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Reissue programmes: framing the past as project

Elodie A. Roy

Opening scene: the age of reissue

There is a touching, remarkable scene in Jacques Rivette's 1995 film *Haut Bas Fragile* (*Up, Down, Fragile*). We see a young woman hesitantly entering a second-hand record shop in Paris. The room is crammed with boxes of vinyl records. She approaches the shop assistant, starts humming an obscure song from the 1960s and asks him where she can find the 7-inch single. The woman – who is literally, viscerally haunted by a melody – has yearned to possess the song for a very long time. The man replies with a shrug that the shop doesn't have it. Undeterred, she asks hopefully if a 'laser' (compact-disc) reissue of the song exists. He laughs at her naivety, and explains that only big hits and commercial successes are reissued.¹ His attitude conveys the sense that *obscure material is bound to remain unknown*, lying deep within the intimate and fluctuant folds of individual remembrance. More than 20 years after the scene was shot, with the internet providing inexhaustible sources of digitised music and countless liquid 'sound souvenirs' (Bijsterveld and van Dijck 2009),² the paradigm of reissuing the recorded past has almost shifted in the completely opposite direction. It seems that anything that was ever recorded, no matter how arcane and anecdotal, is bound to surface and ricochet again, to be revived, reissued, repackaged and redistributed. Many of the 'new' releases which garnish the shelves of (surviving) record shops today are indeed re-releases,³ with more than half of the titles released for the 2014 Record Store Day being reissues (Maalsen 2016, p. 519). The art critic Roberta Smith (2014) perceptively wrote about a 'no artists left behind era' to describe the ways in which art history now resurrects and assimilates every minor, neglected artist, but also retrospectively *creates* artists, thus endlessly reforming the canon (see also Bottomley 2016, p. 154):

It's a period of sometimes exhilarating excavation and rediscovery during which art history has become larger and more inclusive. ... rescuing artists from the past ... has

¹ This is a thesis that still often dominates perception of reissues today: for instance, Bottomley (2016, p. 152) writes that 'reissues commonly serve to reaffirm readings that already exist in the broader musical culture, confirming fan discourse and thereby providing "evidence" for fans to marshal'.

² In the form of YouTube videos, for instance.

³ A shop such as Monorail (Glasgow, Scotland) elects and promotes every month its 'archival release'.

become something of a fad. ... it seems as if every gallery reaches into the past once or twice a season, if not more.

In the realm of recorded sound, rescuing and reissuing artists are equivalent. Contrary to what a 21-year-old Richard Brautigan (1999 [1955]) once wrote in melancholy jest, unknown poets may no longer be doomed to stay unknown. Hundreds of small 'boutique' reissue record labels have appeared across the Western world to embrace and recapitulate the vertiginous diversity of sonic heritage (Crane 2013, Bottomley 2016). These range from issuing lost 1960s and early 1970s pop records (Top Sounds), to Eastern European film soundtracks (Finders Keepers), classical music (Testament, Heritage), semi-professional and amateur recordings (Companion Records), African musics (Soundway, Analog Africa, Awesome Tapes from Africa), soul, rock and funk (Numero Group), reggae (Archive Bristol), or encompassing all or most of the above genres (Soul Jazz). Some of these labels (Folkways, Say Disc, Yazoo) are older than others. Some have strong, solid agendas, others were created by collectors for the pure thrill of running a record label.

We could tentatively identify three distinct waves of archival and reissue record labels: there were, first, the pioneering labels, which often arose from institutionalised sound archives; secondly, the commercial reissuing labels and programmes such as Sony Classics initiated by majors and whose practices were triggered by changes in technological formats (78s to 33s and 33s to CD, see Cross 2015, p. 151); and finally, the smaller, niche independent reissue record labels which developed and survived through the rise of the internet, and often emerged from MP3 blogs. This chapter illuminates aspects pertaining to these three waves, while drawing attention to their continued interdependence. It opens with a quick panorama of past and current reissuing practices and the discourses which accompanied them, from the establishing of the first sound archives to contemporary reissue record labels. It then moves on to theorise the two main poles in contemporary reissuing – that of documenting and that of monumentalising the past – through two case studies. I first examine the French archival record label *Frémeaux & Associés* which, since 1991, prides itself in preserving 'our collective memory'. Secondly, I survey the British record label *Finders Keepers* (founded in 2005) which re-releases a range of thematic recordings from around the globe.

From anthologies to reissues

Tales from the sound archive

Impulses of locating, rearticulating or ‘remediating’ (Bolter and Grusin 1998) the aural past are nothing new: the discourses on anthologising music predate the consolidation of the record industry in the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, early song collectors and musicologists such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Clemens Brentanos or John Philip Sousa applied themselves to gather, compare and produce scientific knowledge about vernacular musical forms of the past. Their documentary practice was rooted in both romantic and scientific interests; it combined the subjective desire to return to uncorrupted, primary musical forms with a will to objectively analyse the changes, corruption and revivals which affected them. In keeping with the scientific models of explanation of the time, the song was seized as a species, an objectified form irresistibly caught in a linear evolutionary process and, reciprocally, available for anatomical dissection (Hoffmann 2015, p. 76).

The advent of phonography in the late nineteenth century definitely changed the modes of analysing and storing sound as well as the epistemic relationship to the archive, for it became possible to capture in real time the voices, rituals and songs of the cultural ‘other’. As poignantly summarised by Nora (1989, p. 13), ‘Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image’. The phonograph introduced the possibility of founding an archival matrix whose dynamic contents would unfold in real time. It stored not merely the trace of sound but the actual movement of sound – that is to say *time* – itself. The first sound archives were created at the turn of the twentieth century in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. Their birth marked a first, important phase in practices of collecting – and, later, ‘branding’ and reissuing – music. First director of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv Erich von Hornbostel precociously realised that his ‘scientific’ recordings could also yield commercial benefits. In the early 1930s, the ethnomusicologist set himself to commercially release on gramophone records two emblematic compilations of archival recordings, respectively titled the *Demonstration Collection* (containing recordings from the 1900–1913 period) and *Music of the Orient*. These sets, released through the transnational Parlophone and Odeon labels, were the first of their kind in the world (Bohlman 2002, pp. 28–32) and constituted a blueprint for later (world-music) reissuing programmes.⁴ Symptomatically enough, the *Demonstration*

⁴ It must be noted that the Phonogramm-Archiv has carried on releasing archival recordings in collaboration with partner institutions. See for instance *Songs of Longing* (2014).

Collection was in turn reissued by the crucial North American label Folkways in 1963. In addition to anthologies of recorded sound, classical music labels such as L'Oiseau Lyre (France/Australia) and Archiv Produktion (a subsection of Deutsche Grammophon) were central in curating and 'sonifying' the written musical past and, by extension, fashioning a 'tasteful' class of listeners (in conjunction with specialised publications such as *The Gramophone*). What these labels proposed was mainly a paradoxical gesture of inventing a tradition or a 'golden', perfect age of music (expressed, for instance, in Curt Sach's monumental *Anthologie Sonore* recorded for Parlophone between 1933 and 1954). Such a gesture was implicitly informed by a conservative subtext.

Popular collectors, critics and diggers

It is only in the second half of the twentieth century, following from the transnational rise of the record industry (Gronow and Saunio 1998), that reissuing programmes became at once more systematised and undisciplined. The material accumulation and surplus of music encourages 'digging', collecting (and, later, reissuing) practices (Vale and Juno 1993, Straw 2000) where 'diggers' operate a conversion of cultural waste into valuable heritage (a process which forms one of the most potent cultural mechanisms in industrial and post-industrial societies; see Thompson 1979, Neville and Villeneuve 2002). Furthermore, periods of industrial transition from one listening format to another – such as during the 1960s, early 1990s and 2000s – coincided with phases of intensive reissuing; they signaled the will to preserve contents by migrating them towards the newest storage formats. More cynically, they also constituted a means to generate profit by selling to the public what it already owned. Anderson (2008, pp. 51–52) muses on the psychology of re-buying material in a new format, as if the listener was searching for something new, previously unsuspected, within familiar forms. To listen back to a reissue may be a means to recover one's private past (*biography*), as well as to gain a further knowledge of the 'past' in general (*history*).

In 1986, the folklorist Norm Cohen wrote about the function and value of country and western reissues in one of the earliest scholarly pieces surveying reissuing practices. Though well aware of the 'biases of the collectors who do the fieldwork', Cohen (1986, pp. 370–371) underlined how essential these were to help listeners develop a more coherent vision of the recorded past. Reissue record labels, and especially small independent record labels, made legible and accessible material which had previously been hard to find; in doing so, they

therefore performed a distinctly educational purpose (Cohen 1986, p. 371). They were there to guide the listener, and help them structure his or her historical knowledge of music. Cohen (1986, p. 371) goes on to describe the Columbia programme of historic reissuing⁵ in great detail. The Columbia History Reissue Series was one amongst many. Columbia had started reissuing records as early as 1960, the date when the Legacy LP Series was first launched (*Billboard* 1960, p. 11) with the aim of releasing album-books retracing North American history through sound. Mainstream record labels continued to capitalise upon their past successes (selling golden oldies, budget-priced compilations, etc.) the way book publishers kept in print particularly significant or successful titles.

Several cultural intermediaries between the material object, its symbolic content and its public or consumers can be identified. Drawing from D.F. McKenzie's concept of 'bibliography', Chartier (2005) insists on the layered temporalities and multiple agencies shaping books as cultural objects across time, gathering to themselves complex sets of materials and people (proofreaders, printers, collectors, critics, listeners, and so on). He reminds us that 'the process of publication, whatever its modality, is always a collective process, which implies new agents and where the materiality of the text is not separated from the textuality of the book' (Chartier 2005, p. 9, my translation), a conclusion which also applies to records. In addition to the professional collector, the 'popular collector' (Martin 1999) soon emerged as a driving force for the mediation of popular music heritage. Writing at the turn of the 1970s, the North American rock critic and collector Lester Bangs frequently reviewed deleted, hard to find records for *Creem* or *Rolling Stone*. By bringing attention to personal aural remembrances and 'lost' LPs from his own collection, he implicitly defied the linear, one-directional calendar of commercial pop culture (which embraces the new, the transient and the immediately consumable). His reviews paradoxically contributed to the rediscovery and industrial reissue of records, and it is partially through his passionate sagacity that albums such as Nico's *The Marble Index* (1968) eschewed cultural oblivion. The anthologising of Lester Bangs' writings by Greil Marcus in 1988, followed by a commemorative reissue in 2001, ensured that they continued to impress readers' imaginations, arousing their curiosity long after the author's death.

Literature on popular music reissues has often been fuelled by the writer's own musical

⁵ The programme started in the early 1980s.

sensibilities, memories and power of evocation. Its most convincing and abundant developments lie in the field of cultural journalism (Reynolds 2011), and frequently verge on the autobiographical essay (we could also cite here the rich writings of Kevin Pearce). Through an implicit pact of sincerity and testified presence ('I was there'), these writers achieve both an emotional transfer and (loose) cultural transmission. But journalism proposes an eminently *ephemeral* discourse which, just as the recordings it embraces, is generally bound to a 'commercial now'.

More detached (and scarcer) scholars of reissues strive to disentangle themselves from this ephemeral discourse by looking at reissue cultures historically and geographically, as located in heritage practices and as practices of the self in time. They engage with processes of long-term circulation and consumption. Maalsen (2016) for instance is particularly keen to evidence how independent music from the past gets excavated and curated, allowing for a reordering of the musical canon and the creation of 'alternative heritages'. Bottomley (2016) embraces listening back as a biographical practice, a re-assembling of the self in and for the present. Why do people listen to reissues? What kind of particular cultural mechanisms allow for reissue practices to take place? What kind of relationships to 'contemporary' regimes of memory do reissue cultures betray (Roy 2014, 2015)? These general questions can only be answered by identifying particular articulations, colourations and singular occurrences of reissuing. We may collectively agree that to reissue is to dynamically re-present the past – but this is insufficient. One totalising 'explanation' for all reissue cultures is impossible: there is no system of reissues. Accordingly, we must approach reissue practices as idiosyncratic, situated and fragmented ventures – and keep emphasising their two-sided life as commercial and sociocultural practices.

Frémeaux & Associés and the encyclopedic impulse

The French reissue record label Frémeaux & Associés constitutes one of the only, and most coherent, independent reissuing record labels in France – it almost has the monopoly of reissuing in the country (although some independent micro-labels such as Superfly also exist). The label's website further 'intends to be the first portal dedicated to the sonic patrimony' (Frémeaux *et al.* 2008, p. 11, my translation). Frémeaux & Associés is a large-

scale venture, with many ramifications and international distribution agreements,⁶ and more than 7,000 retailers across the world. The label hires eight salaried employees, and has formed strategic partnerships with individual artists, patrimonial institutions (museums, sound archives, libraries), and book publishers who have collected sound material. It could therefore be described as a core – and fluid – platform for articulating and putting in relation different actors of the heritage sector.

Founded by the art dealer and collector Patrick Frémeaux in 1991, in a pre-digital context, the label has set itself the ambitious and delicate task of preserving and making available ‘our collective memory’ – this is an ambiguous formulation. Which collective memory, exactly? How can French identity/ies be expressed in and through sounds? And which identity/ies are put forward? As noted in the 25 points peremptorily detailing the activities of the company, the aim is to:

represent the francophone literary, philosophical, political and historical patrimony across the whole world, but also to showcase, in France, varied worldwide musical cultures, with particular attention to the history of urban popular musics, in order to defend and promote them, and finally to disseminate worldwide cultures on an international scale through the commercial platform. (Frémeaux *et al.* 2008, p. 9, my translation)

What Frémeaux & Associés proposes is a comprehensively militant or political (in the broader sense of the word) vision of the world through recordings, hopefully engaging us to *listen* to history and answering ‘a pedagogical need to give keys’ (Frémeaux 2008, p. 4). Here, sound archives get ‘rebranded’ from ‘musty places where documents go to die’ to ‘sites of interaction and energy, connection and outreach’ (Turin 2011, p. 451). They become public and publicised, woven into an often implicit process of national identity formation. It should come as no surprise that the label’s founder indefatigably takes part in national debates concerning the status of sonic heritage in France. He has notably penned a number of administrative memoirs and theses, including a ‘Green report on the distribution of the audio archive heritage linked to the public domain’ (first published in 2001). The report was communicated to the Ministry of Culture, to fellow sound archivists and to the press to argue against the extension of the copyright period from 50 to 70 years. For Frémeaux, this extension signified a considerable loss for archival labels specialising in curating and

⁶ For instance, with Naxos in Canada and the USA, Discovery in the UK, Galilelo in Germany, etc.

distributing public domain recordings.

The label, offering a 73-page, A4 catalogue for the 2016–2018 period, has released hundreds of albums and box sets (with a quarter of its catalogue represented by public domain recordings), all of them systematically organised and filed under 11 distinct categories: ‘philosophy’, ‘history’, ‘oral archives’, ‘audiobooks’, ‘youth’, ‘jazz’, ‘blues, gospel, rock’, ‘chanson’, ‘world musics’, ‘sounds of nature’, and ‘live in Paris’. With archival sources on the Algerian war to recordings of mento and calypso, writers’ readings, early jazz cultures, one gets the sense of a vast, sonic treasure trove, appealing to various generations of listeners and wide-ranging musical sensibilities. Each CD release is initially pressed at 300 copies and, while some titles prove immediately popular with the public, others only appeal to a handful of connoisseurs: for instance, ‘the 22 historical discourses of Léon Blum only interested 600 people in four years’ (Frémeaux 2008, p. 2, my translation) while over 10,000 copies of a Django Reinhardt anthology were sold. It is because the catalogue is so vast that Frémeaux can afford to produce and distribute less successful titles. The technical work of restoration (and systematic digitisation) of the recordings is combined with an in-depth work of contextual research and classification carried out by dedicated experts specially commissioned by the record label (historians, musicologists, and so on) and occasionally made in collaboration with the former, aged owners of the original recordings (this is mainly the case for 78s). The act of reissue starts with human contacts rather than contact with the recorded object – it is first and foremost a function of social relationships. Frémeaux’s most potent work lies in the realm of restoring and researching the history of the recordings in a collaborative fashion, and with the support of heritage institutions.

The encyclopedic drive and collective work of ‘sonic museography’ carried out by the label is backed up by a real financial and material infrastructure, and a healthy business model. Frémeaux remains a scholarly, relatively ‘old school’ reissue record label (precisely because it was established before the phonographic crises of the turn of the 2000s), which shares commonalities with other labels founded in the early 1990s, such as the North American label Yazoo (which specialised in reissuing ethnographic recordings originally issued on cylinders or 78s records). In terms of aesthetics, the label develops a rather rudimentary visual language, carrying no palpable or persistent ‘image’. Frémeaux recordings are not collected for their appeal as scopophilic objects, let alone as art objects per se, but first and foremost

for the rare contents and sonic secrets they may yield: they first and foremost exist as documents. There is a quiet, resolute untimeliness – but no archaism – to the label’s existence, which, although it embraces digital means of distribution and promotion, seems a remnant of the old musical business world.

Finders Keepers and the simularchive

The British record label Finders Keepers, founded in 2004 by Andy Votel and Doug Shipton, epitomises the contemporary wave of reissuing labels. Finders Keepers’ catalogue is wide-ranging and seemingly undisciplined, embracing a variety of temporal and geographical sites often issuing material which was only released confidentially. The label’s catalogue counts more than 250 titles, resembling a randomly-assembled ‘Harlequin’s coat’. It lacks a pattern but this absence of uniformity itself creates a genre, so that we could argue ‘reissue’ has become the name of a new genre of popular music, in and for itself.

Reissue labels such as Finders Keepers continue to release physical objects (CDs, vinyl records, cassettes, as well as promotional artefacts) but they were established in the wake of digital ‘dematerialised’ musical cultures, often rising from MP3 blogs (see Borschke 2012).⁷ They generally emerged under the impulse of younger, passionate – almost exclusively male – vinyl archaeologists or ‘crate-diggers’ (a term closely linked with hip-hop culture), rummaging through distant market stalls, private collections and record shops to locate little known discs and tapes. African hip-hop collector Thomas Gesthuizen (2016, n.p.), in the liner notes for the second volume of *Kenya Special* (Soundway Records), insightfully comments on the novel type of reissuing ventures:

The approach to musical discovery that is behind *Kenya Special* has its origins in a youthful movement of vinyl collecting (and to some extent club culture), which has, in the past decade and a half, carved out its own niche alongside the established music industry.

Here, the activity of reissuing is often combined with radio shows, film nights, DJ sets, sometimes even a dedicated physical record shop,⁸ and more dynamic, spectacular presentations of the recordings. The recordings collected worldwide (with a neat predilection

⁷ This is the case, for instance, of the relatively well-exposed New York-based Awesome Tapes from Africa, which first existed as a collection of found tapes the author would post and share online (encouraging his audience to send him files to re-post and re-present).

⁸ Such as Superfly in Paris.

for urban dance musics from the African continent) may therefore be taken, in turn, on worldwide tours and injected again in a hybrid global economy, with sometimes aged, long-forgotten recording artists invited to perform again. Emphasis on the performability of the recorded object in the DJ sets is reminiscent of the very first phonographic spectacles organised by Edison for captivated audiences, and the subsequent gramophone-listening clubs of the interwar period. Phonography and the materiality of the music object then occupy the centre of the musical experience. This return to tangible artefacts, prompted by a longing ‘to have and to hold’ (Blom 2004), can be read as a by-product of dematerialised digital cultures and the wish to make music *magical* again, reconciling the material fetish with a dynamic live economy. What matters in such a case is less to create an accurate relationship to the past than to coin an authentic, haptic relationship to one’s physical environment through the medium of the physical object. Musing on the material enhancement of reissues, Bottomley (2016, p. 160) writes that they:

may include pressing albums on high-quality, audiophile-grade 180-gram vinyl, including albums from the CD era that were never previously available on the (currently in-demand) vinyl format. Another strategy is to create artificial scarcity through limited edition pressings, hand-numbering, special colored vinyl, and the like. These are just some of the ways in which reissue producers attempt to control or redirect the discourse of authenticity.

The effort to synthesise the material and digital realms remains one of the most striking aspects of contemporary (reissue) record labels. The latter completely rely upon digital environments and outlets (to promote and disseminate their activities, but also to locate and establish links with collectors and artists they may wish to re-release). The current constellation of niche record labels can be seen in direct correlation with the internet boom, which facilitated processes of collective discovery and sharing of lost recordings and other musical oddities.

Finders Keepers’ collection (its catalogue) – with its frequent idiosyncrasies – shares a number of affinities with the private collection, passionately and knowingly assembled by the connoisseur (Baudrillard 1968). For just as the private collector may be embarking on countless real or metaphoric digital journeys to locate the object of his or her desire, the

founders of small reissue record labels often travel extensively and at great cost to secure recordings. They are partially driven by sets of individual forces, stories, attachments and personalities. The small record label constitutes a discrete ‘way of world-making’ (Goodman 1978), that is to say it performs or projects a vision of the world, relying on artefacts from the past to elaborate or literally *release* contemporary meanings. Similarly, the private collector frequently seeks to create, either consciously or not, an autonomous and safe realm of meaning through the possession, careful selection and arrangement of objects (Baudrillard 1968).

This desire for the past can reciprocally be read as a longing for a temporal as well as a geographical otherness. Maps, as well as postcards and visual exotica, frequently ornate the booklets of contemporary music reissues. Frémeaux & Associés and Finders Keepers have strikingly similar logos featuring the terrestrial globe, a traditional symbol for businesses metaphorically seeking to ‘cage’ the world (the record label Third Man also uses a globe as a logo). Many compilations are organised around geographical locations. The collector is pictured as an inexorably lonesome, almost typically male traveler, a flâneur in the world of sound – a relative luxury in a time of acceleration and generalised socio-economic precariousness. The goal is less to offer a comprehensive vision than to provide a pleasurable, subjective place of (self-)display for the collector. In his introduction to the compilation *Nigeria Special* (Soundway), Miles Cleret (2007, n.p.) writes:

... these two discs are in no way meant to be an ultimate, definitive or truly authoritative collection. These are just twenty-six recordings that deserve to be heard again. ... These tracks are some of my favourites, selected from among the thousands that generally lie un-listened-to amongst piles of records kept under beds, in cupboards, suitcases and lock-ups all over Nigeria.

A potential risk is to replicate a real or symbolic form of neocolonial exploitation, where the artists do not get paid by the reissue record label, either because it is impossible to locate them, or because no particular effort is made towards finding them. Hence the insistence of some label-founders to meet the artists and inform listeners that ‘all tracks [are] fully licensed’ (as stated on the sleeves of Analog Africa’s recordings). To label is always already to classify, to organise, to manage otherness. Exoticism ‘amounts to constructing the Other to

be different, but not frighteningly so – a difference that makes the Other able to seduce and to be consumed’ (Arom *et al.* 2011, p. 396). There may be, then, a subtle ‘absorption’ and formatting of the other: the record, after all, can metaphorically and literally be seen as a standardised box, a safely self-enclosed territory.⁹

Reissue record labels provide a symbolic and material place to articulate and rearrange the sonic past, as one would rearrange artefacts in a museum display or at home to tell slightly different stories. As such, they function as sites of *reflexivity*, constituting themselves as *laboratories of the past to come*. On its website, the Numero Group (n.d.) label typically claims that it releases ‘albums reimaged, imagined here for the first time, and currently still beyond imagining’. This playful re-composition bears no systematic relationship to hard history (periodised and factually defined in documents), rather it exists in the softer, evocative halo of free associations, remembrance and daydreams. Archival record labels are not traditional archives and, in many ways, they are not archives at all. If the archive is to be defined as ‘the site where official records were guarded and kept in secrecy’ (Featherstone 2006, p. 591), the only archive labels may yield (providing that some physical holdings remain) is that of the company itself, with its scrolls of financial accounts, business correspondence, contracts, and so on. What the record label creates is the simulation of an archive – a form of ‘simularchive’ (to playfully adapt Sarah Atkinson’s term of ‘simulacinema’), which can be defined as the ‘counter-image of the archive: the archive as the repository of material which has only been loosely classified, material whose status is as yet indeterminate and stands between rubbish, junk and significance; material which has not been read and researched’ (Featherstone 2006, p. 594).

Beyond nostalgia: the open-endedness of listening

The age of the industrial reissue is, of course, not limited to recorded sound but embraces every aspect of consumer culture, from the most popular, disposable forms – such as comic strips – to high-end designer items (clothes, shoes, perfume, and so on).¹⁰ In his pioneering sociology of nostalgia, published in 1979, Davis noted that ‘thousands of firms exist dedicated to preserving, propagating, and deriving income from one slice of the recent past

⁹ We can also think of a cassette, once a small case in which to keep precious documents and jewellery, as a cage (it provided the miniature fortress in which Goethe’s Melusina lived).

¹⁰ In 2016, the British shop Marks & Spencer released an ‘Archive collection’ inspired by its most iconic pieces of womenswear.

about which people feel or can be made to feel nostalgic' (p. 118). The fear of the old engulfing the new, or the danger of a dead-end 'retromania' (Reynolds 2011), is a state of cultural affairs regularly denounced from the 1970s – when the first writings on consumer's nostalgia (Cross 2015) were published – to the present day. Writing for the *The Face* in 1985,¹¹ David Toop described, for instance, a 'retro a go-go' situation, lamenting upon the ceaseless flow of reissues and nostalgic re-editions. He complained that 'Everywhere you look it's images of the past' (Toop 1985, p. 77), a stark but curiously timeless statement. The difference with earlier ventures now is the intensity of reissues and the rapidity with which they may flood – and interrupt – the circuit of cultural production, which makes up for the extreme heterogeneity (and quasi-illegibility) of the popular music landscape today. Surveying fashion subcultures across the twentieth century, Ted Polhemus (1994) noted the sudden convergence of subcultural styles in the postmodern 1990s; he used the slightly derisive term 'the supermarket of style' to describe the unruly, random mix-and-match aesthetics which characterised subcultural groups' wear. Today's musical scenes are similarly heterogeneous, but this is not necessarily the sign of a cultural asphyxia. Nostalgia, 'a major driving force in heritage-making' (Berliner 2012, p. 769), is not the only force prompting the reissuing (and consumption) of *musical* heritage-making.

Practices of reissuing induce a different relationship to cultural consumption, where one gets to look forward to an old recording, reinserted in the linear axis of time and the everyday. A re-released record comes to exist synchronically with new releases, thus cohabiting more closely with current trends. When it is reissued, a recording is also activated for a second (or third) time, extending its field of influence to new listeners. This is also true of every new re-edition of a work of literature and, to some extent, of every major retrospective of an artist's work. To reissue is to create a potential for appropriation and reinvention. Works distant in space and time can become so close as to influence current artistic forms and practices. For instance, the intensive release of compilations and reissues of the briefly-lived French post-punk bands¹² of the early to mid-eighties incited a generation of young people to form bands

¹¹ A leading British music and fashion magazine.

¹² For instance, we can cite the compilations *Frenchy But Chic* (Virgin 1994), *Rose Bonbon – Open all night* (Le Maquis 2002), *So Young But So Cold – Underground French Music 1977–1983* (Tigersushi 2004), *Des Jeunes Gens Mōdernes – Post punk, Cold wave et culture novō en France 1978–1983* (Naïve 2008).

and release albums. In the 1950s, Folkways' *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), compiled by Harry Smith, had been a significant catalyst for the New York folk revival scene of the mid-1950s to early 1960s.

To reissue is to consolidate, or retrospectively create, a culture while also allowing it to flourish again and influence new audiences. Each reissue marks a small reshaping of the recorded past. The consumption of heritage therefore allows for its transformation; it guarantees the continuation of a cultural life which, in order to persist, needs to rely on the dynamic reactivation of past forms. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne – the muse of memory – is the mother of all arts: it is she who links and holds together a set of greatly disparate personalities. And yet, as soon as a record is played, it may be that temporal distances are being crossed, and history may vanish in favour of the immediately, inexorably present shock of listening (Ernst 2016). There is a pure aesthetic joy of discovery, of being emotionally touched by a recording – no matter how historical – *for the first time* or *as if it was the first time*. The predominantly phenomenological encounter with the aural past may in this case supersede a more dialectical and reflective relation to history. Affect, it may be argued, may go in the way of actually suspending or erasing historical mediation. What is, then, 'archival' or 'historical' about a recording from the past? To what extent can the dynamic object of experience be reduced to a patrimonial site? How can we fruitfully theorise the primarily somatic encounter with sound, the asymmetry between *hearing* and *reading* the past? The written and visual documentation which accompanies the reissue may construct and mediate some knowledge about the past, but the listening event disperses or shatters its object, resonating in a transhistorical or even anti-historical fashion. For there can be no strictly inherited event – or pleasure – of listening, a practice which always already constitutes its object in and for the present.

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