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Curating popular music: authority and history, aesthetics and technology

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Abstract

The practice of curation in popular music may be seen as a form of historical enquiry that works in a similar way to the critical projects of the 'new museology'. Self-curation can be employed by musicians to re-present their work as a historiographical project of popular music and as an intervention in dominant critical accounts of the musicians' creative practices. The challenge to conventional historiography can be understood as a project of archaeology in the Foucauldian sense, where discourses surrounding objects and their histories may be contested and reinvigorated through a process of recollecting/re-collecting that also recalls Walter Benjamin's challenge to historicism. Using the work of Robert Fripp and King Crimson as an example of musician-curated recordings, I argue that legal and economic control may become a basis for aesthetic control, through which histories of creativity may be rewritten. The act of recollection/re-collection becomes a route through which musicians are able to engage with critical contexts and genre formations, and to contribute actively to the material culture of their own history.

Introduction

Curation is no longer the preserve of the museum or the art gallery. The term is increasingly applied to other forms of creative exhibition, including popular music, where it may be applied to concerts and festivals, as well as to the compilation of anthologies of recorded music. This paper explores the curation by musicians of their own recordings and the intersection of the ontology of recording with the aesthetics and histories of creativity. I bring together arguments about technology, authority and ownership, aesthetics and listening practices in the context of musician-run labels. In particular I hope to reveal how ideological claims about the histories of musicians and genres can be generated through a process of curation that is interested not simply in presenting archive recordings for commercial gain, but as interventions in the dominant critical accounts of the musicians' historical creative practices, accounts over which the musicians might have had little, if any, control. A focus on musician-run labels enables an examination of how musicians are able to exert authority over what recordings are released, how they are released and, most significantly, why they are released: what aesthetic, critical and historical purposes they serve.

I am therefore concerned with the writing of musical history and its rewriting through methods other than the straightforwardly historiographical. In what follows I argue for the practice of curation in popular music as a form of historical enquiry, and draw parallels between artist-curated record labels and the critical projects of contemporary curation termed the 'new museology'. My aim is to show how self-curation can be employed by musicians to re-present their work as a historiographical project of popular music.

Curation and historiography

The notion of curation, with its roots in the Latin verb *curare*, carries in it both a sense of taking care (of oneself, of others or of things) and of taking charge (of a situation or business). Curation combines tending and superintending, looking after and exerting authority over. A conventional definition of the work of a curator in a museum or art gallery would once have emphasised the fixed contexts within which collections and exhibitions were presented to the public, where meaning was preserved alongside the artefact. By contrast, when curation is seen through the lens of the 'new museology' (Vergo 1989), the production of meaning is understood as a dynamic relation between historical artefacts and the cultural resources of the present, enabling artefacts to be re-interpreted in new and emerging contexts. Kreps (2003) calls this 'conservation', to distinguish the process from 'preservation', where curation fixes the meaning and value of an artefact in time and place. The new museology seeks to reveal and understand the processes through which meaning is generated from (and assigned to) artefacts through the contexts that curators construct from supporting documentation, forms of display and methods of presentation. Curators are thus able to '[unmask] the structures, rituals, and procedures by which the relations between objects, bodies of knowledge, and processes of ideological persuasion are enacted' (Sherman and Rogoff 1994, pp. ix–x).

With its emphasis on the interrogation of bodies of knowledge inflected by ideology, the approach to new museology proposed by Sherman and Rogoff has parallels with interventions in historiography, most notably with Foucault's archaeological method. They also acknowledge the work of Walter Benjamin, who wrote in the *Passagenwerk* of replacing the fixities of historicism with a historical-materialist approach that understood history by 'recourse to consciousness of the present' (Benjamin, cited in Sherman and Rogoff, p. xv). Benjamin sought a critical reinvigoration of historical memory by bringing apparently familiar objects together in the present in order to challenge dominant historical discourses. In English, this act of political historiography can be expressed punningly as recollecting/re-collecting. In the field of popular music the re-collection of historical recordings may be seen as an alternative form of representation that offers an account of a musical culture that challenges the historiographical limits of popular music journalism.

To explore the status of the musician as curator I want to borrow a museological approach proposed by Sharon Macdonald (1996) that comprises three analytical frames: contexts, contests and contents. The contexts presented and generated through curation can be seen as a process of representation that addresses questions of agency (who is representing what and in what ways) and materiality (the choices of materials and methods of presentation). Contexts are generated through a network of actors (curators, designers and writers, and even the material agency of the objects

themselves) who arrange objects and their interpretation in space and time. As Lumley (1988, p. 2) puts it, contexts 'map out geographies of taste and values'.

This is not to say that contexts are settled, fixed or definitive: they are always subject to contestation. The generation of an alternative context might become the occasion for a historiographical and aesthetic transformation of existing materials that have been previously and persistently embedded in a dominant critical context. Contestation over questions of meaning, identity and difference might therefore be seen as projects of archaeology in two ways. First, there is the mundane sense of recovering artefacts from the past for display and (re)interpretation, but more significantly there is a second way that points to archaeology in the special sense that Foucault gives it. Foucault's archaeological method aims to discover the 'functioning of a discursive practice' through an examination of how it is articulated through 'institutions, economic processes and social relations' (Foucault 1989, p. 164). Museums (or the exhibition or the collection) are able to become 'contested terrains' for arguments over identity within particular cultural contexts; discursive control gives way to discursive contest (Macdonald 1996, pp. 9–10). Foucault's archaeology is one way to critically reveal and contest the epistemic and discursive processes that regulate the production of meaning.

Contests over contexts are played out in the ways that objects and their documentation are presented in systems of classification and display. The contents of a museum, exhibition or collection may be the location for contestation or contradiction, not only where a dominant historical interpretation is challenged, but also where internal contradictions within a collection may be revealed. Here the material agency of a collection comes to the fore, where processes of collecting, selecting, displaying and interpreting constitute both a practice of classification and a discursive strategy.

Critical contestation and progressive rock

My argument is concerned with the contemporary curation by musicians of historical recordings of their own performances. From the 1990s to the present we can identify an especially strong current of live recordings released by musicians. Many of these releases derive from performances in the 1970s by groups that have generally been categorised as progressive rock. They range from modest, single CDs by groups such as Egg and Hatfield and the North, to boxed sets such as the 10-disc collection *The Road* by Henry Cow, with its emphasis on the group's live improvisations. Perhaps the most extensive release programme of a single group has been co-ordinated by DGM, the record label and download archive owned by Robert Fripp, whose group King Crimson has been releasing music since 1969.[1]

It is easy to place these releases alongside the reissue programmes of major labels such as EMI's 'Immersion Editions' of Pink Floyd and the '40th Anniversary Collectors' Edition' of Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*. There is, however, a difference of intent and intensity in the case of musician-run labels. First, the major label releases might be seen as a continuation or reinforcement of an aesthetic status quo, with their emphasis on remasters of studio material. By contrast, musician-run release programmes tend to emphasise live recordings. In part this is due to copyright restrictions: in the case of Egg and Hatfield and the North, the ownership of the studio recordings resides with another label. Turning this restriction to their advantage,

the musicians present aspects of their work not captured in the studio. Some, like Robert Fripp, who after lengthy legal battles (most recently with the Universal Music Group) now owns the copyright for all his recorded work, are also able to rerelease studio recordings (previously owned by other record or management companies) alongside live recordings. Legal and economic control may thus become a basis for aesthetic control, through which histories of creativity may be rewritten.

These examples offer a starting point for an exploration of musical re-interpretation and historical repositioning by musicians of their own work. Their broad location within progressive rock, an especially contested genre amongst critics, fans and musicians (Ahlkvist 2011), presents an ideological context within which contestation through self-curation can take place, a contestation that draws its power from musicians' critiques of dominant journalistic accounts of their music.

What we might term the historical record of popular music (at least in the US and the UK) derives its ideological power and detail from the continuing accumulation of its journalism. More precisely, its histories derive from a relatively narrow set of ideological positions and cultural values: popular music as youth culture; rock as masculinist, 'authentic' and 'real'; pop as feminine and 'weak'; popular music as about 'feeling' not 'thinking', as corporeal not cerebral (Jones 2002; Lindberg *et al*. 2005). Dominant accounts of popular music emphasise an epochal history, where music is often considered as movements: the psychedelic rock of the countercultural late 1960s; punk politics in the late 1970s; acid house and protest in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Popular music is typically understood through the cultural work of organising and classifying musicians, performances and recordings into historically inflected categories. Perhaps in no other cultural arena does genre play such a significant role in organising and generating meaning in specific social contexts (Frith 1996; Holt 2007). Yet, as Frith and Holt have argued, far from being 'given' and static modes of categorisation, genres are culturally produced by an array of agents, including musicians, publicists and promoters, media producers and audiences. Jason Toynbee (2000) has shown how genres are malleable, subject to the play of repetition against difference, and how they are historically and culturally mobile.

Such malleability is demonstrated in Bill Martin's study of progressive rock, where he argues that rock music is characterised by its 'generosity' and 'synthesis' (Martin (1998, p. 21) and that it is open to a range of styles and influences and instrumentation, many of which lie outside the history of rock. To this extent, he argues, 'there *always* has been a progressive trend in rock music' (Martin 1998, p. 21, original emphasis). In the late 1960s and the early 1970s the term 'progressive' was used by journalists, promoters and record companies to refer to a wide range of groups that drew on blues, folk, jazz and soul, as well as Baroque and Romantic music.[2]

Within music journalism, however, the notion of genre often seems to carry an ideological weight that prevents its mobility and instead argues for the fixity of genres, to make possible a common cultural history of popular music. Progressive rock provides a signal example of this ideology in action. While Robison might be accused of hyperbole when he writes of 'mainstream rock journalism's attempt to erase progressive rock from the popular consciousness' (Robison 2002, p. 232), the journalistic histories of progressive rock, as Macan (1997) shows, demonstrate a critical orthodoxy that found the music and its musicians lacking in authenticity, spontaneity and social relevance. Unlike 'rock'n' roll', critics such as Robert Christgau and Dave Marsh argued that progressive rock was not born of experience: it was insincere, overly considered and apolitical (or lacking the capacity to be politicised).

Interestingly, Robert Fripp appears to agree with the critical orthodoxy of progressive rock, finding it 'characterised by bombast, exaggeration, excess, self-indulgence, pretension and long solos' (Fripp 1997a, p. 43). Yet it was as progressive rock that his work with King Crimson was (and continues to be) characterised by critics. Contesting this categorisation, he excludes his own musical practices from what he considers a 'facile generalisation' (Fripp 1997a, p. 43), arguing that the critical reception of King Crimson in the 1970s as progressive rock is misplaced because King Crimson did not operate in a similar fashion to its peers. Unlike its peers, commercial success was not a priority for King Crimson. Furthermore, Fripp argues, the music of the group was unpredictable (it progressed, rather than repeated itself) partly as a consequence of the group's shifting line-up over five decades: it 'changed its direction and/or personnel whenever a particular musical approach had run its course' (Fripp 1997a, p. 43).

Fripp's claims for the changing and unpredictable nature of King Crimson are presented extensively in the 15-disc boxed set, *Larks' Tongues in Aspic: The Complete Recordings*.[3] Released in 2012, the collection brings together all known recordings (studio and live) of the line-up of King Crimson that recorded the *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* album in 1973, the only commercial release by that line-up before the departure of its percussionist, Jamie Muir. The line-up lasted less than six months as a touring group.

King Crimson had appeared in various line-ups since its formation in 1969. The line-up that went on to record what would become the group's fifth studio album, *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*, in 1973 was a quintet, in which Robert Fripp (guitar and mellotron) was the only original member. Drummer Bill Bruford and bassist John Wetton had both come from groups that in the early 1970s had been considered part of the 'progressive music' scene (Yes and Family, respectively). Violinist and keyboard player David Cross came from a background in classical music as well as folk-rock. Percussionist Jamie Muir had played with a jazz-rock group (Sunship) and was also an active member of the free-improvised music scene in London. The quintet made its first live appearance in October 1972 and lasted until Muir's departure in February 1973, shortly after the group had recorded *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* (Smith 2001).

The group's concert performances in 1972 (from which *The Complete Recordings* are drawn) saw them developing an entirely new repertoire from previous line-ups, save for an encore of perhaps the best-known King Crimson song, '21st Century Schizoid Man' (from the group's first album). The written repertoire was balanced between lengthy multi-part instrumentals and more conventional songs. However, performances also included significant passages of collective improvisation, presented as independent from the written pieces, and at times comprising up to half the length of a performance.

Larks' Tongues in Aspic: The Complete Recordings

Taken as a form of 'exhibition', *The Complete Recordings* exemplifies and complicates the arguments surrounding the curation of popular music as a form of historiography and as an act of recollecting/re-collecting. Its combination of studio and live recordings enables a historiographical challenge to the dominant critical reception of progressive rock. The live performances of the *Complete Recordings* are the only

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ones known to survive from this line-up of the group, although many had already been made available before the release of the boxed set, either as single CD releases by DGM (as part of its King Crimson Collectors' Club series) or as downloads from the company's DGM Live Library site. Of the nine CDs that comprise the concerts in the *Complete Recordings*, only two had not been previously released.

The live recordings draw mostly on cassette recordings, only one of which was made from the soundboard by the group; the rest were made by members of the audience and had for many years been in circulation as bootlegs.[4] The studio recordings include remixes of the original stereo album, a compilation of outtakes and rehearsals from the album's recording sessions, a 5.1 Surround Sound mix of the studio album and lossless stereo transfers across three formats (CD, DVD and Blu-Ray). Finally, the only known video recording of the group, recorded for German television, is included on DVD and Blu-Ray. The presentation of these recordings (live, studio remixes and unreleased studio recordings) in a single collection might be thought of as an exhibition that presents a historical moment in the life of a musical group. The inclusion of reproductions of memorabilia such as promotional posters and a ticket stub emphasises the status of the collection as relating to a 'special time' that has significance beyond the musical and that engages the fan as collector. This is a common strategy in the contemporary presentation of boxed sets of popular music, where non-musical items, as Whyton (2008, p. 160) shows in the case of jazz, 'are used to give the consumer a sense of owning a special part of history'. In the case of the *Complete Recordings*, however, these items are marginal to the critical-historical weight that the recordings themselves seem intended to carry. That weight is best understood in terms of the contest over the critical definition and aesthetic qualities of progressive rock. In this respect, Fripp emphasises instrumental experimentation and particularly the contribution of King Crimson's percussionist Jamie Muir in developing collective improvisation in the group.

Improvisation becomes the key component of Fripp's argument against the situating of King Crimson's music as 'progressive rock'. While improvisation is common in rock and jazz, it is valued differently in different settings. In most rock and jazz settings, where performances are based on songs, performers and audiences alike expect improvisation to take place in defined parts of the song, typically as melodic solos over a chord progression (Faulkner and Becker 2009). Such an approach is common in progressive rock, as in most rock forms; perhaps the only difference in progressive rock is the emphasis placed on the solo due to its length and the virtuosity of the performer. By contrast, collective improvisation is rare in progressive rock and in rock music generally, although it formed a substantial part of the performance practice of King Crimson in the 1970s, as it did with a few other groups such as Henry Cow, Matching Mole and the Third Ear Band.

The role of the group's percussionist, Jamie Muir, is central to the presentation of *The Complete Recordings*. Before joining King Crimson, Muir worked with Derek Bailey and others in the Music Improvisation Company and therefore, unlike the rest of the group, was an experienced free improviser, whose style and instrumentation (his kit included an array of household objects, scrap metal and a bag of leaves) appeared quite at odds even in a group that had already been recognised for the avant-gardism of its compositional complexity. Muir's contribution is exhibited throughout the collection in two ways: in re-presenting the studio work of the quintet (the sessions that became the original *Larks' Tongues in Aspic* album) and in live performances (most of which had already been collected and made available through

DGM Live). First, I want to examine the re-presentation of Muir's contribution in the context of the studio recording in rock music, before turning to a lengthier discussion of the documentary and aesthetic problems that arise in the presentation of live recordings and particularly of improvised music.

Re-presenting the studio

Whether made in a studio or during live performance, any recording resembles some kind of performance or, as Gracyk puts it, 'recordings are simultaneously documentations and stylized "semblances"' (Gracyk 2008, p. 73). It might seem obvious to claim that a recording can only ever *resemble* a performance and can never *be* the performance itself but, as Jonathan Sterne's (2003) study of the early years of sound reproduction shows, a confluence of commerce and aesthetics developed a culture of listening where the recording was promoted as ontologically (if not experientially) identical to the performance it aimed to document. Sterne exposes the technological ideal of the 'vanishing mediator' as a vain attempt to produce a copy indistinguishable from the original performance (Sterne 2003, p. 218), an attempt that is better understood as a cultural argument about how to listen. Consequently, the history of sound reproduction can be rethought as the development and consolidation of a culture of listening that encourages a 'collapse [of] the difference between live and reproduced into a single continuum of likeness and difference' (Sterne 2003, p. 285), a cultural search that continues to the present, as Milner (2009) and Sterne (2012) have shown.

The studio recording will always be a deliberate construct conceived as an act of phonography, with the aim of presenting repeatable performances to an audience (Brown 2000a). The sum of these performances – after they have been edited, overdubbed, mixed, remixed and remastered – does not aim to resemble a live performance. In an echo of Sterne's argument about the vanishing mediator, Kania finds studio recordings of rock music 'are not transparent to live performance events' (Kania 2008, p. 13). Likeness and difference underlie any assessment of live and studio recordings: the studio recording exhibits difference (from the live ensemble recording) and likeness (to a creative ideal of the musicians and the producer).

The Complete Recordings presents a variety of approaches to 'how to listen' to the historical studio recordings of King Crimson. The original multitrack masters are remixed, often radically, to refocus the attention of the listener and to provide evidence for Fripp's argument about the contribution of Jamie Muir. First, the studio album is presented as it was originally mixed, providing a reference copy with which to compare more recent presentations of the album. A new stereo mix of the album brings out Muir's percussion lines, while maintaining an instrumental balance across the ensemble. A 5.1 Surround Sound mix enables the listener to separate the instrumental parts and to hear the duet improvising of Muir and drummer Bill Bruford much more clearly than in either stereo mix. Unbroadcast video footage of the group improvising for German television provides a further set of cues to encourage critical listening. Most radical, however, is a set of remixes that highlight Muir's work in isolation and that move the listener away completely from the presentation of an ideal of group performance, suggesting a more forensic approach to listening. For the song 'Easy Money', the rest of the group's parts are mixed almost to the level of inaudibility, providing only the faintest of backgrounds against which Muir's

percussion takes on the form of a continuous solo improvisation. A second remix of the song removes Muir's contribution entirely, an apparently perverse strategy that shows what the group might have been without him or, as the sonic absence following Muir's departure, evidence of what the group lost when Muir left. Fripp himself seems to have felt Muir's departure keenly: 'something was not there that was a necessary part of the band as conceived' (Fripp 2012, p. 11). Finally, a collage of studio rehearsals and unused takes constructs an idealised run-through of the entire album that emphasises the improvisatory capacity of the group in its display of variations of parts and ensemble playing.

Together these radical representations and remixing strategies argue for a history of the group and its music – a 're-collection' – heard through the ears of the present, a listening project that is dependent upon the availability of remastering and remixing technology, but also dependent upon a critique of a dominant historiography that has become more sedimented over time (and which therefore seems to need a more substantial argument to counter it). To present such extreme versions of performances that had been fixed for 40 years is to make a striking ideological argument about the aesthetics of the music. By contrast, if we accept Kania's position that studio recordings do not readily stand in for the live performance (which is how I understand his 'transparency' argument), then the recordings of the group's live performances seem to present a very different form of exhibition, a form that nevertheless remains bound to the aesthetic claims made by Fripp about the improvisatory significance of the group.

Live recordings, fidelity and listening

While comparatively rare in rock music, recordings of improvised music have a particular significance in jazz, where they enable live performances to be preserved, studied and codified, processes that have enabled the historiography of jazz. The collection, archiving and distribution of live recordings of improvisation have become part of a strategy of jazz historiography – even, as Brown (2000b) shows, an argument for considering the history of jazz as a history of its sound recordings. Live recordings of free improvisation are an extreme example: not only are the solos original and unrepeatable, but also the entire musical performance. The social occasion, location and reception of the improvised performance is aesthetically unique and will contain musical events of the moment that will never be heard again. David Borgo shows how the capture and selection of otherwise evanescent performance practices can establish a specific history, and how they may become 'important documents or milestones in an evolving career' (Borgo 2002, p. 179). Borgo is cautious, though, about the extent to which a recording can be considered as a faithful account of a performance in a particular social setting. A recording can only document, it can never duplicate; it will only capture a 'limited spectrum of the performance experience' (Borgo 2002, p. 178). Recordings of improvised music may also be considered as acts of phonography similar to those described by Brown and Kania. Recordings may be edited and specific performances preferred above others. For example, Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* album of 1961 is generally considered to be the first recording of collectively improvised jazz. It was not until 10 years later, when 'First Take' was released on Coleman's *Twins* album, that it became generally

known that the performance released on the original album was the second of two attempts.

While we might consider the improvisations collected in *The Complete Recordings* as having a similar status to the jazz recordings examined by Brown and Borgo – as attempts to establish a specific history through the presentation of a set of unique performances – the curatorial narrative that surrounds them seems to avoid the problems of considering the recordings as 'transparent' performances or as unique documents of 'special moments'. That said, in terms of scarcity alone, the recordings have value to fans: they are the only known extant recordings of the line-up and consequently the only examples of Muir's live work with the group (apart from a recording made at the Rainbow Theatre in London and available to purchasers of the boxed set as a free download). Of 32 concert dates played by this line-up of the group, recordings of only seven of them survive (and a number of these are incomplete). The eight hours of live recordings seem to intensify the aesthetic argument about King Crimson presented through the studio recordings.

If listeners hear the studio re-presentations first (though the live recordings are presented first in the collection), then we would expect that they would already know 'how to listen' to the live recordings. A reasonable expectation would be that the live recordings afford a general exploration of the improvisatory nature of this line-up of King Crimson and that they will enable a specific, detailed account of Muir's contribution to be made. Kania refers to what he terms the 'replete detail' that a recording of live jazz affords, a richness that he does not expect to find in live recordings of rock music where, he argues, there is little necessity for 'listening *through* the recording to the represented performance' (Kania 2008, p. 13, original emphasis). Yet it is precisely a practice of 'listening *through*' the live recordings of King Crimson that is required in order to transform them from mere documents to aesthetic interventions.

Eric Clarke has written persuasively about systems of musical affordance that, in an application of James Gibson's concept of affordance to practices of listening, draw on both the 'objective properties' of the musical material and the material qualities of 'cultures, social practices, emotional states, and ideological allegiances' that contextualise and embed any specific listening experience (Clarke 2005, pp. 37, 190). In the case of King Crimson, we have already seen how Robert Fripp's re-presentation of the group's studio recordings can contribute to an ideological positioning of creative practices. The group's live recordings are only the sonic traces of more complex social occasions that in their original forms involved a range of interactions and behaviours in a specific performance setting, none of which remains in the recording, except in a highly attenuated form of likeness (such as the sound of an appreciative audience or Fripp's onstage announcements). Any system of affordance provided by the live recordings, while informed by the aesthetic claims presented in the studio recordings, still needs to demonstrate those same claims.

The live performances of *The Complete Recordings* are all audience recordings, with the exception of one premixed stereo soundboard recording. In presenting the live recordings for commercial release, Fripp and his sound engineers, who restored the original tapes, were faced with two problems. First, the majority of recordings were made on domestic cassette machines by audience members; second, both these and the soundboard recording were premixed in either mono or stereo, preventing any rebalancing of the instruments and enabling only limited use of equalisation to improve the recordings. These are not new problems for DGM:

Fripp has acknowledged the difficulties faced by his sound engineer David Singleton 'to bring these tapes [of live performances collected in the *Epitaph* set] to a listenable state', a process that he terms 'a rite of necromancy' (Fripp 1997b, p. 19). Singleton (2013) has also commented on the problem of recreating a 'realistic concert experience':

> Bootlegs are a reasonable representation of the fairly awful actual sound in the hall. Board recordings are an exact representation of the horribly imbalanced sound that was played through the PA system. So what we actually crave is a wholly unrealistic concert experience. (Singleton 2013)

Singleton is arguing that the representational capacity of audience ('bootleg') and soundboard recordings is generally considered inadequate to present a detailed account of a performance. In other words, they will inevitably lack the 'replete detail' that Kania argues is necessary for critical listening, a view that is reinforced by Glasgow (2007) and Gracyk (2008), both of whom draw attention to the deficiencies of audience recordings. Singleton is also troubled by studio reconstructions of live performances:

> My favourite live album as a teenager was Live and Dangerous by Thin Lizzy, which I now know is largely a studio construct, heavily overdubbed and edited with an artificial setlist – but if the role of a live album is to create the perfect concert experience (the 'platonic concert' for those familiar with such ideas) then this is, in one world, a perfect live album. Because all live albums lie. Even if there is truth in the playing … beautifully balanced mixes are a lie. Which brings us back to bootlegs and board recordings. (Singleton 2013)

These too, though, will also 'lie', in that they will represent the music heard from only a single 'hearing point' under less than optimal acoustic and technological conditions. In the case of *The Complete Recordings*, there is no possibility of presenting 'beautifully balanced mixes', because there exist only the unbalanced mixes of cassette recordings. It is at this stage that the material culture of the recordings intervenes, where Sterne's vanishing mediator looms large. The presence of 'too much' mediation can interfere with the listening experience to produce an experiential gap so wide that it obstructs audition, as Gracyk shows in his account of an online discussion among Grateful Dead fans. Noting their negative assessment of the recording quality of a particular performance, he argues that 'not every documentary recording presents "sufficient likeness" to its source to encourage critical listening' (Gracyk 2008, p. 70). By contrast, prior to the release of *The Complete Recordings*, King Crimson fans posted reviews on the DGM Live website that present overwhelmingly positive responses to the recordings when they were first made available as downloads. Despite acknowledging the evident deficiencies of the recordings ('very good for a bootleg cassette', 'good sound apart from the odd bit of distortion and top end crackle'), fans are enthusiastic about their documentary quality, two even describing the audience recording made at Hull Technical College as the 'Holy Grail' of performances featuring Jamie Muir. Another fan argues for the audience recording over the soundboard:

> The bootleg source does not detract from the performance in any way, in fact, I'd go as far as to say that it somehow improves certain aspects: you feel like you're in the hall watching King Crimson play and there is no bias in the mix. … The recording has ambience, which would certainly be lacking in a soundboard. ('TheNightWatcher' 2010)

Not that the listening process is easy; it clearly requires attentiveness of a kind captured in Novak's (2008) notion of 'virtuosic listening':[5]

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I've found that the audience tapes of this group make it a bit difficult to appreciate everything that's going on, but repeated and concentrated listenings are rewarded – put on the headphones and just listen, as deeply and totally as possible. It's worth it. ('DeVito' 2008)

For these fans the value of the recordings lies not merely in their scarcity, but in the quality of the music:

I absolutely love the improvisations that this Crimson delivered. They are full of adventure, heart, passion, and never boring!! ('freshlet' 2007)

The same post goes on to compare the group's improvisations with the jazz-rock fusion of Miles Davis's 'electric' groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s, making a similar argument to that presented by Fripp himself for the historical and aesthetic significance of the recordings:

I'm only 15 minutes into the Vista [Hull] improv and I have to say that this is worth buying on the strength of this alone. In improvisational quality this is right up there with Miles and Mahavishnu [Orchestra]. ('paulwelsh' 2007)

Fans are clearly able to engage with the recordings beyond their documentary significance; affective engagement is made with the performances they document and not simply through the 'collectibility' of the documents themselves. Throughout the posts it is the improvisations that attract particular critical attention, whether for their 'extraordinary touches of magic, lyrical beauty and excitement' ('antmanbee' 2008) or to emphasise Muir's contributions, 'from his beautiful and atmospheric sounds ... to the pure thrashing and industrial kitchen noises' ('TheNightWatcher' 2010). As if in anticipation of what Fripp would write about Muir five years later, 'JorgeSouto' (2007) writes of 'moments that offer different perspectives of this band and where it could have gone had Mr. Muir decided to stay longer'.

I want to conclude this section with a lengthy quote that was also written some years before the release of *The Complete Recordings*. Written by a fan who was present at the original concert, it shows how fans develop their own arguments about the music and place it in contexts that go well beyond a sedimented notion of 'progressive rock'. While similar arguments might be made about the improvising of other groups at the time (such as Gong or Soft Machine), it serves to remind us of the key interests of this article concerning aesthetics and authority, of the curating and contesting of genres, and of the writing of musical history:

I'd heard improvisation before, but always within a context. I'd never heard truly free improvisation, jumping out into the void and seeing what happens. This gig was truly revelatory. And what's more, of all the free improvisation I have heard since then, from Henry Cow through Lol Coxhill through Evan Parker through to the bunch that I even get to play with myself, Oxford Improvisers, King Crimson, the 1972 incarnation including Jamie Muir in particular, remains the exemplar. Had any rock band ever done anything like this before? Had Crimson done anything like this before? ('mramnesiac' 2008)

Conclusion

Genre categories are crucial to the writing of histories of popular music. In the case of progressive rock, the dominant critical reception of the music has presented the music in terms of its failure to display what is prized in rock music: it is not

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authentic; it is not sincere; it is not socially relevant. The hardening of this critical position into a historical orthodoxy depends on a relatively static description of genre where its features are seen as persistent and unchanging. Against this orthodoxy we have seen how Robert Fripp prefers to remove the music of King Crimson from the category of progressive rock altogether and to present a historical account of the group that not only contests the critical reception of its music but also implicitly interferes with genre categories in popular music.

The significance of Fripp's approach lies in the curatorial method he employs to present his argument, a process through which historical memory is challenged not through the writing of an alternative history but through a re-presentation of material culture. *The Complete Recordings* may be considered as a museological project that defamiliarises existing 'objects' (radical remixes of studio recordings) and presents them in the context of other materials not easily available during the creative life of the group (live recordings). The challenge to conventional historiography, as we have seen, can be understood as a project of archaeology in the Foucauldian sense, where objects and their histories are reinvigorated through Benjamin's notion of recollecting/re-collecting.

This optimistic reading of the curatorial power available to musicians must be tempered by the acknowledgement that Fripp is in an unusual position, due to the large amount of legal, economic, technological and aesthetic control he possesses over his own work and that of King Crimson. By contrast, control over the recordings of most professional musicians of his generation remains constrained by managers and record companies. Nevertheless, in some domains of popular music we do find significant numbers of musician-run labels, as well as independent labels that cede artistic control to musicians. In genres such as folk, jazz, experimental music and 'avant-rock' we find hundreds of such enterprises (as the review sections of specialist magazines such as *fRoots* and the *Wire* attest), where musicians have significant amounts of control over their own work. Even for musicians in these circumstances, though, there remains the major constraint of economics. Fripp's reputation and 'selling power' has been built up over five decades of professional work, whereas the economic base and audience reach of many independent labels is far more limited. That said, where musicians 'own' their creativity – where they are able to make aesthetic decisions about how to present their own work – it may still be possible for them to become curators of their own creative practice, if only on a modest scale. Arguably, musicians who record for their own labels are already curating their own practice, creating further situations that might have consequences for the place of journalists in the writing of popular music histories.

Curation is a reflexive process: to assemble the contents for a musical 'exhibition' is not only to describe a historical situation but also to argue for how we might attend to it, appreciate and understand it. In describing the historical situation, the curator constitutes the situation. I have argued that curation is concerned with taking care and taking control. It is not, however, sufficient to exert authority over the recordings themselves: the curator must also convince the listeners. If the recordings being curated imply an argument about how to listen, then the argument's success rests on the critical reception of the recordings by listeners.

In the case of *The Complete Recordings* we have some evidence that, however limited the live recordings might be as an account of a musical encounter, fans are in agreement that these recordings represent a significant moment in the history of the group. Although they might be ontologically and technologically 'unfaithful',

the recordings become much more than a desperate attempt to commercialise the unlistenable. More significantly, fans present critiques that place King Crimson in a far wider musical context than that encompassed by 'progressive rock'. Their critiques look back to the electric jazz of Miles Davis, to the contemporaneous work of the Mahavishnu Orchestra and to free-improvising musicians – they even place King Crimson as part of a history of improvised music. The critiques show how fans contest genre categories as well as hinting at how fans are able to organise their listening beyond those categories. For a musician like Fripp, curation enables him to re-present historical performances in ways that work against genre as fixity and instead places those performances in settings that suggest a more malleable understanding of musical history. His approach thus moves closer to Martin's 'generous synthesis' of rock music and away from more conservative journalistic accounts. The act of recollection/re-collection becomes a route through which musicians are able to engage with critical contexts and genre formations, and to contribute actively to the material culture of their own history.

Endnotes

1. This is not to say that progressive rock is the only locus for musician-led reissue programmes. Throbbing Gristle, for example, continue to release multiple boxed sets of live recordings through their own Industrial Records label, as well as through other independent companies. The earliest example is the group's *24 Hours* cassette release of 1980, which comprised 26 cassettes of live recordings housed in an attaché case. While we might expect progressive rock in particular to favour the multiple release (given the genre's reputation in the 1970s for double and triple albums), the extent and longevity of Throbbing Gristle's reissue programme indicates that the exhaustive (or excessive) documentation of a group's performances is not peculiar to progressive rock and, perhaps more importantly, that there are listening publics interested in immersive, critical listening beyond those for progressive rock.
2. For example, in 1969 Decca released the sampler album, *Wowie Zowie! The World of Progressive Music*, featuring songs by the Moody Blues, Genesis, Savoy Brown and John Mayall. The 'generous synthesis' of progressive rock is identified in many scholarly accounts of the music: Hegarty and Halliwell (2011, p. 3) call it a 'heterogeneous and troublesome genre' and present a capacious reading of progressive rock that extends well beyond what they call the 'most visible bands of the early to mid-1970s' (Hegarty and Halliwell 2011, p. 3) – primarily ELP, Genesis, Jethro Tull and Yes – to examine the connections between rock, jazz and folk, amongst other generic intersections. They also look for evidence of the 'progressive' (as the subtitle of their book indicates) 'beyond and before' the 1970s. Lambe (2012) provides a more journalistic account, yet one that is equally inclusive. Holm-Hudson's (2002) collection similarly ranges 'beyond and before' in situating studies of the group United States of America and 'math rock' alongside those of King Crimson and Yes. Anderton (2010) and Keister and Smith (2008) similarly argue for more inclusive understandings of progressive rock, whether in respect of cultural geography (Anderton) or affective musical content (Keister and Smith). Holm-Hudson's (2008) monograph on Genesis contextualises the group's last album with Peter Gabriel within a political economy of record production and promotion that, instead of shearing progressive rock off from other musical currents, identifies economic and social confluences that enable a reading of the album as a precursor to the cultural and social commentaries within punk and new wave.
3. Before the release of *The Complete Recordings*, Robert Fripp had already curated two four-CD sets of recordings (*Epitaph* and *The Great Deceiver*) that emphasised the improvisations of two line-ups of the group in concert, in 1969 and in 1973–1974. Since the release of *The Complete Recordings*, Fripp has released *The Road to Red*, a 24-disc set that documents the live performances of the 1973–1974 line-up to an even greater extent.
4. There is a contradiction here between Fripp's attitude to bootlegging and filesharing, and his use of unauthorised recordings for his own label's releases. Since at least the 1980s, Fripp has insisted that no recording of any kind (whether by sound or image) take place at his concerts. His dispute with Universal Music Group largely centred on the unauthorised sale of King Crimson downloads. One can only assume that the argument for the commercial use of unauthorised recordings is similar to that presented by Frank Zappa for his 'Beat the Boots' series of releases: that the purchaser is at least guaranteed the best available copy, often

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sonically improved, at a reasonable price and with the artist's permission. Still, the contradiction remains.

5. Two observations need to be made here. First, to judge from other sites for discussion among King Crimson fans, such as Elephant Talk (www.elephant-talk.com), the listening practices of these fans already tend towards the 'virtuosic': they often focus on the technicalities of the musical material and not simply the affective nature of the music. Discussions on Elephant Talk often focus on musicological matters and the site contains fans' own tablature transcriptions not only of the group's compositions, but also of Fripp's improvised guitar solos. Second, as both Heylin (2003) and Marshall (2003) show in their studies of bootlegs, the desire to collect whatever recordings are available can often override (or at least mitigate) considerations of musical or technical quality.

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