

## Scene But Not Heard: Strategies for Collecting Local Music

### Introduction

Good morning IAML delegates, and thank you for attending my session. The title of my talk is “Scene But Not *Heard*: Strategies for Collecting Local Music.” This is a revised version of a talk I gave at my MLA regional chapter this past May, and I’m excited to share this work with an international audience.

The purpose of this talk is to examine local music from theoretical and practical perspectives, and consider its place in the music collections of academic libraries. I will discuss perspectives from a variety of disciplines on what constitutes “local music,” and how we can better serve to understand, collect, document, promote, and provide *meaningful* access to local music in libraries.

I will frame my discussions of local music collection strategies using perspectives from popular music studies, cultural studies, and historical perspectives from music librarianship.

I will mostly be looking at the “scenes” approach from popular music

studies, and focus on the local popular music scene--a specific type of scene in this approach.

I will also discuss the current development of a local music collection at my own institution-- the University of Alberta Music Library. Lessons learned, strategies taken, and challenges yet to be overcome will all be discussed, in addition to practical details such as acquisitions and cataloguing, and providing access to local music materials. This is a new activity for us, so I hope we can have some discussion some of your more developed local music collections.

### **Framing the Problem**

When I started my position at the University of Alberta Music Library, I had heard an anecdote about the collecting philosophy of my library system. It reads: "A good collection does not *just* mean that you have what everyone else has, but that you have what **nobody** else has." Some may interpret this statement to mean: we collect things that others do not, which I will admit is partly true.

However, this philosophy has informed my so far short career as a Music Librarian, and helped me realize that this collecting philosophy is second

nature to most music librarians: we collect the materials that others do not want to deal with, tirelessly track down scores and recordings that we know are “important” or “underrepresented”, and juggle the resource needs of the user groups we serve with the desire to obtain the “one of a kind.”

The approach of a large ARL library system such as the University of Alberta to collect anything and everything can result in the difficulty in being able to see “the trees for the forest,” so to speak. Trying to collect “everything that everyone else has” can easily take over collecting “what nobody else has.” Local music collections are likely candidates in the “what nobody else has” category in many communities, including mine. Local music materials are almost categorically ephemeral, and often forgotten in place of the more immediate needs of our user communities.

The problem then lies in knowing where to focus our efforts on collecting local musical materials, i.e. which “difficult” and “unique” materials will we invest our time in collecting.

For most of us, we will never be able to collect anything and everything related to the musical life of our communities. I would argue however, that by understanding the various ways in which local music can be

understood, how it operates within our communities, and ways in which we can better engage with it, can make the creation of a local music collection that much easier.

### **A Little History - Music Libraries on Local Collections**

Collections of local materials in libraries are certainly nothing new, nor are collections of this kind with a significant local music component. There is a well documented history in the music library literature of enthusiasm for local music collections, and impassioned calls for music librarians to pay attention to the music of their own communities.

Harold Spivacke, in an article in *Notes* in 1940 speaks passionately about the responsibility that libraries of all types have in preserving and providing access to music collections of local interest. Spivacke writes that **QUOTE** “[the role of the library] is to collect, preserve and make available a record of the past and present life of the community it serves” **END QUOTE** (Spivacke, 50).

Spivacke goes on to explain the various kinds of materials that librarians should collect to document the musical life of the communities they serve (for example - concert programs; archives of performing groups, scores of community composers, etc.) and how to acquire them; process them, and

build relationships with community musicians and organizations. His suggestions still reign true today, and serve as a good basis for local music collection programs.

A common thread in Spivacke's article is that one cannot expect national libraries to be able to adequately collect materials of your local musical culture (I should note that at this time Spivacke was working in the Music Division of the Library of Congress). This observation is quite timely given the recent dismantling of national libraries and archival institutions under austerity, with music and arts divisions often being the first to suffer (this is particularly true in Canada in recent months, with major cuts made to Library and Archives Canada, including the discontinuation of the National Archival Development Program, which provided “contribution funding for archival projects to archival institutions, organizations, and provincial and territorial archival councils”).

Furthermore in the Canadian context, satellite music libraries of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) were recently forced to *expediently* weed their collections, and consolidate their sound recordings with those at the national headquarters in Toronto. Luckily my library was able to obtain some of the discards from the Edmonton CBC music library,

but with yet another vital collector of musical heritage being undermined, the offloading of this responsibility falls to other libraries in the community.

Spivacke continues to note how local music collections contribute to the larger goal of comprehensive national collections. By having a local music collection, Spivacke writes **QUOTE** “the librarian so engaged, is preserving for all the country, the documentary evidence of one of the most important elements of our nation's culture” **END QUOTE** (Spivacke, 54).

Twenty five years later writing in *Notes*, Dena Epstein revisits Spivacke’s call for the creation of music collections of local interest, and again points to the importance of local collections in contributing to the documentation of a national musical culture.

Epstein writes: **QUOTE** “To a good librarian, being able to answer questions about the community and its citizens is a matter of self-respect...[and] The local history of music...has more than a regional interest, since definitive treatments of music...cannot be written until local studies provide the groundwork” **END QUOTE** (Epstein, 18).

Epstein is well known for her contributions to the history of American

music, and in particular the musical culture of Chicago, for which she collected extensive local materials. Epstein, like Spivacke, were both of the “old guard” of music librarianship, where collecting local materials was seen as imperative to the functioning of a “good music library,” and simply part of what music libraries were tasked with doing.

Epstein and Spivacke’s insights on the importance of local music collections, and practical strategies for collecting local music are still useful today. What is perhaps needed is a modernized understanding of local music collections, taking into account changes in musical culture, the expanded scope of music collections in general, and shifting demographics of the communities we serve.

What first comes to mind in this respect is the greater inclusion of popular and world musics in our collections, in addition to more ethnic diversity in our communities.

Today, music libraries are faced with a “bittersweet” situation in regards to local music collecting. Roger Levesque, writing about the music scene in Edmonton in our daily paper *The Journal* writes in 2006: **QUOTE** “as the volume of non-mainstream music releases grows larger and larger

every year, finding a good selection of that same music is getting harder and harder” **END QUOTE** (Levesque, 2006@D.14). 6 years later, Levesque’s observation is even more true; with local musicians foregoing releasing their music on physical media and releasing online only, and libraries not yet having a way to acquire this music, collecting local music is paradoxically stalled. This should not discourage librarians from continuing to pursue local collecting however; this should prompt us to adapt to changing modes of distribution in service of our local collections, and inspire us to take advantage of the increasing availability of local music materials in plain view.

Another challenge in developing local music collections is in how much work has been done by our predecessors in this area. In many cases, local music may have been out of scope or simply not paid attention to for reasons of workload, resources constraints, etc. Also, it is likely that not all music librarians have thought as broadly about the role of music libraries to collect local music as Spivacke and Epstein did. Historically, music libraries generally did not collect popular musics until relatively recently.

Michael Rafferty, reflecting on his experience of building a local



music collection in the Leicester reference library, remarks how much of the strength of a local music collection depends on the efforts of your predecessors, and on what they considered to be the role of the music library: he writes **QUOTE** “We ignore the low-brow at our peril” **END QUOTE** (Rafferty@12).

Rafferty was remarking on the difficulty of playing “catch-up” in his local music collection; local popular music had not really been collected by his library in the past despite the fact that significant music scenes were going on in his community including skiffle for example.

He was now faced with wanting to catch up with the music scene of Leicester in his collection, and was presented with recordings of skiffle music that were now pricey collector's items. The role that music libraries have historically played in enforcing the Western Musical Canon, and presenting a legitimated history of music through their collections should not be overlooked--this is perhaps a topic for another paper!

### **What is “Local Music”?/The Local Music “Scene”**

Moving on from the approaches to local music collecting from the library world, I will now discuss recent theoretical perspectives on local

music from academia. As I will demonstrate, by revising our understanding of what constitutes local music, we are better prepared to increase our engagement with it. For this purpose, I will discuss the “scenes approach” and the insights this approach can have on local music collections. The “scenes approach” from popular music studies arose out of scholars in the 1990s trying to grapple with issues of music and locality in an increasingly fragmented popular music industry, in which independent music scenes and new genres seemed to be popping up left and right.

Historically, the term “music scene” comes to us from the journalistic literature of the golden age of jazz. Richard Florida explains that the term was used to describe **QUOTE** “the musical genres associated with mid-20th-century crossroads music locations that brought diverse rural talent into contact with larger audiences, performance venues, recording studios, radio stations, managers, and record labels” **END**

**QUOTE**(Florida@787) (for example, the notable jazz scenes centered around large urban centres such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans, etc.).

Richard Florida refers to this phenomenon as “clustering,” which he

argues is less prevalent today in other industries, but amazingly still continues in music. While this definition is a useful starting point for engaging with local music, it misses the larger range of musical practices that are going on in our communities at any given time. It is obvious that the music scene that a location is known for is only part of the story, and that diverse music scenes exist outside of large urban centres.

This is where the music scenes approach from popular music studies comes in.

First used in an academic context by Will Straw in 1991, the music scenes approach offers a more holistic view of musical culture not tied to traditional dichotomies of popular vs. serious music, or bound by mainstream understandings of musical genre and location which are in fact merely commercial constructs. Straw defines music scenes as : **QUOTE** “that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.” **END QUOTE** (Straw 1999@373).

The most famous study which expands on Will Staw's work in the early 1990s, and edited by Andy Bennett, outlines three major types of music scenes: local, translocal, and virtual. For the purposes of this talk, I will only focus on the local scene, which Bennett defines as: **QUOTE**

A focused social activity that takes place in a delimited space and over a specific span of time in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans realize their common musical taste, collectively distinguishing themselves from others by using music and cultural signs often appropriated from other places, but recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene (Bennett,

8) **END QUOTE**

Bennett's study, and others using the scenes approach are mostly concerned with independent popular music scenes that operate outside of the standard channels of commercial distribution (whether or not the music is in fact released independently). The scenes approach does however provide many insights for music librarians attempting to grow their own local music collections, regardless of musical genre or format, because it broadens the understanding of what local music can and should include.

It is an expanded definition of local music that quite simply considers

what musical activities are going on in a given space and time. It also allows us to consider music that originated elsewhere as still being local, as this music takes on a local character by merit of the fact that it is occurring in our community.

An example in Edmonton that comes to mind is the vibrant roots music scene: roots music clearly did not originate in Edmonton, and it borrows musical conventions and cultural codes from elsewhere, but there is an identifiable roots music scene in Edmonton, that is of a distinctly Edmonton character.

The scenes approach is counter to the use of the label “subculture” to describe divergent music scenes operating outside of the mainstream, which comes to us from a more ‘traditional’ cultural studies approach (for example, Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which explored Mod Culture in 1960s England).

The music scenes approach avoids the subculture label intentionally, in order to avoid the “centre-periphery” distinction where the ‘homogeneous’ subculture is put in opposition to the supposedly

‘homogeneous’ mainstream culture. The local music scene definition is drawn more from sociological conceptions of culture, in particular the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the field of cultural production, and the “art worlds” described by Becker (Bennett@3).

In this approach, culture operates within a field, in which focus is not simply directed towards the creator, but operates within a larger, broader field including the consumers of music, cultural intermediaries, and takes issues of class, gender, and ethnicity into account.

What this means for local music collections in libraries, is that instead of merely focusing our efforts on the musical creators designated as local by our own collection criteria, we consider large consumer / fan communities, producers, and other cultural intermediaries as part of the operation of a given local music scene.

## **Identifying Local Scenes**

It may sound daunting to consider the music scenes approach as a collecting strategy given how broadly it allows local music to be defined. However, it is possible to put some parameters around the approach. As Connell and Gibson write **QUOTE** “At the most basic level, before a

‘sound’ or ‘scene’ can develop, there should be both a ‘critical mass’ of active musicians or fans, and a set of physical infrastructures of recording, performance and listening...spaces that allow for new musical practices” (Connell and Gibson@101) **END QUOTE.**

Since it is likely inconceivable to be able to identify and collect the output of every local music scene active in your community (especially in larger urban centres), it is a better strategy to look for those which have at least some staying power, as evident by a critical mass of creators and consumers, venues catering to a given scene, etc.

Perhaps what can be taken from the local music scenes approach is that the musical life of the community you serve cannot be taken at face value. A broader understanding of the way musical life and locality are mutually implicated, can help librarians to better collect, and document the music of their communities. I’d now like to discuss the local music collection I am currently working on at my institution.

### **Local Music Collecting - The University of Alberta Experience**

Less than a year ago, the Edmonton Music Collection at the University of Alberta Music Library began to take shape. Developing this collection has revealed many of the challenges and opportunities in local

music collecting discussed so far in this talk, including: identifying materials to collect, playing “catch up” with historical materials, and balancing the research and teaching needs of our users with the important task of preserving local musical culture. I will go into more detail about these challenges in what follows.

Here is some background on how this collection started. Like many ideas, the impetus for this collection started over drinks after work. I was discussing the lack of local music materials in the music library with a colleague from the science and technology library. He explained to me that he had been a performing musician in Edmonton for over 25 years, and had wanted to do something like this for a long time. He had contacts, knew the local independent music scene, and was eager to help.

### **Scope and Acquisition**

We have started off quite small: four times a year a local record store specializing in independent music of the Edmonton area sends us a list of the latest local music titles (mostly “independent releases”), as well as “must haves” from the past of well known musicians and performing groups with an Edmonton connection. Our library assistant then searches the catalogue to determine which titles we already own, and we ask the



store to exchange these titles with something else. We make a trip to a local record store and purchase the titles, which has an added benefit in that it helped develop a good working relationship with the owner and staff, and raise awareness of the collection to the larger musical community.

We have also made a list of local artists and performing groups, and are gradually purchasing recordings and scores we do not already own.

### **Cataloguing**

We send sound recordings to OCLC for cataloguing accompanied by a flag instructing the cataloguer to add the following local (590) note: "UA Library copy in the Edmonton Music Collection." So far this has proven to be a good "small start" to a comprehensive local music collection, but we still have much work to do. One of the obvious limitations of this project so far has been the focus only on popular music. This is mostly a result of the fact that our collection is lacking in these materials, and that Edmonton actually has a significant local popular music scene that is still thriving.

The output of classical performing groups is well represented in our collection already, and we plan to continue to obtain materials in this area, as well as identify groups we may have missed over the years. We also

hope to broaden the collecting scope to include archival materials from local artists and performing groups, by offering to act as the stewards of their records.

## **Access**

We are currently identifying sound recordings and scores of local interest already in the collection, and retrospectively having the local note added. It is hoped that with the planned implementation of Primo (the new discovery tool at the UofA) this summer, that additional access to our local music collection may be possible. For example, second generation discovery tools such as Primo allow for the creation of custom taxonomies to be overlayed onto traditional catalogue data. This could be used to apply local genre terminologies to materials in the local collection, or non-standard LC subject headings identifying Edmonton, which would not be possible with conventional catalogue records in a traditional integrated library system.

We are also working on creating a Libguide specifically about the local music collection which could serve to highlight holdings, solicit donations (we are thinking about having a depository program for locally created sound recordings), and provide enhanced access that the

catalogue is not able to provide.

We still have a number of local music materials that have been accumulated over the past 40 years or so, which need to be incorporated into the collection, including: a pamphlet file that Includes copies of programs of University of Alberta ensembles dating back to the 1950s, which has no catalogue / finding aid ; Reel-to-Reels, cassettes, VHS tapes and CDs of UA ensembles dating back to late 1960s, also not catalogued. We also have some donated items accumulated over the years such as performer scrapbooks and printed ephemera of performing groups, non-commercially produced recordings, etc.

### **Future Directions**

- Web Archiving of local music sites of bands, composers, festivals etc. in Internet Archive web archiving product - *ArchiveIT*
- Web archiving of music released digitally only, on sites such as Bandcamp

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