Narratives of popular music heritage and cultural identity: The affordances and constraints of popular music memories.

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between popular music, memory and cultural identity. It draws upon narrative approaches to memory and identity in order to explore how engagement with music from the past can both afford and constrain identity construction. On the basis of in-depth interviews with, among others, heritage practitioners and audience members, I discuss how practices in the cultural and heritage industries affect the way in which popular music's past is narrated. Although those narratives offer a sense of belonging and identity through their connection to experiences of time and place, there are also factors that compromise this potential. The article discusses limits to the accuracy of memories and impediments to representations of local diversity. Furthermore, I argue that copyright regulation affects which stories about popular music’s past can be told.

Keywords
Cultural identity, cultural memory, DIY preservationism, narrative, popular music

Introduction

This article concerns the relationship between popular music memories and cultural identity. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in popular music’s capacity to evoke memories (Van Dijck, 2006) and the ways in which cultural industries feed into audiences’ attachments to music from the past (Cohen, 2013; Reynolds, 2011). In particular, the music people listened to throughout their formative years has a special significance to them during later life stages (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989). For example, rock music from the 1960s is part of the cultural memories of the baby boomer generation and is now presented as cultural heritage in museums (Leonard, 2010; Van der Hoeven and Brandellero, 2015). The study of popular music memories thus concerns how popular music and its culture are remembered and music’s capacity to induce reminiscence. To
examine the relationship between cultural identity and popular music memories, this article draws upon theories that demonstrate the importance of narratives in our experience of identity (Brockmeier, 2002; Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001; Finnegan, 1997; Kraus, 2006; Van Dijck, 2006; Wertsch, 2002).

This perspective enables me to theorize the temporal aspects of identity and the relationship between personal and shared popular music memories. Narratives make causal connections between events and thus allow us to give meaning to past experiences (Nelson, 2003). Furthermore, this approach takes into account that narratives of the past are always selective and change according to needs in the present (Misztal, 2003). This challenges conceptions of memory as the ‘storing’ of experiences (Brockmeier, 2010). Metaphors such as memory as a ‘hard drive’ or ‘archive’ imply that when memories are stored and retrieved, they remain untainted in the process of remembering. However, narrative studies demonstrate that even our personal cultural memories are dependent upon cultural practices that shape recollections. Although this raises important questions about who narrates the past and the accuracy of memories (Wertsch, 2011), the narrative approach has rarely been applied to the study of popular music (notable exceptions are Frith, 1996; Negus, 2012; Van Dijck, 2006). Nevertheless, these are apposite questions for a cultural form that is closely related to expressions of identity and distinction, but is, at the same time, riddled with myth and nostalgia. Accordingly, I set out to examine how narratives of popular music’s past both afford and constrain identity construction.

Many researchers have convincingly demonstrated the meaning of popular music memories as building blocks for identity (DeNora, 1999; Van Dijck, 2006). So far, however, there has been little discussion about the factors that might constrain this relationship. This article draws upon work that extends our understanding of music as a resource for personal identity construction (DeNora, 1999), by highlighting the connections of such individual music practices to wider sociocultural dynamics (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, 2013b; Van Dijck, 2006). In order to understand how popular music is remembered, and how this matters for our sense of self and cultural identity, one needs to consider the relationship between popular music memories and tensions between commercialism and creativity in the cultural and heritage industries.

The next section provides an overview of the literature that explains how narratives enable people to grasp the temporal and historical dimensions of human life. After discussing the methodology of this article, I apply this narrative approach to the study of popular music memories. In particular, I consider how the relationship between popular music memories and identity affords a sense of self, time and place. However, as I will discuss thereafter, narratives of popular music memories can also confine identity construction. These constraints will be examined against the background of a tension between commercialism and creativity in the cultural and heritage industries.

**Narrative approaches to cultural memory and identity**

Music has narrative aspects, as songs and lyrics tell stories (Negus, 2012). However, in this article, I focus on narratives about music and their relation to the narrative structure of memories and identities. According to Frith (1996), ‘Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives’ (p. 124). Of course, also other (non-narrative) experiences of music, memory and identity (Strawson, 2004; Wertsch, 2011) exist. Nevertheless, as I argue herein, this theoretical vantage point enhances our understanding of the relationship between cultural identity and the meanings attached to music from the past.
Following Somers’ (1994) definition, I will conceive of narratives as ‘constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment’ (p. 616). Throughout the article, I will use this concept to refer to stories about popular music’s past and their relation to identity on both personal and collective levels. These narratives range from personal memories, like experiences of love and loss associated with particular songs, to widely shared cultural narratives. However, as will become clear, even personal memories are strongly connected to social memory practices (Nelson, 2003; Van Dijck, 2006).

Narratives are expressed through ‘culture’s countless discursive registers’ (Brockmeier, 2002: 27), such as documentaries, blogs, everyday conversations and museum exhibitions. Often, they narrate similar or overlapping stories because the same narrative can be expressed through different media, genres and formats. These narratives give meaning and coherence to what would otherwise be isolated events (Nelson, 2003). Moreover, they enable us to relate our identities to wider cultural narratives: ‘The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our senses of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related’ (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001: 10). Members of a community, for example, a music scene or locality, share such stories to give an account of their identity. Furthermore, narratives provide a sense of continuity as they link the past to the present, enabling individuals to see their experiences from a historical perspective (Brockmeier, 2002; Finnegan, 1997). Arguing that recollections and identities are constituted by narratives has important theoretical implications for the study of cultural memories. Below, I will discuss consecutively the selectivity of cultural memories, their reliance upon shared memory practices and their dynamic nature.

Although they are cultural tools for remembering, narratives are also intrinsically intertwined with forgetting (Misztal, 2003). According to Wertsch (2000), this relates to the affordances and constraints of narratives: ‘The constraints in this case involve the fact that any act of emplotment inherently limits one’s perspective and results in neglecting information that is available and might be included in another narrative account’ (p. 515). However, forgetting does not only have negative consequences. Apart from the fact that it is impossible to remember all past experiences, selection allows us to express what we find important, what is worth remembering and what has special significance for us. As Brockmeier (2002) argues, ‘Because remembering as selecting always creates gaps, distortions, contradictions and other incoherences, it is also reconfiguring: by closing or ignoring gaps and omissions, it arranges new orders and creates new coherences’ (p. 22). Moreover, it makes it possible to downplay less favorable experiences. Notwithstanding these positive aspects of forgetting, its potential adverse effects on identity should not be neglected either. This is particularly the case when certain voices are marginalized (Couldry, 2010). Furthermore, this is a question about what is considered to be heritage and what is not (Smith, 2006). What is included in a narrative depends upon the contexts in which narratives are constructed and shared.

To elucidate the differences between individualist and collectivist approaches to memory, Olick (1999) made a distinction between ‘collected’ and ‘collective’ memories. Collected memories are theorized as an aggregate of individual memories without presuming that there is a collective memory that transcends the individual. This approach therefore focuses on the remembering subjects. The other theoretical position, which is more in line with the approach taken in this article, emphasizes the social aspects of remembering. Following this latter approach, remembering cannot be reduced to what happens in individual brains, as memories rely on, for example, mnemonic technologies and shared social practices for their recall. The narrative approach to remembering allows us to ‘avoid both theories rooted in social determinism (which subordinate individuals totally to a collectivity) and visions of an individualistic, atomized social order (which deny the importance
of communicative relations between people and their social embeddedness)’ (Misztal, 2003: 10). Musical memories are always embedded (Van Dijck, 2006). They are invoked in specific social settings or through particular mediums, such as exhibitions, documentaries and nostalgic dance parties (Van der Hoeven, 2014). These are spaces where personal narratives and wider cultural stories come into dialogue with each other (Rowe et al., 2002). As a consequence, even our autobiographical memories are strongly related to social memory practices. However, this does not mean that individuals passively absorb cultural narratives. Although this article emphasizes the role of the cultural and heritage industries in mediating between cultural narratives and identities, audiences of course have the agency to construct their own readings of these narratives (Misztal, 2003). Audiences will interpret the narratives offered by, for instance, documentaries and exhibitions against the background of their own biographical experiences (Rowe et al., 2002). As Brockmeier (2002) observes, there is a continuum between personal and social memories. People might, on the basis of their personal experiences, argue with the narratives of the past that are offered to them (Bagnall, 2003). On the other side of the continuum, people could confuse cultural narratives with their own experiences.

How we think about the past is thus strongly related to the ways in which memories are recalled in the present (Misztal, 2003; Van Dijck, 2006). Narratives are socially constructed and might change according to the sociocultural contexts in which they are invoked. Furthermore, the objectives of a particular narrative affect its content. To understand this, we need to think of narratives as an action, namely, a process in which meanings are communicated (Brockmeier, 2002; Finnegan, 1997). Apart from conveying information or offering entertainment, narratives could, for example, be used to foster a sense of belonging to a community or nation (Wertsch, 2002) or boost a local tourist industry (Brandellero and Janssen, 2014). Typically, a narrative will combine several of these functions. A documentary maker may seek to give a compelling and accurate account of past events, but is also expected to engage an audience. Arguably, a music documentary produced for a public television broadcaster will have a different balance between information and entertainment than one for a commercial channel (Long and Wall, 2010). Accordingly, to examine how the past is narrated, we need to look at dynamics in the cultural and heritage industries because these shape popular music memories in key ways.

**Popular music memories and the cultural and heritage industries**

Cultural and heritage industries cater for the interests of both younger and older audiences in music of the past with, for example, music exhibitions, nostalgic documentaries and magazines about ‘classic rock’ (Cohen, 2013; Van der Hoeven, 2014). Like other forms of cultural production, these memory practices can be analyzed through a focus on the tension between creativity and commerce and the widespread conviction that these two forces pull in opposite directions (Hesmondhalgh, 2013a). Producers of cultural content tend to rely on genres and formats that have proved to be successful in the past in order to avoid failures and to give audiences an indication of what to expect of a cultural product (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Hesmondhalgh, 2013a). Documentary makers, for example, will be aware in the creative process of the prevailing conventions for documentaries and the expectations audiences have about their content. Indeed, they face the challenge of catering for both well-informed music fans and a wider audience who may have less critical knowledge of popular music history (Long and Wall, 2010). This is also true for heritage institutions like museums, which use music to reach audiences who are less likely to visit more ‘traditional’ exhibitions (Leonard, 2010). In these cases, there might be a trade-off between audience maximization and the information value of narratives about popular music’s past.
In the field of popular music, this tension between creativity and commerce is often captured in the alleged opposition between the ‘mainstream’ and ‘underground’ (Wall, 2003). In this context, underground commonly refers to alternative acts on independent record labels, while mainstream concerns widely known artists with a mass appeal. Although this distinction is too simplistic to capture the field of popular music production – independent and major labels in fact rely on each other in all sorts of ways (Hesmondhalgh, 1999) – this binary opposition is real in its consequences as a vernacular term that gives meaning to practices of music consumption (Wall, 2003). Halnon (2005) analyzes the appeal of underground music as the expression of feelings of alienation in a society dominated by commercialism. Even if those ‘indie’ or ‘alternative’ acts actually sell millions of albums, they retain a great capacity to attract teenagers who want to distinguish themselves from their mainstream peers.

This opposition between underground and mainstream also gives meaning to the way people engage with music from the past. For example, fans of hardcore house claim that the ‘radio-friendly’ renditions of hardcore, which had to appeal to a wider mainstream audience, made the music more ‘commercial’ (Van der Hoeven, 2014). A music scene revolving around ‘early hardcore’ aims to go back to the original sounds of this genre. Similarly, on the production side of music memories, record labels and fan communities dedicated to specific genres attempt to raise awareness of overlooked histories of popular music or ‘forgotten artists’ (Bennett, 2009). Bennett defines these initiatives, which aim to move away from mainstream narratives, as DIY (Do-it-yourself) preservationism. Baker and Huber (2013) highlight the role of affect and the love of music in such practices: ‘We can think of DIY museums and archives, then, as places in which affect is produced and made possible through community and the process of remembering, and made again through encounters with objects that inspire both these things’ (p. 525). Leaver and Schmidt (2010), meanwhile, make a similar observation about music tourism, describing how in the not-for-profit segments of this sector conservation and authenticity are valued above the commercial exploitation of an artist’s heritage through place marketing. These studies demonstrate that the meanings attached to music from the past are strongly related to dynamics in the cultural and heritage industries. Before analyzing how this bears upon the ways in which narratives afford and constrain identity construction, I will discuss the methodological aspects of this study.

**Methodology**

The research for this article has been conducted in the context a European research project on popular music heritage, cultural memory and cultural identity. It builds upon the findings of four case studies that focused on the ways in which cultural and heritage industries construct narratives of popular music heritage and cultural memory (Van der Hoeven, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, Brandellero & Van der Hoeven, 2012). It builds upon the findings of four case studies that focused on the ways in which cultural and heritage industries construct narratives of popular music heritage and cultural memory (Van der Hoeven, 2012, 2014, 2015; Van der Hoeven and Brandellero, 2015).

The analysis of this article follows on from 44 semi-structured interviews with audience members, musicians, heritage practitioners and disc jockeys (DJs) in the Netherlands. Eight of these were telephone interviews, while the others were ‘face-to-face’. Generally, the interviews lasted about an hour. The interviews with the audience members focused on the various music-related activities they engage in, the meanings they attach to music from the past and the role of popular music-related memories in their lives. In the selection of respondents, I have sought a balance between audience members who qualify as ‘dedicated fans’ and those who have a more ‘casual
engagement’ with popular music. In the case of heritage practitioners involved in projects of music preservation, the interviews explored their motivations, archival and curatorial practices and their understandings of popular music heritage. I have interviewed both representatives of professional heritage organizations as well as grassroots initiatives of music preservation (i.e. DIY preservationism). Throughout the article, citations and examples from the interviews will be used to exemplify the main findings. These quotations have been translated from Dutch to English.

**How narratives afford identity construction**

**A sense of self and identity**

Unlike the consumption of other cultural forms such as, for example, books and theater, the experience of listening to a song can be easily repeated, which makes it possible to summon the memories it evokes with very little effort. On hearing a specific song, events are recalled that have shaped the very meanings attached to that piece of music. According to Van Dijck (2006), ‘Our personal musical repertoire is a living memory that stimulates narrative engagement from the first time we hear a song up to each time we replay it at later stages in life’ (p. 364). Researchers on ‘media memories’ have found that mass media, such as those used to consume music, becomes part of people’s life-stories (Bourdon, 2011). Through such narratives, people articulate what music means to them and how this relates to their sense of self. These self-narratives are employed to ‘organize experiences’ (Bruner, 1991; Finnegan, 1997) and present a personal identity in relation to music tastes and personal memories. The following two interview quotes are examples of this:

**I:** Of course I already have an idea of what kind of music you like, because I have read your blog, but could you, anyway, describe your taste in music?

**R:** Well, then the question actually should be which music I come from, where it began. Because I have a very broad taste in music ... I like a lot of different music genres and I believe every music genre has its gems. You would almost limit yourself by not listening to other genres. That can be anything, but where I come from, where I have seen the light, are the alternative bands from the mid-eighties. That is the foundation of my love for music. In 1986 the New Musical Express published a list of the 150 best songs of all time, which I completely devoured. Through this I have developed a very broad taste in music. This list made me think there is so much more. (Martijn, communications advisor, 42)

**I:** Could you tell me something about which music you like?

**R:** At the moment I particularly like frenchcore, tribecore, tekno and ‘early day’. That’s also how it started actually, because for years I have been an early gabber [a Dutch subculture – AvDH] so to speak. I also went to all parties related to early gabber and bought everything related to early ... aussies² ... everything I collected. (Robert, Painter, 20)

In his narrative, Martijn recalls a specific event (reading the New Musical Express (NME) list from 1986) and relates this to his openness to a wide range of music genres. Later on in the interview, he explains that his taste in music has recently broadened to include dance music. Thus, he presents himself as a ‘rounded, musically sensitive’ individual (Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 339) who is open to new aesthetic experiences and avoids nostalgia and snobbery. Furthermore, these narratives reveal the temporal aspects of identity. The question about music taste is, for these respondents, related to
their sense of self as it has developed over time. Bourdon (2003) finds changes in media consumption patterns to be often related to major transitions in people's life-cycles. He maintains that the memories associated with those forms of media offer a sense of time. As Robert explains in the quotation above, his identity of being a gabber determined for years the clothes he wore and the parties he attended. For many adolescents, affiliations with music scenes such as gabber, metal or punk provide a stable identity in the transitional period of the teenage years. Generally, it is the music listened to during such formative experiences and transitional periods that retains a special personal meaning (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989). While young people use music to construct an identity, for those who are older it also evokes those very experiences and offers a sense of continuity (DeNora, 1999). In the following section, the connections between popular music and experiences of time will be further discussed.

A sense of cultural change and nostalgia

Narratives about popular music's past offer a timeline (Van der Hoeven and Brandellero, 2012) of sociocultural developments, connecting events that exist in a temporal and causal relationship with each other. So, music history is a succession of technological, sociocultural and artistic developments that have shaped popular music as we know it today. By means of its relation to, for example, old fashions, musical objects such as vinyl and devices like transistor radios, music signifies the passing of time (Guesdon and Le Guern, 2014). The technologies and media that people used to listen to popular music have a central place in their memories (Van der Hoeven, 2012). The coordinator of a Belgium exhibition focused on ‘the 1960s’ explains how they actively attempt to evoke a sense of time by connecting to such memories:

For example, we play tunes of pirate radio stations and fragments from Radio Caroline. We want to give the feeling of what it was like for a boy of fourteen years old to sit in his bedroom with a transistor radio; searching for pirate radio stations with a clear signal, so that he could listen to those American songs.

Music, in other words, evokes a sense of what things were like in the past and thus how things have changed. Against this background, claims that music from the past is more authentic and less commercial can be understood (Van der Hoeven, 2014b). As Hayes (2006) argues about the ‘provinyl youth’ who buy long plays (LPs) from the past in search of a more authentic musical experience,

Through their retrogressive tastes and practices, these youth effectively disrupt the music industry's efforts to define and regulate their consumer identities, thus restoring a degree of autonomy to an economic relation widely perceived to be over-determined by corporate objectives, youth-oriented marketing campaigns, legal action and other forms of control advocated by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). (p. 52)

Similarly, certain music audiences loathe voice-enhancing tools like auto-tune or the advent of electronic music. Such narratives give an account of how technological developments are incorporated in the daily lives and consumption patterns of media users (Bourdon, 2011).

Others, in contrast, regard this resistance to contemporary musical developments as nostalgia, namely, a rose-tinted understanding of the past that follows on from negative feelings about the present (Davis, 1979; Van der Hoeven, 2014b). Vinyl buying youths might underestimate the extent to which artists from the past were also subject to economic rationales (Hayes, 2006). Irrespective of the question of whether things were better back then, this demonstrates how older musical forms are used as resources to produce narratives that question contemporary sociocultural practices.
While various authors have argued that nostalgia can be an impediment to creativity and musical innovation (Reynolds, 2011; Roberts, 2014), other researchers underscore the relevance of its sociocultural meanings to audiences (Van der Hoeven, 2014b). Accounts of nostalgia that solely focus on its negative consequences often neglect the ways in which people actively give meaning to nostalgic narratives. According to Pickering and Keightley (2006),

An investigation of the ways in which audiences may actively engage in the cultural making of meaning is not considered. We need to investigate the interaction between different sites of meaning-making if we are to move nostalgia away from a nebulous characterization of a particular orientation to the past, and engage instead with the distinct and specific ways in which contemporary interaction with the past is enacted. (p. 929)

In fact, distinctions can be made between different forms of nostalgia (Boym, 2001), encompassing both conservative and more progressive stances toward the past. In that sense, nostalgia is a way of engaging and coping with sociocultural change, offering people a sense of continuity in their identities by connecting past and present cultural practices (Davis, 1979). Music exhibitions, for instance, use nostalgia as a memory trigger, allowing visitors to actively relate their own biographical experiences to the exhibit (Bagnall, 2003). Furthermore, nostalgic music events like reunion concerts enable the intergenerational transfer of memories and foster community building through shared reminiscence (Van der Hoeven, 2014b).

In the next section, I will discuss how narratives of music and memory are also embedded in place.

A sense of place and local identity

As a ‘mnemonic cultural object’ (Neiger et al., 2011), popular music evokes memories that constitute local communities. Furthermore, songs might elicit memories of what places were like in the past. This could, for example, be related to a lost sense of community in working-class areas after processes of urban regeneration or deindustrialization. Roberts (2014) gives the example of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, where music, the local steel industry and history give form to a local heritage that is celebrated in music archives and the ‘Home of Metal’ exhibition. In particular, he finds that the ‘interweaving of local music heritage with industrial heritage and social history can give voice to working-class communities and identities that would otherwise struggle to secure a stake in more official forms of local heritage discourse’ (Roberts, 2014: 268).

The capacity of this heritage to give a voice to working-class communities highlights the importance of popular music heritage in terms of recognition and a sense of belonging. Projects of music preservation are used to underscore the significance of local music histories (Brandellero, Van der Hoeven & Janssen, 2016). This illustrates how the construction of narratives of popular music heritage is also a performance, aiming to change public knowledge of popular music history.

These narratives of local musical identity typically take on their specific meaning in relation to other places that are more readily recognized for their cultural value. A representative of a Rotterdambased music project, for example, argues that this city is generally perceived as ‘the second city’ and receives less attention than the capital city Amsterdam. Such cultural rivalry between cities and regions is epitomized in a quote by the British record label owner and journalist Tony Wilson: ‘But this is Manchester: we do things differently here’. This phrase, positioning Manchester in relation to England’s cultural center of London (Redfern, 2005), now adorns mugs and bags that can be bought in Manchester’s Visitor Information Centre. Brandellero and Janssen (2014) demonstrate that local music heritage is used on tourist websites and in city guides to market places.
Using these narratives to frame local music practices, journalists further perpetuate such local identities.

**Constraints on narratives and identity construction**

Notwithstanding the many positive contributions of music to identity, various factors might negatively affect this relationship. Given music’s role in negotiating recognition and a sense of belonging, it is crucial that narratives adequately represent the diversity of musical experiences.

In this section, I will discuss how copyright, a lack of accuracy and the relationship between narratives and place might constrain engagement with popular music’s past. These three aspects manifest a negotiation between commercial imperatives and established narratives on the one hand and opportunities for new narratives that question received notions of popular music’s past on the other.

**Tensions between the interests of rights holders and archivists**

In her analysis of a Dutch multimedia event revolving around music history, Van Dijck (2006) highlights ‘the importance of public space for sharing personal stories and constructing a collective musical kinship, which in turn feeds individual creativity and identity’ (p. 371). The development of such a space for the exploration of a common past can be hampered by a too strict copyright regime. Although copyright is central and vital to the way in which the cultural industries operate, as it aims to ensure fair remuneration for producers of cultural content, it might also limit access to those very cultural products. Existing copyright regimes have been called into question because they are seen as defending commercial interests instead of supporting the public accessibility of culture (Collins and Carter, 2015; Gaines, 1991).

Heritage practitioners and others working with material from the past are dependent upon the cultural artifacts available to them. When it is too expensive to get permission to use the material or find the copyright holders, it cannot be used in, for example, exhibitions or documentaries. Such copyright issues are even more salient for independent producers and DIY preservationists, as they often do not have sufficient financial and legal resources to reuse cultural content such as music and archival footage (Larsen and Nærland, 2010). However, their work is particularly vital when it comes to the diversity of the voices narrating popular music’s past.

Larsen and Nærland (2010) found that ‘copyright has implications not only for creative choices but also for the kinds of stories documentarians choose to tell’ (p. 54). In my interviews, curators and archivists made similar claims that copyright impedes the presentation of certain material to the public. A respondent involved in a project of DIY preservationism, for example, decided to place audiovisual material in a members-only section of their website. However, other archivists openly defy intellectual property rights. Collins and Carter (2015) discuss online popular music heritage initiatives that risk prosecution because they present digitized recordings and music-related ephemera. The researchers use the term ‘activist archiving’ to describe how some archivists contest the interests of rights holders by making available obscure or out-of-print recordings. For instance, they discuss a blog that presents hard-to-find South African music, which the bloggers contextualize with historical information on the rich African music heritage. Collins and Carter argue that such projects are important because they may highlight forgotten objects and raise awareness of untold or excluded histories.
The accuracy of popular music memories

A second issue that concerns the content of narratives about music’s past is the reliability and accuracy of personal memories and public accounts thereof; memories are not fixed, but change when they are being recalled (Van Dijck, 2006). In his discussion of a re-enactment of David Bowie’s last concert as Ziggy Stardust, Reynolds (2011) provides an illustrative example of how media shape personal recollections. To recreate this concert, artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard used footage from a documentary by D.A. Pennebaker:

‘Pennebaker’s film makes the gig look red’, says Forsyth. It turned out to be something to do with the 16-mm film that he used. But we decided to have the lighting make the gig look red, because even people who had gone to the original gig, through watching the movie over and over, it had distorted their memory. (Reynolds, 2011: 45–46)

This is of course a harmless example, but music’s relation to nostalgia can also involve more seriously ‘colored’ conceptions of the past. For example, rock’s alleged connection to protest and individualism might cloud how these values have been incorporated into discourses of commercialism and hedonistic self-realization. As Hesmondhalgh (2008) argues, ‘When dozens of nostalgic rock documentaries look back to the glory years of rock rebellion, they provide a comfortable picture of bohemianism for older viewers now immersed in a very different kind of autonomy’ (p. 335). This highlights the importance of counter-narratives, which problematize prevailing notions of the past. An example of this is the BBC documentary, Why I Hate the Sixties: The Decade That Was Too Good to Be True, which purports to uncover the myths surrounding this period. Similarly, an exhibition on this decade in York Castle Museum questions the pace of the cultural changes that took place and the extent to which emancipatory ideals spread across British society.

In terms of the music of this decade, curators of 1960s exhibitions have to take the expectations of their audiences into account. In the next quotation, a coordinator of an exhibition at Bokrijk, a Belgian open-air museum, explains that the conceptions people have of the 1960s are not always representative of this period:

_We deliberately decided to not let the sound of the Beatles and the Stones dominate. Although that gives the feeling of the sixties people now have, and what everybody still knows, we deliberately also give attention to the Elvis of the early sixties, Italian music, German language music and orchestral music, which was often used in television shows._

In their construction of the popular music heritage of the 1960s, curators need to strike a balance between offering the well-known stories and evoking memories that have become less salient over the years.

Impediments to the representation of local diversity

Narratives might also constrain identity construction when they obscure the diversity of experiences in a given locality. The reliance on established genres and conventions in the cultural and heritage industries might impede the narration of alternative conceptions of popular music’s past. Narratives about the alleged connections between a place and certain sounds can become a kind of myth, drawing attention away from the actual musical diversity of a locality. This is particularly the case when more attention is paid to the musical legacy of a city than to its contemporary music culture. Furthermore, an essentialist notion of local identity obscures how places in fact change over the course of time. A patriotic focus on the cultural identity of a particular locality neglects the fact that
musical creativity is often the result of artistic influences from other places. As Massey (2005) argues, places are the products of shifting interrelations and are thus always under construction. Patterns of migration bring new sounds to urban settings and may alter or diversify the musical cultures of a given locality. In relation to this, Khabra (2014) notes how the sense of Britishness constructed at the British Music Experience at the O2 Arena in London fails to engage with the contributions of the Indian community to this popular music heritage:

Notably, this exhibit marginalises Bhangra music, constructing a narrative that includes significant mentions of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Glam Rock, Punk, Reggae, the 90s Manchester music scene and Britpop. It becomes clear from progressing through the exhibit that this is a narrative of British popular music that British Bhangra is not a part of. (pp. 349–350)

Moreover, such a canonized narrative of rock music might overlook the contributions of other genres, local artists and bands without major record label deals to the development of popular music (Hayes, 2006). This highlights what are both the strengths and weaknesses of narratives. As ‘cultural tools’ for remembering (Wertsch, 2011), they give coherent and compelling accounts of the past. However, these narratives also smooth out contradictions and reduce the past to a single viewpoint (Long and Wall, 2010). As Wertsch (2011) asks with reference to the affordances and constraints of narratives, ‘By emplotting events in one way, are we blind to seeing them in others?’ (p. 28) As narratives about popular music’s past matter to our sense of identity, it is important that they do justice to the diversity of musical experiences and the sociocultural connections between places.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that popular music memories can both afford and constrain identity construction. Popular music memories enable a sense of self, time and place. However, strict copyright regimes, the inaccuracy of memories and narratives that misrepresent the diversity of experiences in a place can be obstacles to this. Together, these aspects manifest an underlying tension between commercialism and creativity in the cultural and heritage industries. Popular music memories provide opportunities for these institutions to connect to local identities and the biographical experiences of their audiences. At the same time, there is a fear that popular music loses its provocativeness and creativity when the rebellious musicians of yesteryear become part of cultural heritage discourses (Reynolds, 2011; Roberts, 2014). Nostalgia can be a meaningful way of engaging with the past, but I have argued that music’s relation to experiences of time and place can also involve regressive notions of musical identity. Furthermore, it might compromise more inquisitive studies of popular music culture. When narratives become bland or clichéd, they no longer surprise or offer new insights into music’s sociocultural meanings. However, it is possible to preserve popular music culture without doing harm to its urgency and falling prey to ‘retromania’ (Reynolds, 2011), for example, by exploring popular music culture from different vantage points, like its connections to art, fashion, the public space and politics. Such in-depth explorations of popular music culture do justice to its sociocultural, artistic and political value. To this end, adequate resources in terms of time, funding and expertise are required. Well-researched narratives can move beyond a mere appeal to biographical memories to challenge received notions about popular music’s past. In that case, music narratives connect the past and the present as a source of inspiration for the future.
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Notes

1. Of course, creativity and commercial imperatives are not necessarily incompatible. See Hesmondhalgh (2013a) for a further discussion of this tension.
2. Aussies refers to the specific brand of tracksuits that gabbers wear.

References


