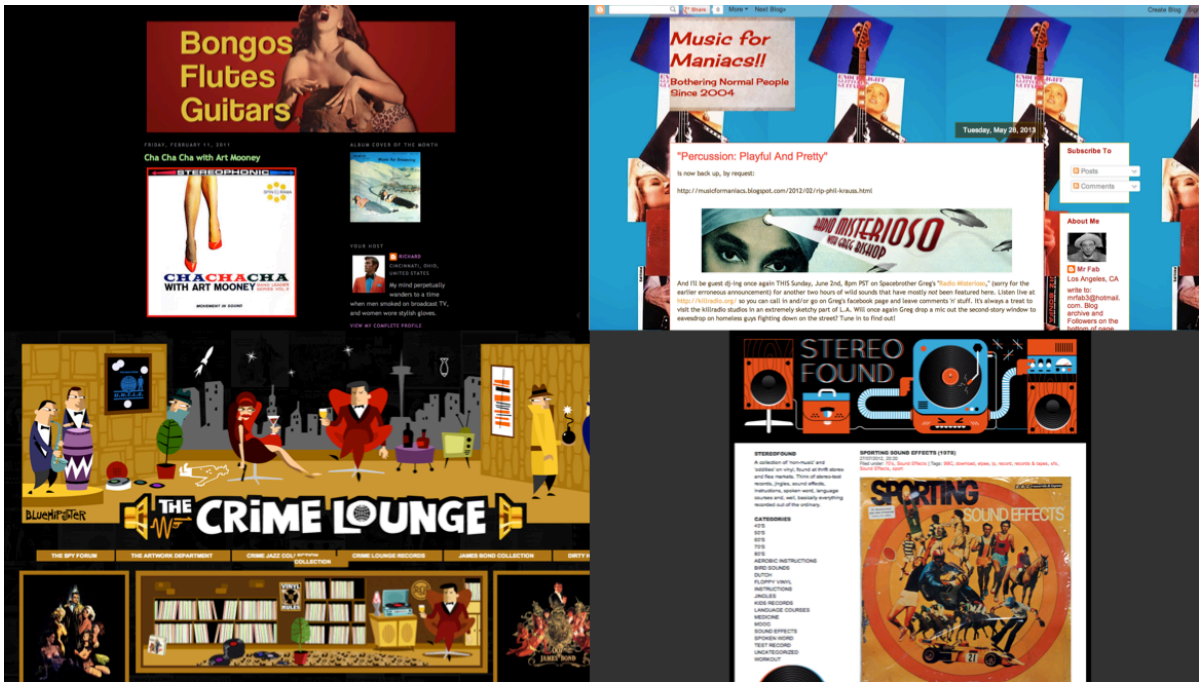

Figure 8 (clockwise) Bongos Flutes Guitars, Music for Maniacs, Stereo Found, The Crimes Lounge[117]

The web sites described thus far all demonstrate an ideological investment in the idea that such lost gems from popular music history can be 'liberated' from the obscurity that industry failures have imposed. They share a belief that the Internet and related technologies of sharing and duplicating are capable of remedying the scarcity of "new old music," making it available anew. The attitude of sharing and redistributing music bears similarity to the imperatives of the creative commons and free culture movements advanced by figures such

[117] All sites accessed on 2 June, 2013.

as Laurence Lessig.[118] Juxtaposing personal collecting practice with sharity ethics, the sites assert their belief that recordings should be universally available (regardless of legal constraints) and in defiance of the conventional prestige associated with preserving and protecting a personal library.

4.2 NETWORKS: RUPTURE AND RESILIENCE

As this project developed, many of the personal B-music blogs and websites discussed in this project began to slow their output. Of some twenty-five blogs and web sites studied, slightly more than half of them had gone dormant at the time of writing. Some had gone quiet just before research began, but several others stopped updating during the final months of this research (See Fig.). Perhaps some ran out of material to cover, having exhausted their personal collections or lost their appetite for pursuing new albums in secondhand markets. Some, like the *Thrift Store DJ* site, cite frequent hacker attacks as the reason for slowing their posting rate.[119] Being hosted on free platforms such as Google's Blogger, many of the sites are easy targets for such attacks. Another site, *Rocket Remnants*, authored under the pseudonym "Roy Rocket" went quiet in July 2012. Rocket explains that vinyl rarity blogs were losing readership and falling out of favour.

> Five years ago, when I first began Rocket Remnants, music blogging was cool. Now it's really in the hands of those posting new releases. The retro blogger, whether of shows, deleted albums or general rarities, well, they're all gone now: "blog no longer exists"; words all read up; links long dead. I joined in thinking I had something to add; it looked like fun. I was also about to digitize much of my own collection, the leap from ripping to sharing was short, so as long as it wasn't widely available I'd put it on here, adding a word or two. That process has now come to an end, as does this blog.[120]

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[118] "Free Culture."

[119] http://www.records.fruityfamily.com/. Apparently, a sweepstakes scam had leveraged several takeovers of the URL, causing the site's administrator to have to overhaul the design and content of the site many times over.

[120] Rocket , Roy, "Valediction - The Best Till Last ," *Rocket Remnants* (blog), 28 June 2012, http://rocketremnants.blogspot.ca/2012/06/valediction-best-till-last.html/.

The valediction for *Rocket Remnants* offers both a personal reflection on the archiving and sharing practices of one individual and speaks to the growth and eventual decline of such practices that began in the mid-2000s. This decline, I argue, relates both to the fashionable (and therefore volatile and changeable) practice of sharing independent collections online and to infrastructural weaknesses in the web tolls used to conduct such sharing. This site and the majority of "whole album blogs," have been entirely dependent on the content hosting and linking infrastructure provided by such one-click hosting sites as Megaupload, RapidShare and MediaFire.

Figure 9 Lifespan of Smaller-Scale B-music Blogs

Name	Start	End	Duration
http://record-fiend.blogspot.com/	2009	2012	3
http://stereofound.wordpress.com/	2009	2012	3
http://bobpurse.blogspot.com/	2005	Active	8
http://excavatedshellac.com/	2007	Active	6
http://www.records.fruityfamily.com/	2008	2012	4
http://basementcurios.blogspot.com/	2008	2013	5
http://mischalke04.wordpress.com/	2007	Active	6
http://wopbopaloobopalopbamboom.blogspot.com/	2009	Active	4
http://www.weirdomusic.com/	2001	Active	12
http://vinylorphanage.com/	2006	Active	7
http://trustarvibrations.blogspot.com/	2007	2013	7
http://xtabaysworld.blogspot.com/	2007	2011	4
http://weirdtownstuff.blogspot.com/	2009	2012	3
http://thecrimelounge.blogspot.com/	2005	2012	7
http://slander365.blogspot.com/	2007	2007	1
http://rocketremnants.blogspot.com/	2008	2012	4
http://wfmuichiban.blogspot.com/	2009	Active	4
http://bongosflutesguitars.blogspot.com/	2006	2011	5
http://mutant-sounds.blogspot.com/	2007	2013	6
http://www.fatcitycigarlounge.blogspot.com/	2007	2013	6
http://cakeandpolka.blogspot.com/	2005	2009	4
http://thegroovegrotto.blogspot.com/	2005	2012	5
http://twilightzone-rideyourpony.blogspot.com/	2006	Active	7
http://wayoutjunk.blogspot.com/	2006	2011	5

As the popularity of these services spread during the early 2000s, high profile legal cases also ensued. Although two of these three services remain in operation at the time of

writing,[121] they have faced combined dozens of court injunctions and forced site takedowns. Each of these incidences created disruptions in hosting and linking for those sites that rely on the one-click services to deliver files to their users. Of course while the legal cases against hosting services take place in one jurisdiction (and it is very often in the United States), the effects of the ensuing takedowns are experienced at the global level.

Although Roy Rocket of *Rocket Remnants* laments the decline in prestige of retro music blogs (and suggests they could simply have fallen out of fashion) a great majority of the sites went dormant in 2012 or shortly before. This is precisely the time range of a battery of international legal injunctions on these three major hosting services. Of course it is unlikely that any of the hosting services went down directly because of the blogging activities of those sites listed in Figure 7. A single infraction, for example, can be the basis of a copyright infringement lawsuit and eventual takedown of a hosting service. In-print albums backed by a record company with a dedicated legal department are many times more likely to spur legal action. Nonetheless it is difficult to imagine that the decline of such sites is not related to the increasing difficulty of providing access to digital music files. When links 'go dead' site authors go back into their archives, re-upping content at the request of their readers who ask for new links to the files associated with older posted material. Certain blogs, such as *Xtabays World*, however, shut down with the explicit proclamation: "…No re-ups of shares will be done." [122] While the site remains active (these blogs often leave their ghostly remains behind for years after they die since the free platforms don't require web hosting fees), scavenging readers have to dig deep into the archives to find any useable material.[123]

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[121] MediaFire has remained in operation by maintaining a strict takedown policy with regards to copyrighted material (http://www.mediafire.com/policy_violation/copyright.php), RapidShare relocated to Switzerland and has similarly survived numerous legal cases by cooperating with authorities. Megaupload was taken down at the beginning of 2012. Its official site and associated links remain inactive at the time of writing.

[122] http://xtabaysworld.blogspot.ca/

[123] Some of these ghost sites that have been out of order for years are only shells of their former selves, with

4.3 ARCHIVES AND OPEN SOURCE ETHICS

I would like to turn now to the Free Music Archive, an online project coordinated by the WFMU radio station. Without suggesting that the Free Music Archive picks up directly where smaller projects like blogs leave off, it is worth exploring how the 'sharity' idealism and other variations on open source ethics are at work in other platforms. In the following section, I explore how the project is using the online archive to provide free exposure (and financial compensation) to working artists, as well as to showcase interesting and uncommon historical recordings. WFMU is a freeform, non-commercial community supported station based in Jersey City, New Jersey. The standard signal reaches east into lower Manhattan, but also maintains an international listenership through Internet radio. The station has built a reputation as an inspirational resource for well-known creative figures like Lou Reed, Jim Jarmusch and Matt Groening. It is supported by an active fan base, strives to function as an "expressive medium,"[124] and has earned credibility as influencing creative practice. The station strives to broadcast a wide variety of content including:

> …flat-out uncategorizable strangeness to rock and roll, experimental music, 78 RPM Records, jazz, psychedelia, hip-hop, electronica, hand-cranked wax cylinders, punk rock, gospel, exotica, R&B, radio improvisation, cooking instructions, classic radio airchecks, found sound, dopey call-in shows, interviews with obscure radio personalities and notable science-world luminaries, spoken word collages, Andrew Lloyd Webber soundtracks in languages other than English as well as Country and western music.[125]

The styles of music broadcast on the WFMU signal gesture towards a distinctly experimental and counter-canonical aesthetic. In combining contemporary alternative music like punk and improved music with historical curiosities, the station's programming draws a continuum between obsolete and expired musical curiosities and new directions for inventive music.

The Free Music Archive (or FMA hereafter) began in 2006 when WFMU was granted

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image hosting issues leaving gaping holes in their aesthetic structure as well.

[124] Wolf, Jamie, "No Hits, All the Time."

[125] WFMU. "About."

money from the New York State Music Fund. The New York State Music Fund, was made possible by a series of inquisitions into illegal "pay for play," or *payola* activities in the state. The money recuperated from broadcasters who took bribes to play certain music was pooled and redistributed to new initiatives like the FMA that made music more accessible. [126] The new project is intended to extend the reach of the radio station, covering an interface for those aspects of the digital age that were outside of the scope of the traditional 'terrestrial' radio format. In an attempt to safeguard the efforts of individuals who wished to stream content online and create podcasts, the managers at WFMU sought to create a site that would host content safe to use— for example in remixes, video art or digital broadcast—under existing copyright laws. The site provides a useful illustration of how open access movements are mobilizing to make notable, but lesser-known artefacts from the history of the recording industry available to anyone with an Internet connection.

The FMA aims for quality of content over quantity; the concept of the FMA differs from user-determined sites like Archive.org in that it relies on curators to structure the content it showcases. So while The Internet Archive hosts anything users submit, the FMA's expert curators' attention is instead aimed at ensuring only interesting and worthwhile content stays on the archive. Currently, roughly a hundred different curators determine the content of the archive. These curators are not individuals, but rather an assortment of international institutions: independent radio stations, festivals, performance spaces, other online music libraries and preservation projects. The site is designed to supplement existing resources for unknown or innovative audio like independent webcasting[127] and netlabels.[128] It aspires to assemble these kinds of efforts—along with projects like the University of California at Santa

[126] Moss, Ceci, "Interview with Jason Sigal of the Free Music Archive." The FMA also received a large grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 2010.
[127] Creators of podcasts and independent streaming sites can source recordings licensed expressly for this purpose.
[128] Web sites that release digital albums available for free download.

Barbara's Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project—by providing a joining infrastructure and promoting exchanges between them. Users can browse content by curator, or through genre portals like Experimental, Folk, Country, Spoken and Old Time/Historic. There are a number of song-poems and outsiders featured in playlists and blog entries, for example.

Crucial to the FMA's mandate is providing a parallel means for the circulation of music that need not rely on mainstream, corporately owned distribution and promotion. As managing director Jason Sigal explains in an interview, the trouble with existing digital streaming services is not simply that they are forced to operate within the established structures of the American industry, but also that artists (and especially lesser-known and unsigned musicians) frequently go uncompensated.

> But SoundExchange (the performing rights organization who claims to collect royalties on behalf of all the world's recordings, not just those registered with the RIAA) has a gargantuan list of Unpaid Artists that they can't seem to track down... SoundExchange has a very difficult task at hand, and it's a valiant one, but if they can't find these artists, they're NEVER gonna be able to find some of the shit we play, so our money mostly goes to support SoundExchange's operating expenses so that they can pay Metallica.[129]

Some of the content is public domain, but the FMA also establishes individual agreements with recording artists and rights holders so as to accommodate a variety of licensing approaches. Most of these licenses are from Creative Commons and allow downloading and sharing outside of commercial use.[130] Within the archive, users can "tip" artists as they see fit, using direct links to deposit the amount of their choosing into PayPal accounts. Sigal's comments suggestion that the archive's inception had as much to do with disrupting established artists' revenue streams speak to the project's broader goals of circumventing the

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[129] Moss, Ceci, "Interview with Jason Sigal of the Free Music Archive." 'RIAA' refers to the Recording Industry Association of America.

[130] While the original Creative Commons licenses were written with U.S. legislation in mind, it now addresses a much broader corpus of legislative zones and presently offers licenses designed for 55 countries, including Canada.

legal structures of commercial radio airplay and distribution.

The Free Music Archive is a good example of how counter-cultural practices—such as collecting rare and extraordinary music and attributing value to cultural objects previously presumed to have none—are migrating towards digital environments. Collectors like Mississippi Records' Warren Hill, The Museum of the Unknown's Mickey McGowan or any of the other collectors interviewed for the *Incredibly Strange Music* volumes are essentially pop cultural historians. They have worked to ensure that alternate versions of the history of twentieth century American recorded music are available and intelligible for posterity. Where efforts to spread the knowledge of such anti-canonical repertoires have traditionally relied on independent radio stations like WFMU, digital environments are providing alternative possibilities for connectivity. The FMA is therefore not an entirely new initiative, but is rather a continuation of older practices. It brings "long-standing counter-cultural binaries—out of utopian alternative systems opposed to the corporate regulation of culture," and transports them into digital media environments.[131]

The FMA extends out of the world of alternative listening and record collecting described in previous chapters. In sharing their personal collections over the airways, the collective of radio DJs that make up the WFMU station transformed individual practices of material accumulation and self-education into a form of public scholarship. In broadcasting alternate versions of the history of recording (both music and other parallel forms like classic radio airchecks and found sound), the WFMU could engage a community of listeners looking for such material. Radio signals are an ephemeral medium, however, and archives of individual shows and mixes are difficult to navigate at a later date. As Sigal explains in an

[131] Novak, David, "Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media." 618.

interview, "Radio is not enough."[132] Supplementing the station's efforts with the advantages provided by the FMA was a logical step.

A radio broadcast is capable of exposing all manner of obscure and interesting content. Being publicly transmitted, radio is relatively accessible. Since the signal is still ephemeral (or, at least, its accessibility degrades), it is not particularly malleable or portable. As such it does not satisfy all of the ideals to which audio playback is held to today.[133] Technologies for sampling, saving, modifying and mixing music have been useful for the creative efforts of groups like The Books, who, as illustrated in the section on spoken word LPs, build new music out of old recordings. The FMA makes such audio still more accessible by requiring only an internet connection, instead of the hardware typically involved in ripping and reusing such audio, for example. It does the same thing that individuals sharing music have done for years, but, in operating under the framework of the Creative Commons, situates such practices within legal practice. The FMA makes old media new by serving as a platform for its preservation (both sonic and semiotic). Outmoded music is made and remade in this environment; old and rare recordings are re-inscribed with value and given a place alongside the more familiar hit lists, bolstering the claim that interesting old music should be heard and not hoarded.

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[132] Moss, Ceci, "Interview with Jason Sigal of the Free Music Archive."
[133] Sterne, *MP3*, 238.

5 CONCLUSION

When a record collector assembles a personal music collection, they are offering a highly personalized version of the history of recorded music. Such collections can arguably serve as "implied commentaries on twentieth-century history."[134] Collecting is very often a practice rooted in community. Those who collect and trade LPs, for example, belong to communities of listeners who together establish standards of good taste and acceptable listening practice. Exchanging opinions about good and bad music or comparing collections are ways that individuals can 'tune in' to the tastes of others. While a record collection might offer a highly detailed portrait of an individual, it also has a great deal to say about the cultural environment that houses it. A collection can simultaneously be the history of an individual and the record of a public culture. Contemporary subjects who consume media in digital environments are now more than ever involved in the shaping mediated culture. As one blogger phrased it in the epitaph for his project, the leap from ripping to sharing is short[135] and remediating old formats also facilitates the participation of individual curators who conduct new readings of cultural forms, thereby structuring the audio content available to listening peers. The practices explored in the preceding chapters indicate a desire to secure the longevity of 'B' versions of cultural history. Curators and collectors advocate for the relevance of multiple versions of our aural legacy.

Just as most collections are never 'finished,' digitized resources for preserving B-music are forever incomplete. Just as vinyl collectors strive to fill gaps in their personal libraries with elusive rare pressings or obscure genres, the state of publicly available digitized B-music is always in flux. New projects like personal blogs are born and then, as illustrated

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[134] Sterne, *The Audible Past*. 351.

[135] Rocket , Roy, "Valediction - The Best Till Last ," *Rocket Remnants* (blog), 28 June 2012, http://rocketremnants.blogspot.ca/2012/06/valediction-best-till-last.html/.

in chapter four, can go quiet or begin to degrade out of disuse. Larger-scale efforts to preserve and recirculate music digitally, like the FMA and Archive.org, build their reputations on an ability to offer a wide breadth of content and so are always in the process of expanding their repertoires. The benefit that these platforms offer is the involvement of individuals whose contributions shape the body of available resources. And yet while the longevity of Archive.org (which was founded in 1996) suggests that there is a great deal of support for promoting open access to recorded media, the future of sites featuring content from outside of the public domain is less certain.

The rare, outmoded, confusing and strange music contained in vinyl discs is always at risk of decay or disappearance. Just as there are limitations to protecting and preserving obscure forms of recorded music in analog formats, however, digital sharing and archiving environments are subject to decay and the whims of fashion and taste or changing legal standing. The changes that B-music experiences as it travels between analog media, through the process of remediation, to digital environments are mostly in the significance of such content: its social value, the level of historical detail associated with it and its role as public property. Just as collectors curate recorded music, determining what counts and offering new readings of old media, the assemblage of currently available digital music sharing resources similarly influence a particular version of historical pop music honing specific taste profiles and curating a body of music.

Spaces for sharing digitized music have now been around for almost fifteen years.[136] Although music industry powers continues to leverage legal action against such activities as peer-to-peer sharing, bit torrent transfers and one-click hosting, there nevertheless remains the possibility for the licensed and public domain use of recorded material to circulate in

[136] Napster, the first of these platforms, began operating in 1999.

digital environments. Implicit in such sharing activities is the claim for maintaining individual agency alongside industry heavyweights like the Recording Industry Association of America. Rediscovering and recuperating lost cultural forms from the history of recording is becoming a tradition among the community of listeners that have extended out of the legacies of punk and experimental practice. As evidenced in the programming strategies of the WFMU and the Free Music Archive, knowledge of such conceptual predecessors is viewed as crucial to the health and longevity of alternative and critical creative endeavors across the arts.

These networked archival practices—despite still being subject to many of the same biases and deficiencies of traditional physical archives—manifest some of the most utopic beliefs about liberal democratic society. Online archiving efforts signify the belief that every voice, however fleeting or inconsequential (including those diluted by mediation), should be heard even if only by later generations. By making obscure recordings and lesser-known genres from decades past easy to peruse by a consuming public (or a media researcher), contemporary networks of remediated music beg to be explored. They invite any user or listener to join the conversation about what counts and how we should remember the past.

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