

MATERIALITIES

POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES



NEW THINKING #3

2019/20

BCMCR

Birmingham Centre
for Media and
Cultural Research

MATERIALITIES AT BCMCR

Over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, researchers in the BCMCR have been producing work in response to the research theme of 'Materialities'. With this theme, we were interested in exploring the ways in which our theoretical work and practice interact with and exist within the material world.

Led by Dr Iain Taylor, the theme has produced a breadth and depth of exciting work across each of our research clusters. This pamphlet has been produced as part of a series, which aims to capture a snapshot of the ideas and discussions which have emerged from the theme over the course of the year, and to provide a resource for colleagues and students who are keen to consider notions of materiality from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives.

For more information on Materialities at BCMCR, or on the work of the Centre generally, please visit our website:

www.BCMCR.org

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Popular Music Studies

Materialities



July 2020



RAMONES

ROCK ON JIMMY

ROCK ON JIMMY

SUGAR MAN

SUGAR MAN

RAMONES

RAMONES

RAMONES

RAMONES

SESSIONS DE

MARTY DORRIS
BUCK OWENS

ALICE BAKER

ALICE BAKER

ALICE BAKER

ALICE BAKER

ALICE BAKER

MERLE HAGGARD

adp

adp



HELLO {NAME_OF_CITY}!

CRAIG HAMILTON

Craig's research explores contemporary popular music reception practices and the role of digital, data and internet technologies on the business and cultural environments of music consumption. In the main this research is built around the development of The Harkive Project, an online, crowd-sourced method of generating data from music consumers about their everyday relationships with music and technology. Craig also researches live music ecologies and music festivals. He is the co-Managing Editor of *Riffs: Experimental Writing on Popular Music* and the Project Coordinator for the AHRC-funded Songwriting Studies Network.

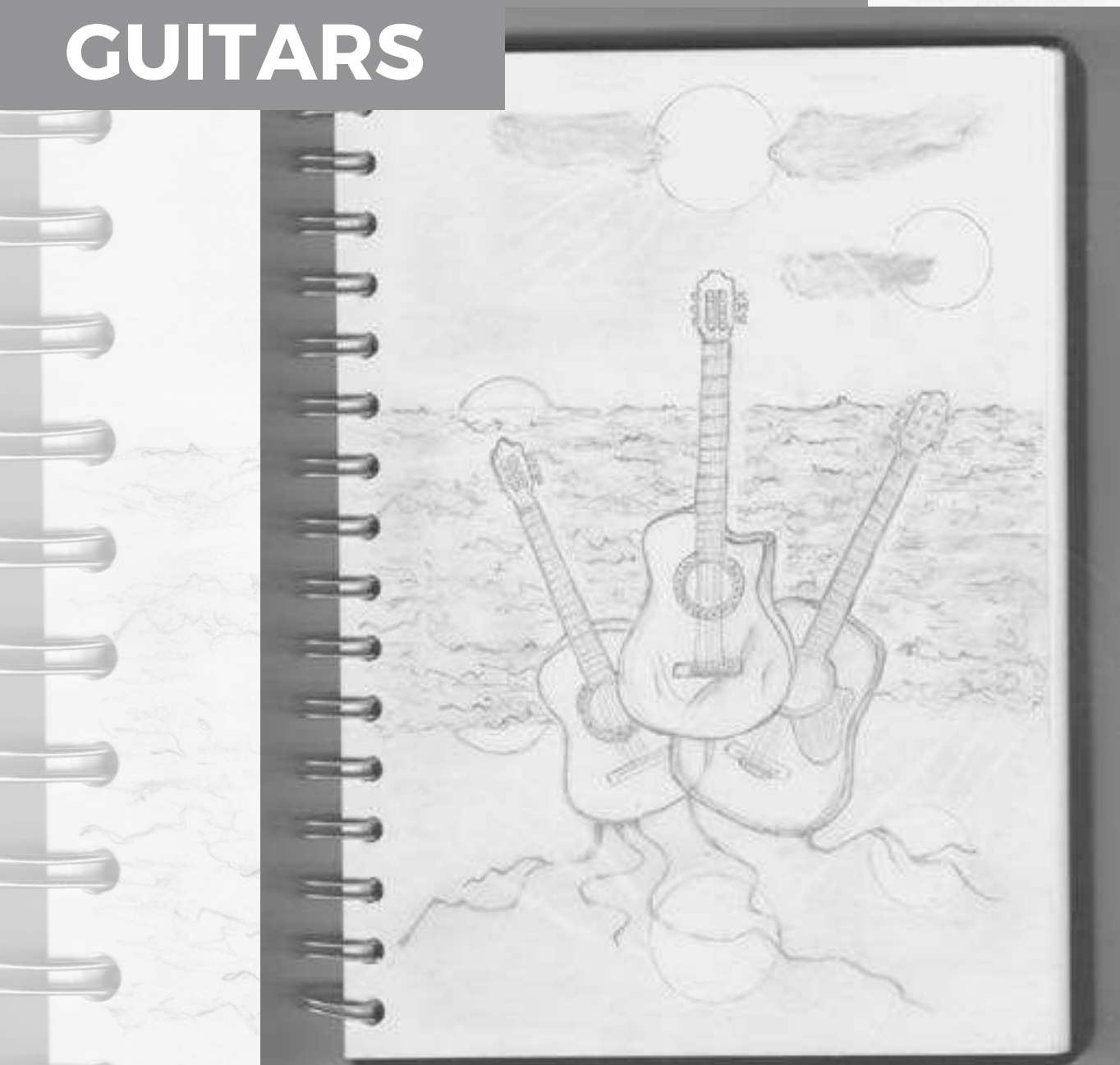
Much of my time, thinking and energy over the last twelve months has been dedicated to work that attempts to understand complex relationships and experiences that occur in 'real-world' situations through data-derived research and digital tools. How can the many relationships, places, roles and activities that comprise the live music ecology of an entire city be represented through an online map? How can the many different types of experiences people have at a music festival be understood through a mobile application? How can the everyday experiences people have with popular music be understood through what they say and do on digital platforms?

In one sense - and even as technologies such as mobile app or the streaming service have become (to many people) central to how we interact with music and each other - the work I do sits at the intersection of a visible binary between the real and the abstract. However, the work I do also exists in an embodied, real-world setting. My back will ache if I spend too much time bent over my laptop working on a coding problem. The 'cloud-server' I struggled to configure over the course of a few days last month is in reality a physical hard-drive located in a data centre. Similarly, the interactive dots on the music venue map interface I created are only really interactive if they are clicked upon by a user's mouse, or thumb. The immateriality of the virtual is really anything but, and is rather a set of convenient metaphors we have collectively adopted to help us make sense of the world.

Yet, what could not have been predicted during the planning of my various research activities is how events in 2020 would make many of the 'real-world' components of my research disappear. Live music venues have been forced to close. Festivals have been postponed. Browsing for vinyl records ceased. The digital tools I have been involved with have become as real as the things they were designed to represent, in the sense that popular music now exists in the socially-distanced abstract.

Likewise, the aims of my various projects have shifted. Considerations of survival and evolution have overtaken an exploration of the day-to-day now that the everyday is extraordinary. Artists, venues and promoters are being challenged to consider ways they can continue to operate in virtual environments. Mobile apps designed to be used on a sunny festival site are now being deployed as a means of creating a simulacrum of the festival experience for an imagined community dispersed across time and space; the interface becoming the only physical location people can share. Likewise, the intimate connection between artist and audience created by the live music setting must- for now, at least - be forged or renegotiated through the live-streamed gig and the virtual tip jar. As I write, we are collectively exploring these possibilities and alternatives and the line between real and abstract erodes further.

ABOUT BIRTHDAY GUITARS



ASYA DRAGANOVA

Asya Draganova is a lecturer at the Birmingham Institute for Media and English. She is the course director for MA Cultural Studies and teaches on the BA (Hons) Music Industries. Her research is in popular music culture, and she is the author of the monograph *Popular Music in Contemporary Bulgaria: At the Crossroads* (2019) and editor of *The Canterbury Sound in Popular Music: Scene, Identity and Myth* (with Shane Blackman and Andy Bennett, 2021).

Birthdays – a prominent opportunity for material expressions of love. Not all my seven guitars are birthday presents, but those that are, are milestone guitars, and the birthdays themselves – milestone birthdays.

My first guitar I got for my 6th birthday, September 1995. My uncle travelled from Sliven to Sofia to choose it; he is nearly 6.6ft – and I needed a small guitar. Imagine the giant he was in my eyes spending hours playing tiny classical guitars in the shop: his devotion illuminating the room. He will always remain my music teacher. Sometimes in the summer, when I visit, we play that first guitar - in tune, intact, still beautiful. It is just that my hands are bigger, but when I play, it seems not much else has changed.

The next birthday guitar came 19 years later. It was dad's idea –I needed a loud acoustic guitar easy to travel with, "a guitar for active party use", he said, and not for preservation. Since my 25th, we have seen lots together – spectacular sunrises, nights on the beach, old and new friends. This guitar became the essential part of my summer-travelling luggage – everything else is secondary.

The latest birthday guitar was a gift from dad again, marking my 30th, and my return to playing classical. Embarking on the selection adventure, we found ourselves in unexpected locations, to finally see and hear The One: the milestone birthday guitar my dad thought I deserved, a Bulgarian Kremona, made in Kazanlak since 1924, and almost exclusively produced for export. I couldn't take the guitar with me to England, there were no spare seats on the plane. Just like I had to leave family behind, I had to leave the guitar. Always a separation lurking around the corner, and happiness – never complete. When I went back to Bulgaria over Christmas, I made new memories with the guitar and even took it to my favourite teacher and uncle – to play and feel how well it "fits" me.



I took this birthday guitar with me to Birmingham. Taking the seat next to me on the plane - a family member or a dearest friend - this Bulgarian guitar moved homes, making the journey I made 11 years ago. When I play it, I hear that “real home” I am away from: a transcendental power in the vibration of the strings. Even when it’s silent, the guitar sits next to me, and every glance I catch is a reminder of love and the impossibilities of singularity.

All my birthday guitars “live” in different places –the family house in Sliven, the Sofia flat where I grew up, and Birmingham. A material epitome of my life – one of many homes, and none complete, unless in imagined combination with the others. Three homes, three birthdays, three milestone guitars – the first marking the beginning of a lifelong passion; the second embodying youth and freedom; and the newest – a guitar to enter an era with, one of confidently embracing my unresolved crossroads. Note how many times here I wrote “my” – an ownership over my story, the bonds with people and places I love, my guitars. Birthday presents are more than a consumerist tradition: I hope there are future birthday guitars for me, and that one day I, too, have someone to give a guitar to.





TURN THAT BLOODY THING OFF!



DAVID KANE

Dave Kane is a researcher in the Social Research and Evaluation Unit (SREU) at Birmingham City University. SREU work on a wide range of funded projects relating to social exclusion in the community at large. Dave has been fascinated by pop music since discovering his brother's collection of 1960's singles at a tender age: his MPhil investigated how music fans organise online resources devoted to their object of fandom and he is currently investigating community experiences of popular music in his home city of Birmingham. In his spare time, Dave plays guitar, writes songs and escapes the city on his motorcycle.

Bennett and Rogers observations on the 'the material relevance of popular music objects', (2016: 32-3) prompted me to reflect on my personal experiences of pop's materiality and other instances of material objects from the past gaining currency in the present.

My son, for example, has recently taken to buying and selling 'vintage' items of sportswear; vintage in this case, defined as clothing that was originally manufactured at least a decade ago. The motivation for this material consumption differs from Jean Hogarty's reading of the acquisition of period original clothes by music fans - the motivation to actually own a 'piece of the past' - that links in with their rejection of contemporary music for past sounds often enjoyed on vinyl records (Hogarty, 2017)

Manufacturers of goods such as cars and motor cycles have previously mined the seam of nostalgia by combining retro design with modern technology. For some, this represents the 'best of both worlds.' Triumph motorcycles went a stage further, releasing a 'limited edition vinyl record and turntable, inspired by the rock 'n' roll heritage of its Street Family of bikes' (Pegden, 2017). Such initiatives appeal to a certain demographic or, more cynically, a demographic that has the disposable income necessary to consume such expensive symbols are the likely target.



One of my most vivid memories of music and materiality is listening to my brother's collection of 1960s singles, played on a red HMV mono record player fitted with a Garrard turntable. I had inherited both as my brother had moved on: to new-fangled stereo and Led Zeppelin. I spent hours playing those records in my bedroom, poring over the sleeves and writing lyrics out in long hand. The fun stopped when my father's disembodied voice rang up the stairs issuing a blunt instruction to desist. I would have lost track of time and he would have lost patience.

The red HMV is long gone, my father gone too. Both, however, can be conjured up instantly. Is it somehow disrespectful that they burn equally brightly? The one, merely the means of accessing the latest form of sound carrying technology (Bennett and Rogers; p.31). The other, well, my father. I have no such attachment to other sound reproducing equipment; the succession of record, tape, CD and MP3 players that followed blend into one another, each hastily retired as technology evolved. I have resisted the revival of interest in vinyl; Spotify does the job well enough on my 'phone. I have not felt the urge to revisit my collection of vinyl albums and singles, still boxed at my mother's house.

I would however, love to kneel in front of that red HMV once more, stack the multi-changer with singles and wait - for the disconcerting thump of the record hitting the turntable and the inevitable reaction from downstairs - 'Turn that bloody thing off!'







SONGS IN A MATERIAL WORLD



SIMON BARBER

Dr Simon Barber researches, writes and lectures about songwriting and popular music. He is particularly interested in the relationships between creative workers and industry, which he explores as a member of the BCMCR popular music cluster. Simon also currently leads the Songwriting Studies Research Network, a two-year project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and is the producer and co-presenter of the popular Sodajerker podcast, which features interviews with some of the most successful songwriters in the world.



Immaterial. *Adjective.* Unimportant under the circumstances; irrelevant. Of no substantial consequence. Not consisting of matter.

For songwriters, immateriality is a native state. Until a song is sung into a voice memo or captured as a recording of some kind, it exists only for the writer and those that hear it. Perhaps because of that, songs have structure and form, they have words to share ideas and communicate. The oral tradition of songs as communal experiences runs through the entire history of human culture. Songs make us think and feel. They evoke the past and connect us with the present. So, with that in mind, it seems prudent to ask: does matter, matter?

In practice, the material form is never far from the songwriter's purview. Long before recording technologies became widely accessible, sheet music was the material culture that allowed people to reproduce the songs they heard and to share them with others. In the present, most songwriters engage in making their ideas tangible as recorded sound even in the first moments of creation.


Material. *Noun.* The matter from which a thing is or can be made. Significant; important.

The ways in which we conceptualise and understand songs remains bound up in the material qualities of recorded media. Record labels ask: "Can we hear your material?" Fans ask: "Is the new material any good?" Our knowledge of songs in the modern world derives almost entirely from our access to recordings. Whether it's McLuhan (1964) telling us that the 'medium is the message', or Kittler (1999) telling us that 'media determine our situation', the medium through which we receive the song frames our experience of it and discourse about it.

As Bennett and Rogers (2015) have pointed out, it is the 'manifestations of materiality' that allow people to make cultural meanings from objects, empower themselves in their choices, and share values and experiences with others. This is borne out in the work of Toltz and Boucher (2018), which describes a collection of fragile song-spools and a tiny pamphlet containing twelve compositions that have become part of the continuing repertoire of Holocaust songs. These items represent the earliest recorded testimony of Holocaust survivors after the war. Without such objects, the songs that accompanied those experiences would be lost to history.

There is no doubting the value and understanding of popular music culture that has emerged from music as a physical object. As digitalisation continues to impact every aspect of our lives, our questions about the material aspects of mediation will only increase (Danielsen and Maaso, 2009; Magaudda, 2011), and songs will continue to be made meaningful by their interaction with the material world.





The Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR) was established in 2009 to develop excellent research as a core activity within the Birmingham School of Media. Currently, BCMCR has over 30 research-active staff and 30 research degree students. The Director of the centre is Nicholas Gebhardt, and the Associate Directors are Kirsten Fokert and Dima Saber.

The BCMCR aims to produce distinctive, collaborative work within the field of media and culture research. In the previous Research Excellence Framework process for assessing the UK HE sector, the majority of BCMCR research environment and activities were judged as of a quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

We welcome visiting researchers from across the world and hold regular research seminars which mix presentations from staff, students, and speakers from a range of our collaborative partnerships. Please feel free to contact us if you have a research enquiry.

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Over the course of the 2019/20 academic year, researchers from the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research (BCMCR) have been working in response to the research theme of **Materialities**.

Colleagues from each of the BCMCR's research clusters were asked to create short pieces of writing which capture some of the thoughts, ideas, and discussions which have emerged over the course of the year in relation to the **Materialities** theme.

This work forms the basis of a series of pamphlets which capture the ways in which the theme has shaped / changed thinking within each cluster.