



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 Museu d'Art Contemporani de 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.

William Bennett was invited to the *Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with...* to give a lecture on his sound collection, which took place on April 1, 2011 at the MACBA.

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Since the late seventies, William Bennett has been at the forefront of extreme and experimental music. As front man of the legendary group Whitehouse, and more recently of his project Cut Hands, Bennett's artistic output goes beyond the merely musical and makes inroads into the field of the psychology of language, sociology, perception, the occult and the magical. williambennett.blogspot.com

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH...

William Bennett's lecture transcript

01. Musical homeostasis: music not just to be heard

Just as art is not something just to be looked at, nor is music something to be simply heard: 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 a nostalgic hark back to the days of vinyl any more than 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 prepare; imagine how boring food would be if the experience was reduced to our taking a small invisible pill every day for all the necessary nutrients – and even this doesn't take into account the crucial component of the foraging and the procurement, the very basis of collecting.

Specifically speaking, my biggest love is for vinyl and to a lesser extent CDs, both of which form the main part of my collection, but I do still also have quite a number of cassettes, which are mostly rare early eighties industrial, if we can use that term.

People say that the books you have displayed on your shelf say a lot about the kind of person you are, and, with that in mind, many a dinner party I've been to where guests will make a beeline for the host's bookshelves; yet, perhaps your music collection says even more about your notions of identity and values; see, to me, it's not important what your tastes are, nor how big or small your collection is, it's about the values that your collection represents.

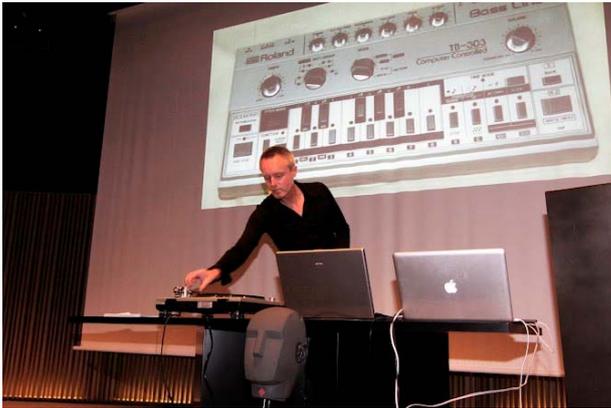
It's like have you ever thought about the difference between being an adventurer and a discoverer? As I see it, it's all a question of intent – what is it about something that makes it special? Is that fulfilling? When I make music I want to take people to unfamiliar places, to drag them into the woods; and likewise, I want others to do that to me with their music; it's the difference between something just fulfilling a role or something that is really capable of fulfilling needs and concerns.

I'm not sure how I got to be like that but, as a young teenager, there was no means to play music at home, so there was little point in collecting music at that age; in fact, I had such little access to music that I had to make do with solely imagining it; like if you're familiar with the Greek mythology and Tantalus and the out-of-reach grapes, I would drool over LP covers in stores, caressing them, reading reviews, talking about them with friends – all to the extent where, without regular access to a record player, one could but form auditory hallucinations of the sounds; naturally, one's aural expectations were lifted to the sublime, later disappointment therefore being, in most cases, inevitable.

This most likely had a bearing on the odd direction my tastes would subsequently go since, when, at the age of about sixteen or so, I was finally able to hear stuff, mainstream music's not being able to live up to my grandiose expectations felt deeply disappointing.

At the age of sixteen or so, my awareness of Yoko Ono was limited to her relationship to one of The Beatles, and that her music was 'a bit weird', but with great anticipation I finally decided to begin my collection upon seeing her double LP *Fly* in a local store, run by the most stereotypical long-haired hippy guy you've ever seen. The shop was, amusingly, called Hell Records – sadly, along with so many physical records stores, no longer in existence.

You know when you set eyes upon something you know you have to have? Something in front of you, you immediately know has to be yours, and you can't



[William Bennett, 2011]

stop thinking about it 'till you get it? Do you know that feeling? It's like you get this feeling deep inside you, that this is what you want, and you know you must get it before it becomes someone else's – it's almost like there's this voice of excitement that says 'this is for me, I deserve this'. See... with me that's exactly what happens, and you find it impossible to resist.

I say that because in this case it was the luscious gatefold US Apple edition copy, nice and kinaesthetically preferable thanks to the reassuringly thick board then common to American sleeves. These things like packaging materials are so important... After paying for it and taking it home, it became the songs on the more avant-garde second disc featuring Fluxus artist Joe Jones' incredible self-playing instruments that blew my mind, and began to firmly mould these values I initially referred to.

Indeed almost immediately from this point on I thus became quite ruthlessly purist and idealist about what deserved to be in my collection and what didn't, and would, with an admitted degree of arrogance, judge others' collections and tastes using the same set of criteria. In other words, it's not about what you like or don't like aesthetically speaking; respect came from your purity of adventurous intent and filtering, disrespect from your lack thereof – today I still look for that as a critically important shared value in others' collections.

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 went on a long UK tour, who regaled me with exotic descriptions of mostly seventies German electronic music, a genre he had an enormous passion for; and then Steven Stapleton (of Nurse With Wound) and I met and became instant friends after realising how much common interest we shared – he in particular had already built up an enormous collection of rare vinyl that he'd acquired from travels on the European mainland and he too was a committed Yoko Ono fan.

What first blew me away was that of his 1,000 or so records, how unfamiliar I was with any of the artists, and then mostly names that Daniel had recommended; Steve would constantly be playing me obscure and extreme recordings of a type that finally managed to fulfil the promise of my younger imagination – especially things like Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, Walter Marchetti and so on.

He also taught me one of the most useful record-collecting skills for those of us attracted to the obscurer corners of independent record stores: the magical art of evaluating sound merely by scrutinising the grooves on the plastic – like some arcane wizard, he'd take the record out of the sleeve, and with squinted eye and close examination describe the music with, what in hindsight was, remarkable accuracy.

From these beginnings, my own collection fast began to take shape as I started to acquire the things I felt that were totally essential and very special. My passion then was almost exclusively for what I considered to be cutting edge experimental and avant-garde electronic music, whether modern or traditional; and yet, at the same time as even more uncompromisingly purging my less valued items, I recall saying at one time, and only partly in jest, that the only record I needed in my collection was Alvin Lucier's LP *Bird And Person Dyning*, part of the Italian label Cramps' amazing Nova Musicha series – although secretly speaking I could also never have parted with other treasures such as George Harrison's *Electronic Sound* which I really liked, and stuff like the first few Residents' albums.

One of the most fortuitous decisions was including my home address on the back of the early LPs I released on my label; that meant that people would, very kindly, in a time long before the internet, send you things from all around the world – loads of letters obviously, but also books, tapes, records – things that they felt that you might find of particular interest perhaps as musical research or inspiration; many of my rarest industrial and experimental records came from this source, and it would have been hard to predict then how valuable these items would later become to be. Items such as the early Maurizio Bianchi, P16.D4, Ramleh, Lustmord and other Sterile Records LPs, United Dairies stuff, one-off Merzbow or Iphar Clinic cassettes, lots of great early eighties experimental compilations.



People you worked with, either in the studio or at live show, also would kindly give you stuff. Some of these items are amongst the most treasured items I own: Stapleton and I would share with each other all of our releases, and then he even made a couple of beautiful special editions of LPs for me, and he also managed to procure some duplicate copies of weird records from his collection that I'd been shamelessly drooling over such as a pristine original of Cro-Magnon's *Orgasm* on the American quasi-mythical ESP-Disk label.

That was what pretty much formulated the only kinds of things I had then, but my collection since explores four or five discrete interests: in loosely termed generic denominations these consist of the avant-garde, bizarre oddities, rare soundtracks, Italo disco, and West Central African and Haitian percussion music.

If there's a link between these seeming eclectic interests, then it's probably once again owing to this sense of adventure, of belonging to a special domain that lies far from the mainstream, and when I say mainstream what I'm really referring to is one of understanding: in other words, a relationship between easy access and familiarity. That said, and weirdly and serendipitously enough, it's always been a delight to discover others who, with the same passion, share precisely these seemingly disparate tastes!

What kind of bizarre oddities? These mostly include records that I discovered in the early eighties from travelling around Europe and the States on tour, or that people had kindly sent to me at the Come Org label – things like the original Manson Family album (very rare Spanish Movieplay edition with gatefold and lyrics), *The Psychedelic Experience*, a spoken word LP by Timothy Leary coming as it does in a wonderfully brash pink sleeve, or perhaps recordings of Japanese Martial Music from the Second World War.

The love for Italo disco began, coincidentally enough, in this enchanting city of Barcelona before I even knew what it was: I'd listen to the local radio stations on an FM radio and came to love the unfamiliar electronic pop music they'd be playing so much of the time, with its cute broken English lyrics and seductive synth sounds. A few years later I came across a large cache of these maxis at bargain prices in an amazing used record store in Switzerland, artists like Doctor's Cat, Kano, Number One Ensemble, Miko Mission, I Signori Della Galassia, Baby's Gang, Hipnosis and so on. I bought literally as many as I could physically carry and have been an avid collector ever since – with Italo disco in recent years becoming insanely hip, a lot of them are now extraordinarily rare and sought after, indeed some of the most highly valued items in pop music.

The origins of Italo disco are as fascinating as they are enigmatic, a genre almost completely undocumented in books, although a friend in London is currently working on one and to which I'm contributing a chapter. Resorts like Rimini already had a pretty vibrant discotheque scene from the late seventies, one which constantly needed to be fed new dance records; since typically these were from the USA. There was a twofold problem for DJs of extremely high import costs owing to a weak exchange rates plus the rapid decline in 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 a growing tradition all over Europe of independent labels and small pressings.

I'd also suggest that another factor that influenced the style of music was that of an anglophile acculturation predominant in Italy; hence the English lyrics and obvious influences from the early British and American pop/synth acts, not forgetting that genius from Munich, Giorgio Moroder. The genre caught the imagination of most of continental Europe, especially countries like Spain, Germany, and Holland, and most of Eastern Europe. But sadly not the UK... our loss entirely.

In the mid ninties I saw a couple of documentary films on Haitian vaudou music which fascinated me, especially seeing how they were able to make some of the most intense complex music with almost nothing, pieces of metal, stones and gravel, simple djembe drums and doundouns – certainly none of the technology that we're addicted to here. From that moment on, I wanted to hear as much as possible of this kind of sound, not the despicable world music crap that the



mainstream gives to us as being representative of Africa, what an insufferable arrogance to assume that there is an 'our' music and a 'world' music! No. This was the real thing. My personal taste centres on the region of Ghana and the Congo, plus of course, as mentioned, Haiti, and it has been a great influence on my own music-making ever since, both in Whitehouse and also even more obviously the Cut Hands project I've been working on for the past four years, and after four years in the making I've finally finished the album for!

The African and Haitian material is the most difficult to get of all these categories. Luckily I have a couple of contacts that are more knowledgeable than I am and who can procure things for me; much of it is released as rare field recordings from sometimes as far back as the fifties, and doesn't exist outside libraries or academia. Favourites right now include the Ghanaian funeral field recordings by the Ashanti and Ewe tribes released on John Zorn's affiliated Avant label in Japan, or recordings made way back in 1952 of the Mbuti pygmies from the remote regions of eastern Belgian Congo made available by the International Library of African Music based at Rhodes University in South Africa. Also Les Tambours De Brazza's 2000 album *Contre-Jour* was a major discovery for me.

In addition to the field recordings, I collect Fela Kuti, the hero of afrobeat – particularly the seventies releases like *Noise for Vendor Mouth*, *Zombie*, and *International Thief Thief*, not just the music but the covers and artwork are astoundingly good too –. US group Antibalas' recent *Security* album is a worthy contemporary continuation of Fela Kuti's afrobeat tradition.

It's worth my interjecting that as far as African music is concerned, none of the usual criteria about formats and condition (or even recording quality) applies. It's purely and simply about getting access to and hearing the music – 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 the dreaded MP3s, and I treasure it all equally.

I've never had the chance to visit Africa, even though Whitehouse were once invited to do a couple of concerts in Angola, which would have been awesome if it had worked out. Can you imagine? Nevertheless, 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, he also was able to get me some incredible Congolese art pieces that probably shouldn't have been allowed out of the country.

With me, soundtrack LPs need to satisfy three criteria: be an exotically memorable film, feature music I loved, and that the record be impossibly difficult to find. A great and much-prized example of that is my still-sealed copy of 1977's *La Ragazza Dal Pigiamo Giallo* by the legend that is Riz Ortolani, and includes superb rare songs by seventies disco queen Amanda Lear and the extraordinary proto-techno track *Il Corpo Di Linda*; which it's not even listed at discogs.com.

Therefore the soundtrack LPs that I have thus tend to reflect my tastes in films, especially ones from the seventies and eighties, not because I'm a nostalgist, most certainly not, 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 much cherished examples of soundtrack vinyl from the collection are those for *Lipstick*, *Emmanuelle*, *Lo Strano Vizio Della Signora Wardh*, *Thief of Hearts*, *Bilitis* and *Deep Throat*.

People sometimes ask about my belief regarding the best format; and despite carrying around two iPhones, owning two Sony Walkman mobile phones, two Sony PSPs, two further iPods, all packed with music – in addition to least two terabytes of hard disk drives worth of songs – it's still no surprise that my biggest love is for vinyl and to a lesser extent CDs, both of which form the main part of my approximately 1,000-strong collection. I do still also have quite a number of cassettes (mostly rare early eighties industrial) but have never held such an affection for any format that you can record over: there's something satisfyingly reassuring about the finality of a piece of recorded vinyl, don't you think?



Although much of what I have is extremely rare, I've been lucky to have acquired it at a time when that wasn't the case; I know this from bitter personal experience, many of the early records that I used to sell for £2 wholesale (about 2,5 euros) including all manufacturing and recording costs included, not to mention the cost in sweat, later would fetch prices as high as £600 sometimes (about 700 euros). It's kind of crazy, you could buy a used car for that much; but really it's not just a question of money but availability that is the challenge; and I'd aver that the easiest way to overcome this challenge is through having knowledge and familiarity with your chosen field of interest.

When entering realms that are obscure this knowledge and familiarity isn't always easy to get. I've been fortunate to either meet people who could lead me in the right direction, or else have the means to travel, and also the stubbornness to learn about what interests me. Although that challenge was much greater in the pre-internet days, if you knew what you were looking for, the rewards were also greater since you could find the most wonderful gems for cheap prices and not be in so much worldwide competition with other collectors. It's perhaps just a little bit too easy now to do it all by mail order.

Speaking of record stores and the fact that they're sadly almost extinct now, you worry about the fate of the weird, often bearded, staff who used to work in them, like lords of some Tolkien-fantasy middle kingdom, now that they've been divested of their power behind the counter, you wonder if they'll ever again be able to function in normal society.

Seriously, of course it's the difficulties or obstacles which are what makes it fun. When each item you have tells a story of how and where it was acquired, that gives it and the experience even more value; for example, in Japan some of the specialist record stores, which still do in fact exist, are insanely tricky to locate – and yet it is a collector's paradise.

Returning to this spirit of adventure that I initiated the lecture with, I'd like to say something about a particular aspect that fascinates me: the archaeology of music; something that seems under-researched – I see the archaeology in this sense as the analysis and recognition of specific themes or motifs, or if you like, we could use Richard Dawkins' notion of memes in this context, and then retrospectively exploring to find their origins. Obvious easy examples might be the use of the heavily distorted guitar in metal, or the origin of the three or so 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" while regularly visiting Peter Sotos in Chicago in 1986 and 1987. At a time when very few people in the States (let alone Europe) were familiar with it all (of course, that would change quickly from '88 onwards); once again, there was precious little information about this, even though I heard from an interview that DJ Pierre (of whom I had a couple of fantastic maxis) was said to have invented the sound accidentally whilst misusing a TB-303.

Anyway, I wondered who used the term first, on what record, but especially, who used this special sound first? Later I made the fantastic – archaeological? – discovery of earlier examples of this sound on Italo disco records from as early 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 an intro and middle eight with the 'acid' sound, but the singing, chorus lyrics (such a weird pre-echo of the ubiquitous early house phrase 'jack your body' and similar variations referring to the typical style of dancing, jacking as in the sense of masturbating), and piano parts too you would think must have influenced Marshall Jefferson on the house music anthem *Move Your Body*, and others on other early house records – it seems unlikely now that highly obscure Italian electronic music could have had such an influence but do remember that disco, thanks to the then reactionary conservatism of rock music, had become pretty much a taboo in the USA in the early eighties and many gay nightclubs and black disco DJs had to import much music from a Europe where the pop/dance scene was still vibrant.

This in turn led to my fascination with identifying drum machines on records I had in my collection (where they weren't listed in sleeve notes), and later



synthesisers too – I've also built up a huge collection of drum machine sounds dating from the seventies to the present day in order to be able to do this; it's fun but pretty challenging, let me tell you.

This particular case of the acid sound meme is an example of the effect of new technology (in this case the Roland TB-303, which came out in 1983, when Italo was arguably at its most creative peak, already beginning to get quite commercial from that point on); the technology factor is particularly notable when the device is brand new as owing to the musician's unfamiliarity with it much more creatively rich results tend to be achieved, as opposed to the easy-access lazy comfort zone that inevitably seems to follow); however, naturally, a meme (whether of technological origins or not) cannot become more common without influence which I see as coming in various forms.

Positive influence is that which is the most fundamental and basic, often having epigonic qualities, this could be in the form of downright copying or imitation – it could apply to sounds, clothes, visuals, equipment, references, band names, and could be sourced from other art forms. Notice how music seems to lag so far behind literary and visual art movements; have you ever noticed how many eighties band names were directly lifted from *A Clockwork Orange* and the books of William Burroughs?

Then by contrast there is 'negative influence' which I define as musicians making specific choices in order *not* to sound like something else, a kind of polarity response, if you will, which may result in a highly stylised sound, an example being the one-note guitar solo in early punk records. If this were a mathematical model, we could observe this negative influence commencing when the previously fashionable memes reach a saturation point – this is very common and obvious in the world of clothes fashion itself and what very recently was super cool and trendy suddenly becomes something to avoid, and so it goes on; this model of negative influence is similar in music, albeit in slightly different manifestations.

Further to this, a theory I have... And I have plenty of those, oh, how I like to punish people with my theories and metaphors... I have a theory about influence in general which is quite intriguing, if true, and 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 to be admitted to. Some cute examples of this would be Ian Curtis of Joy Division to Jim Morrison of The Doors, or Aerosmith to The Rolling Stones, Throbbing Gristle to The Velvet Underground, Eddie Cochran to The Sex Pistols, and so it goes on in a never-ending cycle. It's kind of obvious when you think about it.

So these influences form examples of part of what I term 'transparent concessions', 'transparent concessions' being the study of the invisible factors and compromises that affect how we emotionally respond to things (in this case art), invisible or transparent in the literal sense of the word that there is little or no conscious awareness of their existence other than by the effect that they provide – they may have been intentionally or unintentionally applied by the artist; it also forms the basis of my idea that a piece of art functions, to all effects, not from what we consciously perceive, but through everything that we are unable to consciously notice, including the artwork itself.

So you can see, returning to what is still my greatest passion, that of severely challenging electronic music, along with the more intense African music, in addition to the other pleasures I've talked about, an idea of the fundamental criteria that makes my collection special to me: my records are not trophies, they are an exotic domain full of functional breathing entities from whom I take rich inspirational source, and satisfaction, in all kinds of ways.

03. Related links

William Bennett blog
williambennett.blogspot.com



Susan Lawly
www.susanlawly.freeuk.com

DJ Benetti blog
<http://italoblack.blogspot.com>

Cut Hands blog
<http://djcuthands.blogspot.com>

Come Organisation
www.artnotart.com/come

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH... William Bennett. Part I podcast
rwm.macba.cat/en/research/memorabilia_william_bennett_collection/capsula

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH... William Bennett. Part II podcast
rwm.macba.cat/en/research/memorabilia_william_bennett_collection/capsula

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH... lecture series, Spring 2011
www.macba.cat/controller.php?p_action=show_page&pagina_id=33&inst_id=30547

Conversation with William Bennett, Spring 2011
http://rwm.macba.cat/es/extra/memorabilia_william_bennett_conversation/capsula

Interview with William Bennett, 2011
www.bangthebore.org/archives/853

Interview with William Bennett, 2011
<http://thequietus.com/articles/07199-william-bennett-cut-hands-whitehouse-interview>

Interview with Cut Hands, 2011
www.factmag.com/2011/07/29/cut-hands-afro-noise-i/

'Stormtrooper Electronics: An Abridged Lesson in the History of Whitehouse by Michael Moynihani'
www.esoterra.org/whouse.htm

04. Credits

This lecture took place on April 1, 2012.
www.macba.cat/en/lecture-memorabilia