

## Research > MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

*Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with...* is a new series from Ràdio Web MACBA that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. The documentary series is being presented this spring at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) in a prospective conference/listening format, where four collectors have been invited to share the concerns and particular characteristics that have driven them to build their personal collections. This is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

This is a conversation by email between William Bennett and Anna Ramos to prepare his forthcoming radio show at Ràdio Web MACBA, which took place on March 2011.

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Founding member of the band Whitehouse, William Bennett has chalked up more than thirty years of exploring the more extreme side of music, in a career that mixes experimentation with concepts from the fields of linguistics and psychology. In his presentation, Bennett gives an archaeological overview of a music collection that reflects his main obsessions: avant-garde rarities, Italo Disco, soundtracks and percussion music from West Africa and Haiti.

# MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

William Bennett

## 01. Conversation with William Bennett on his sound collection

**When and why did you start collecting sound and music? What led you to become a record/music collector and how well-defined or limited to a specific area of exploration is your collection?**

Since there was no means of playing music at home as a young teenager, there was little point in collecting music at that age – but I used to love reading about music in books and magazines, and imagining what it sounded like from the descriptions or reviews. This most likely had a bearing on the odd direction that my tastes would subsequently take, since when I was finally able to hear stuff at the age of about 16 or so, I was deeply disappointed at music's failure to live up to my grandiose expectations.

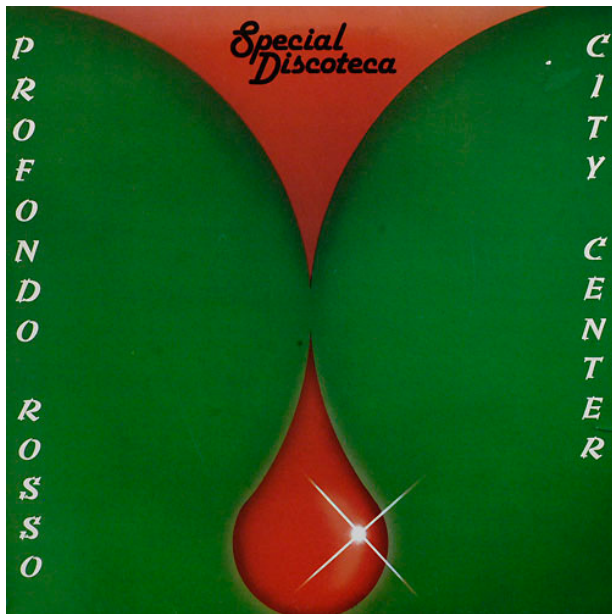
Thus, I almost immediately became ruthlessly purist and idealistic about what deserved to be in my collection and what didn't, and I would, admittedly with a degree of arrogance, judge others' collections and tastes using the same set of criteria. In other words, it wasn't about what you liked or didn't like in aesthetic terms, rather, respect came from your purity of intent and your filtering – I still look for that as a critically important shared value in others.

Some of the people I first met in London in 1979 were great examples of this: my education began with Daniel Miller (The Normal), with whom I extensively toured in the UK, and who regaled me with exotic descriptions of mostly seventies German electronic music, a genre he had an enormous passion for. Then I met Steven Stapleton (of Nurse With Wound) and we became instant friends after realising how many common interests we shared – he in particular had already built up an enormous collection of rare vinyl that he'd acquired during his travels on the European mainland; what first blew me away was that no matter how unfamiliar I was with the artists of his 1,000 or so records, Steve constantly played me obscure, extreme recordings of a type that finally managed to fulfil the promise of the imagination of my younger self – especially things like Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, Walter Marchetti and so on.

Thus, from these beginnings, my own collection began to take shape as I started to acquire things that I felt that were totally essential and very special, and at the same time to even more ruthlessly purge my less valued items. I recall saying at one time, only partly in jest, that the only record I needed in my collection was Alvin Lucier's *Bird And Person Dying*, released on Italian label Cramps' amazing Nova Musicha series – although, secretly, I would never have been able to part with my treasured early Yoko Ono records either.

**Your collection in numbers: approximately how many records do you own? And I can't avoid asking, what is your most expensive record, which one did you pay the most for? Is it possible to choose a personal favourite?**

I've never catalogued them or kept a database, but as a rough estimate, I'd say around 1,000 vinyl records of all types and probably the same again for CDs. Many of the records in the collection are worth £100 or more, although I'm slightly embarrassed to admit that my most valuable records are some of my own, for example pristine copies of *Right To Kill* and *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the former recently sold in a specialist store in Japan for over £650. However, I have several records that it is difficult to place a value on, either because they're special one-offs (perhaps with special artwork), or because there is no available data on their being sold anywhere, although they would be highly sought-after by collectors if



[City Center *Profondo Rosso*, 1984]

they were to be offered for sale – a Japanese collector offered me £200 for my unplayed copy of M.B.'s *Regei*, which I accepted because it seemed like a crazy amount of money and I knew it'd be going to a good home; the most I've paid for a record would be around £40 – I've really been lucky. I classify my records according to genre, but beyond that there is no alphabetical or colour-coded or chronological order.

**What's the most extravagant record you have?**

You mean in the Spanish sense of 'extravagante'? That's a difficult question – there are a couple of Nurse With Wound albums that Steve (Stapleton) made for me with special artwork, one of which includes a collection of some of his very private, intimate photos.

**Are you very meticulous with your sound collection? Do you collect second copies? Are you very picky about having mint copies?**

Not especially, mostly because I see it as a functional collection rather than a 'trophy' collection, if that makes sense; I'm quite happy to have less than mint copies as long as they're in a playable state; likewise, there are no second copies.

**Your collection explores four or five main interests: obscure avant-garde/experimental music, bizarre oddities, rare soundtracks, Italo disco and West-African music. Is there an obscure link between those interests? What draws you to these specific genres/styles/music?**

If there's any link between these seemingly eclectic interests, then it probably has to do with this sense of purism, of belonging to a special domain that lies far from the mainstream. And when I say mainstream I'm really referring to a way of understanding: in other words, a relationship between easy access and familiarity.

That said, and weirdly enough, it has always been a delight to discover others who share precisely these seemingly disparate tastes, with the same passion.

As I mentioned, my first love is the avant-garde and experimental music; bizarre oddities include records that I discovered in the early eighties while touring around Europe and the States, or that people kindly sent to me at the label – things like the original Manson Family album (very rare Spanish Movieplay edition), *The Psychedelic Experience* by Timothy Leary, or recordings of Japanese Martial Music from World War II; my love for Italo disco began in Barcelona even before I knew what it was: I'd listen to the local radio stations on FM radio and came to love the unfamiliar electronic pop music they'd play all the time, with its cute broken English lyrics and seductive synth sounds – a few years later I came across a cache of these maxis in an amazing used record store in Switzerland, by artists like Doctor's Cat, Miko Mission, Baby's Gang, Hipnosis and so on. I bought as many as I could carry home with me and have been an avid collector ever since – a lot of them are now extraordinarily rare and sought-after; in the mid nineties I saw a documentary on Haitian *vaudou* music, which fascinated me, especially seeing how they were able to make some of the most intense music with almost nothing: bits of metal, stones, simple djembe drums – certainly none of the technology that we're addicted to here; from that moment on, I wanted to hear as much of this kind of sound as possible, not the horrible 'world music' crap that the mainstream sells us as being representative of Africa, but the real thing – my personal taste centres on the region of Ghana and the Congo, plus of course Haiti, and it has been a great influence on my own music-making ever since.

**Back to your first love (avant-garde and experimental music) then: format-wise, I think that must be the richest part of your collection. It's quite interesting to see how the available technology helps to develop and express different scenes/music/genres. Can you apply that to your own collection and mention some examples? Some genres opt for a more pragmatic path (Italo disco, soundtracks and library music...) while others are bound to explore available formats and their limits.**

I'm not sure I fully understand your question: when you refer to technology (and in turn, formats), are you referring to the means for collecting and acquiring, or to how it affects the music itself?



[Yoko Ono *Fly*, 1971]

**I was referring to how certain music genres are typically associated to a certain format or storage medium. In that sense, while your Italo disco and soundtrack collections might be predominantly vinyl-based, your avant-garde one is probably much more varied, because the actual exploration of the medium has been part of this scene/culture (using tape, vinyl, exploiting odd sizes, strange formats, etc). This obviously relates to your notion of musical/cultural archaeology.**

I see what you mean; in fact, in this sense, format acts as a valuable transparent concession – even between a 12" single with or without a picture sleeve, these factors are a powerful filter for how we respond to the sounds. In the early days of industrial electronic music in the late seventies, simply having sleeves with images pasted on them was like a signal of intent, which created a special frisson or excitement before you even heard the music. Although of course the reasoning was pragmatic, based on the incredibly high cost of printing small runs of sleeves. The fact that cassette tapes could be played as a continuous uninterrupted loop also affected the listeners' experience. This, added to the DIY ethos that developed, helped to create a genre aesthetic to the extent that you see labels starting up nowadays that deliberately stick to these identifiable formats as an almost stubborn gesture of resistance to change; thus there are aesthetic memes just as there are musical ones.

**Are you interested in post-eighties revisions of Italo disco at all? Either as part of your collection or outside of it?**

Not at all, everything I've heard seems lacking in – how can I put it? – innocence of intent. To me, the epigone almost always misses the point by focusing on superficial concessions, i.e. equipment, sounds, looks – indeed, it's proof for my theory that art is essentially everything that is not consciously perceived; Italo disco, as a creative genre, died around 1985-86 and there's nothing we can do about that, the only echoes we have now are the legacy of its influences in other music.

**How about your West-African collection? What is the preferred format for their releases? I assume the market and industry must be quite different from the Western model. Can you give us any insights into how the music industry works there?**

As far as African music is concerned, none of the usual criteria about formats and condition (or even recording quality) apply, it's purely and simply about getting access to the music and listening to it – interestingly, audio cassettes are still a widely used medium there; I have stuff on records, some of which are library recordings, CDs, tapes, and even dreaded MP3s, and I treasure all of them equally.

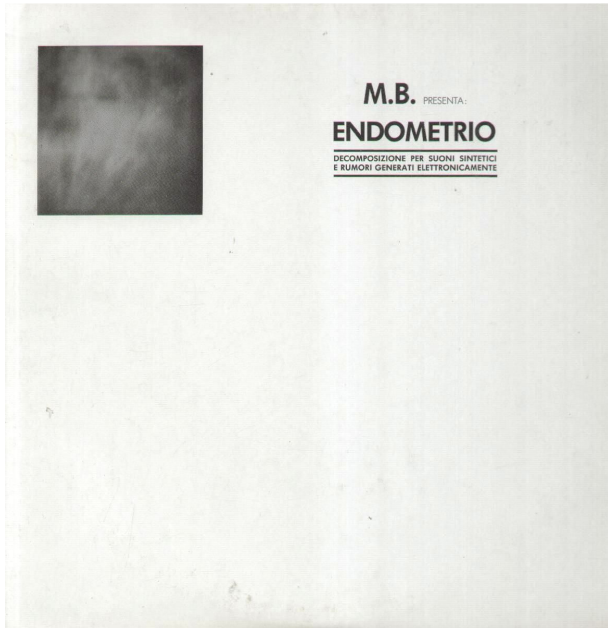
As you say, I'm sure that the market and industry there must be radically different – sadly, I've never had the chance to visit, although I did have a wonderful contact in Madrid, an amazing Cuban guy who'd worked with tribes in villages in the Congo for the UN for a couple of years; he was an incredible fount of knowledge into the relationship between music and ritual there.

**Are any of your particular interests particularly challenging? I'd imagine that West African releases must be quite challenging to collect (though this could be a prejudice). How different is that part of your collection from the avant-garde music or Italo disco?**

Yes, the African and Haitian material is the most difficult to get, luckily I have a couple of contacts who are more knowledgeable than I am and who can procure things for me. Much of it is released as rare field recordings from as far back as the sixties or earlier, and doesn't exist outside libraries or academia.

In the other fields I have built up considerable expertise along the way, which of course makes it far easier to be fluent in their specific musical idiom, if we can call it that.

**I'm also intrigued to know your definition of rare soundtracks. What would be your definition of the genre? Are you interested in any particular period or country of origin?**



[M.B.\* *Endometrio*, 1982]

Rather than a definition, soundtrack LPs need to satisfy three criteria: to be from an exotically memorable film, to feature music that I loved, and for the record to be (preferably almost impossibly) difficult to find. A great and much-prized example of this is my still-sealed copy of 1977's *La Ragazza Dal Pigiamo Giallo* by the legendary Riz Ortolani, which includes superb rare songs by Amanda Lear and the extraordinary proto-techno *Il Corpo Di Linda*; it's not even listed at discogs.com.

The soundtrack LPs that I have tend to reflect my taste in films, especially ones from the seventies and eighties, not for nostalgic reasons but simply because contemporary films are more often than not tedious compilations of songs unrelated to the movie, usually a crude tool for cross-format marketing. Some other examples of OST records I cherish are *Lipstick*, *Emmanuelle*, *Lo Strano Vizio della Signora Wardh*, *Thief of Hearts*, *Bilitis* and *Deep Throat*.

**I sense we are getting back to Italy again. Is that right? What do you think that made Italian productions so prolific and at the same time so advanced?**

This is a really interesting point of discussion: resorts like Rimini already had a pretty vibrant disco scene in the late seventies, which needed a constant supply of new dance records. Given that these were typically from the USA, DJs had a twofold problem of extremely high import costs owing to weak exchange rates, together with the rapid decline of disco Stateside after the reactionary conservative backlash against it. This in turn must have encouraged music-making in Italy, and it became a totally viable proposition with the arrival of affordable electronic music technology and the growing trend of independent labels and small pressings all over Europe.

I'd also suggest that another factor which influenced the style of music was the Anglophile acculturation that prevailed in Italy, hence the English lyrics and obvious influences of early British and American pop/synth acts.

**Raül G. Pratginestós, a specialist in the genre, mentioned that there is a strong demand for soundtracks both in Japan and England. Do you have a theory of why that could be?**

Specifically in Japan and England? I'm not sure about England or why that would be, but Japan has such a strong *otaku* culture that anything and everything seems to be collectible. Mark from London's Vinyl Experience, who we did stuff with in the nineties, used to almost exclusively deal with Japanese customers in all things music memorabilia, they were beyond voracious – I recall that whilst walking around Soho one day, Mark noticed a skip full of rubbish outside the newly refurbished legendary venue Marquee; he offered the builders a wad of banknotes for its contents of rubble and trash and then sold it on to some crazy collectors for a crazy amount of money.

**Soundtracks are somehow a 'decontextualised' art form. Does this make them more interesting for you? As a follower of your blog, I know cinema is one of your passions, any type of cinema. Does your interest in soundtracks bear any relation to that?**

That's a nice point about their being a decontextualised art form. Ignoring the aforementioned lazy compilations made nowadays, traditional (bespoke) soundtracks occupy a curious place within the musical genre in that sense – are they more than mementoes? Would the music stand up in its own right, without the powerful filmic associations? I'm not sure.

If we see a record collection as an expression of what I would describe as our personal 'illusion of identity', then soundtrack LPs would play an important role, because they say so much about a person.

**Along similar lines, are you interested in Library Music? Back in their time, some soundtrack composers were also making those types of recordings, and it's a very interesting field because of its experimental and non-commercial nature. Do you have any thoughts on that?**

Extremely interesting, yes. It's something I've read about but I have never had the resources to fully explore the subject to the extent it deserves.





[Nora Orlandi *Lo Strano Vizio della Signora Wardh* (Original Soundtrack), 2001]

**Apart from those main lines of work, does your collection have any other limits (chronological, format...)?**

Specifically speaking, my biggest love is vinyl, and to a lesser extent CDs, both of which form the main part of my collection. But I do also have quite a number of cassettes (mostly rare early eighties industrial) – there is some recent stuff, but the bulk of it is from the seventies and eighties, certainly very little from before then.

Just as art is not something just to be looked at, nor is music something to be simply listened to: it has to be experienced – and that's why format is a critical component, a transparent concession, that is tragically overlooked nowadays. I don't mean that in the sense of a nostalgic hark back to the days of vinyl, except in the sense of how your experience, at the very least, is profoundly affected by the sensory modalities of having a real object – in this case a record sleeve – to hold and to gaze at, vinyl to smell, to touch, to handle. Imagine how boring food would be if the experience was reduced to taking a small invisible pill every day for all the necessary nutrients – and even this doesn't take into account the crucial component of foraging and procurement, the very basis of collecting.

**So in a sense, the digital revolution, to give it a name, is killing sound collecting? How do you imagine the future of sound collecting?**

I wouldn't go as far as to say it's killing sound collecting; there's a new kind of collector nowadays who operates entirely within the digital domain, some of them obsessively filling up hard drives with MP3s or the more audiophile FLACs – the spirit of foraging and discovery still exists for them; however, the way I see it, the romance of sound collecting might be dead – not because of the music, but due to the loss of the personal human component of the process.

**Except for experimental music, there's a distinct cultural, chronological and geographic distance to your objects of desire. What are your thoughts on that?**

Perhaps it's simply like the ancient historical tradition, when the entire Mediterranean Sea was a great melting pot and fulcrum for traders from all over the world. Objects and ideas that were from far away, from extraordinary contrasting cultures, and very old, would be considered the most exotic and the most desirable and sought-after.

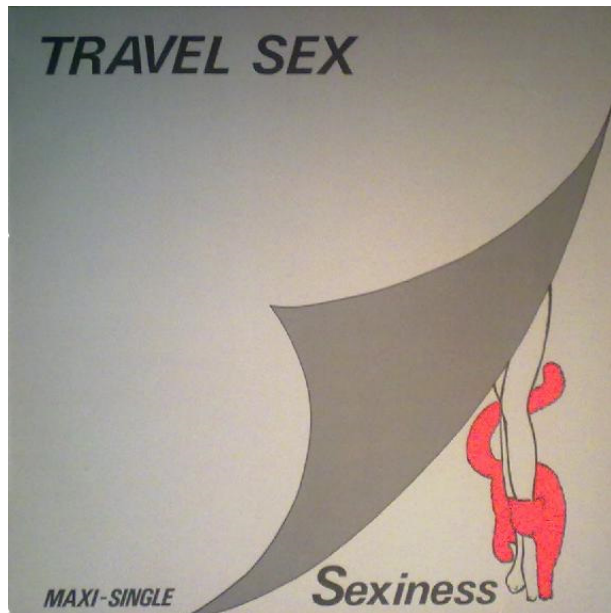
To apply a different metaphor, I enjoy going into and exploring unfamiliar forests, and taking others there. I am much more stimulated by and attracted to that domain.

**Collecting is about overcoming a series of difficulties: how do you deal with the lack of information, price speculation, scarcity of copies?**

Although much of what I have is extremely rare, I was lucky to have acquired it at a time when that wasn't the case – the easiest way to overcome this challenge is to be familiar with and knowledgeable about your chosen field of interest. This is not so easy when you enter realms that are obscure. Again, I've been fortunate to either meet people who could lead me in the right direction, and to have the means to travel, and the stubbornness to learn about what interests me. Although that challenge was much greater in pre-Internet days, the rewards were also greater, since you could find the most wonderful gems for cheap prices, if you knew what you were looking for.

For Italo disco, for example, even now, to my knowledge there is no book that covers the field (although a friend of mine is working on one), and without knowledge of artist names, finding the best stuff means having to sift through thousands of trashy pop and dance 12"s keeping an eye out for odd Italian labels, for the years 1982-85, and for production and writing credits with Italian-sounding names.

**In terms of Italo disco, I understand you are only interested in Italo disco made in Italy. What draws you to that music? It is often perceived as cheesy, quite commercial music, even though the very first years of the scene were very vibrant: it was a place**



[Travel Sex *Sexiness*, 1983]

**where many artists interested in technology could experiment (especially with synths) while still having an audience. What happened to this early spirit?**

As with so many, if not all, nascent musical movements and fashions, it quickly becomes submerged in mediocrity because the original pure artistic intent is compromised and undermined by impurity. When I used to travel to Chicago regularly in '86 and '87, I'd buy a lot of original independent house 12"s, it was another exciting time – a short year or two later it too had drowned in an ocean of crap.

Italo disco, especially during the golden years of '82-'84, almost completely bypassed the USA and the UK. This might explain the fact that people here don't, in retrospect, see it as being at all commercial or cheesy. On the contrary, it is considered by many as being painfully hipster (which is arguably a far worse fate...).

**I don't know if you ever had any interest in the Cosmic phenomenon: a very vibrant scene in the late seventies, in which Progressive rock met African percussion.**

Yes, I really love that stuff although I don't own any records, and it's unlikely that I could now afford to begin...

**Are there any other difficulties worth mentioning? Are they what make collecting music particularly interesting from your point of view?**

Well, the difficulties or obstacles are what make it fun – when each item you have tells a story of how and where it was acquired, that gives it and the whole experience even more value. For example, some of the specialist record stores in Japan are insanely tricky to locate – and yet it is a collector's paradise.

**Can you explain the concept of archaeology of music that you talk about when you refer to your collection? Are there any memorable examples in your collection worth mentioning?**

Archaeology in music seems to me shamefully under-researched. I see the concept as the recognition of specific themes or motifs – we could also use Dawkins' notion of memes in this context – followed by a retrospective exploration into their origins. Obvious easy examples might be the use of heavily distorted guitar in metal, or the origin of the more or less three-minute song, or the use of claps in dance music. One that I became fascinated with was the electronic acid sound, when I began collecting underground house 12"s whilst visiting Chicago in 1986 and 1987 – at a time when very few people in the States (let alone Europe) were familiar with the whole thing (of course that changed quickly from '88 onwards). Once again, there was precious little information about this, even though I heard an interview that said DJ Pierre (of whom I had a couple of fantastic maxis) claimed to have invented the sound accidentally whilst (mis)using a Roland TB-303 – then I wondered who used the term first, on what record, and especially, who used this special sound first? Later I made the incredible discovery of earlier examples of this sound on Italo disco records from as early as 1983, in one case by Alexander Robotnick, but then also by Barry Mason on the extraordinary 'Body! (Get Your Body)' which clearly, to my ears, not only contains a middle eight with the acid sound, but the singing and piano too must have influenced Marshall Jefferson ('Move Your Body') and others on the early house records. It now seems unlikely that highly obscure Italian electronic music could have been so influential, but remember that disco (thanks to the deep conservatism of rock music) had become pretty much taboo in the USA in the early eighties and many gay nightclubs and black disco DJs had to import music from Europe, where the scene was still vibrant.

**I'm also intrigued by your 'personal theories on primary and negative influences as transparent concessions.'**

This is related to my interest in musical archaeology – we mentioned the acid sound already, which is an example of how new technology creates new memes (in this case the TB-303, which came out in 1983). But naturally, a meme (whether of technological origins or not) cannot spread without influence –



[William Bennett. Foto: Muir Vidler]

'negative influence' I define as musicians making specific choices in order not to sound like something else, a kind of polarised response which may result in a highly stylised sound (e.g. the one-note guitar solo in early punk records); what I mean by 'primary influence' is the most fundamental kind, often with epigonic qualities. However, the theory I have about the latter, which is quite interesting, is that – and this applies to art beyond music – an artist appears incapable of admitting to their primary influence and will only articulate secondary or tertiary influences (in other words, less critical ones). Owning up to the primary influence – even to themselves – appears to take too great a toll on the artist's illusion of identity and so it is generally not admitted to.

Transparent concessions concern the invisible factors and compromises that affect the way we emotionally respond to things (in this case art) – they may have been intentionally or unintentionally applied by the artist. This notion also forms the basis of my idea that, to all effects, a piece of art functions not from what we consciously perceive, but through everything that we are unable to consciously notice, *including the artwork itself*.

Anyway, these are all just pet theories of mine, of which I have plenty...

**Along these same lines, you also talk about 'generational acculturalisation'. Can you please develop this concept a bit?**

This has to do with the social influences that affect certain generations – 'acculturalisation' in the sense that one culture may have an inherent warmth towards another. For instance, there was an obvious example of this in the USA's response to English rock music and youth culture from the late sixties to the late seventies. I'm sure you can think of other examples – Italian<>Spanish pop music and culture in the eighties might be another example to consider in this way.

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## 02. Seven favourites from William Bennett's collection

MP3 <http://bit.ly/igmgm5>

Track list <http://bit.ly/fSeVfW>

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## 03. Acknowledgements

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## 04. Copyright note

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