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

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POPULAR MUSIC¹ AND CARIBBEAN
ACADEMIC LIBRARIES – AN UNHOLY
ALLIANCE OR A GOOD MARRIAGE?

Elizabeth F. Watson

Introduction

The principal responsibility of any academic library is to support the information needs of its parent institution. Understandably therefore the collection-building activities of these libraries are guided by programmatic offerings of their host institutions. Wayne Wiegand, highlights this duty when he writes that academic libraries are mainly engaged in “pursuing collection-building activities which support academia’s curricular needs” (Weigand 1970, 200).

Weigand’s useful paper also looks at how culture has generally been perceived within academia. On this he opines that “for

¹ While several definitions exist for popular music, the following serves the purposes of this paper: [Popular music is] Music [that is] accessible to a wide audience, distributed through the mass media as a commercial product. It tends to be associated with urban rather than rural cultures, and is performed by professional musicians. www.music.princeton.edu/~jeffery/Ellingtonvocab.html

decades now, the academic community has been content to allow a narrow definition of culture to dictate the substance of its curricula” (ibid. 200). Regarding popular culture², Barbara Moran states that “there has long been an uneasy relationship between popular culture and libraries” (Moran 1992, 3). The combination of a narrow definition and the existence of this unsettled relationship has been guided, in the main, by precepts which advanced that only Eurocentric cultural expressions and forms are of value. In the Caribbean this perception has been of some standing, its origin dating from colonialism when only European cultures were accorded the status of high or elite culture. During colonialism, every effort was made to root out both the cultural expressions indigenous to the colonized space as well as the cultural heritage of those who were enslaved. Throughout the Caribbean, this cultural hegemony has persisted for over 300 years.

In addition to curricular offerings, collection-building activities in libraries are guided by societal interests and needs which in the past only privileged that which was considered to be high culture. Popular culture as a discipline of academic and social concern is a recent development. But, these are not the only reasons why the acquisition of popular culture materials has not been a mainstream activity in Caribbean academic libraries. The shifting nature of popular culture, the abundance of materials and

² While there are several ways to describe popular culture, these two definitions illustrate the range and complexity of the field:

1. Russel Nye advances that the term popular culture describes “those productions, artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption and capable of reproduction, which appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of a significant portion of the public, free of control by minority standards. They [productions of this nature] tend to reflect the values, convictions, and patterns of thought generally dispersed through and approved by society” (Russel Nye “Popular Culture as a Genre” in Wayne Weigand (ed.) *Popular Culture and the Library: Proceedings of Symposium II* (Lexington Kentucky: University of Kentucky, College of Library Science, 1978), p.5. Quoted in Moran p. 4).

2. Te Kete Ipurangi The Online Learning Centre suggests that popular culture is “contemporary culture as defined by the objects, images, artefacts, literature, music, and so on of “ordinary” people” www.tki.org.nz/r/arts/visarts/glossary_e.php

formats that encode popular culture are additional reasons for the reluctance of academic librarians to develop popular culture collections. John Lent and Moran refer to some of these issues. Lent describes as a problematic the “lack of definition of the field” (Lent 1970, 1) while Moran observes that “the definitions [of popular culture] can be as problematic as the topic itself” (Moran 1992, 4). These factors have also contributed to the exclusion of popular culture materials from the collection-building initiatives in academic libraries.

Moran also addressed the diversity of popular culture materials when she cited the words of B. Lee Cooper to illustrate the comprehensive range of materials encoding popular culture information and data. Cooper advanced that popular culture materials ... are often atypical, ephemeral, oversized (motion picture posters), undersized (postage stamps) technologically oriented (compact discs) ... fads (hula hoops) to folktales, from antique radio programs to contemporary television commercials, from baseball broadcasts to taped interviews with children’s text writers ... (B. Lee Cooper “Somewhere Between Theory and Trivia: Library Service and Information Requests from Popular Culture Researchers”. Paper delivered at the Popular Culture Association Conference, San Antonio, Texas, March, 1991. Quoted in Moran 1992, 9).

Research in and academic programmes based on popular culture are of recent vintage. It has been only within the last couple of decades that popular culture has been accorded the status of being an area worthy of academic discourse or consideration. The previous absence of popular culture materials from academic libraries has been buttressed by what Lent describes as “academic snobbery” towards popular culture (Lent 1970, 1). In the light of Weigand’s observation that collection-building is driven by curricular offerings, information on or artefacts of popular culture were understandably, not formerly part of the collection-building process of most academic libraries. Recent interests in popular culture as a discipline have encouraged the acquisition of materials, non-traditional formats and/or popular culture literature by academic libraries.

Another argument often advanced against the development of popular music collections in the region is that Caribbean libraries are hard pressed to acquire 'traditional' library materials. The diversification of collection-building strategies to include popular music places additional strain on the physical, human and financial resources of these libraries. As popular culture becomes part of the curricular offerings in these institutions, this argument becomes irrelevant.

The social values, orientation and education of many academic librarians also serve as hindrances to the development of popular collections in academic libraries. Many academic librarians have middle-class backgrounds, creating an inherent social bias against popular culture on the part of some of these practitioners. Moran speaks to this issue with these words: "Their [academic librarians] background and their education preclude an easy familiarity with low [popular] culture" (Moran 1992, 6). Thus in the past, for many academic librarians a nexus between popular culture and their libraries was an unacceptable alliance.

The major factors leading to an uncomfortable relationship between academic libraries and popular culture include: a narrow definition of culture, European cultural hegemony, an unsupportive attitude within the information profession towards popular culture, and the absence of a popular culture research tradition. For some time therefore, the acquisition of popular culture materials by academic libraries would have been viewed as an inappropriate development.

However since the 1980s, within academic institutions, there has been a paradigm shift in perceptions on the importance and value of popular culture. Moran provides some of the reasons for this change when she wrote that popular culture is "a means of better understanding contemporary society" and that "as a field of study [popular culture] can function as a barometer or a mirror of contemporary society" (Moran 1992, 6). On the importance of popular culture in the Caribbean, Jocelyne Guilbault wrote that "a great deal of social value [is] placed on popular music" (Guilbault 1970, 79). The significance of popular culture therefore extends beyond it being a vehicle of creativity and cultural expression.

Popular culture is an important means of understanding modern, post-modern and post-colonial societies. Consequently, the need for collections of popular culture materials within Caribbean academia has moved from being a peripheral concern to become one of the mainstream activities that Caribbean academic librarians should pursue. On this point W. Schurk remarked that

popular culture is no longer the voice in the wilderness it once was in the late sixties and early seventies ... (Schurk 1980, 45).

Technological advances and an increased availability of Caribbean recordings have rendered the acquisition process of these materials easier. Hardware used to access and formats used to capture Caribbean popular music are less fragile than they used to be, unit costs are decreasing and more Caribbean popular music is being recorded than in the past. Thus, acquiring sonic texts has become considerably less burdensome in several regards.

Attitudinal changes within academia towards popular culture have also been noted in writings on popular culture. J. Clarke in an early article on popular culture in libraries commented that the study of popular culture is one of the “newly-emerging disciplines, intended to broaden the base of higher education” (Clarke 1973, 215). Studying popular culture is a democratizing act and increases the ability of people to “understand and appreciate all aspects of national history, culture and society” all of which are “important aspects of civil education” (Watson, 2004).

Changes in perceptions of popular culture, developments in academic programming and also the availability of popular music recordings are some of the other compelling reasons for the development of a union between popular culture and academia.

This paper will examine the benefits of developing popular music collections in Caribbean academic institutions. It will also look at the issues and challenges associated with developing popular music collections in academic libraries in the Caribbean. Finally, the paper will draw on the experiences of the Learning Resource Centre on The University of the West Indies’ Cave Hill Campus in Barbados (LRC) as its basis for reflection.

Impact of Post-colonialism on Collection-building in Academic Libraries

Interest in popular culture research and materials is closely associated with the post-colonial era, a post-1950s phenomenon during which many colonies of European nations gained their political autonomy. One of the important benchmarks of post-colonialism has been a growing interest in cultural forms and expressions forced into submergence during colonialism (Brathwaite 1974). Post-colonial authors such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, George Lamming, Luis Rafael Sánchez and Derek Walcott, are among those who have privileged Caribbean popular culture. On the value of the scholarship of these and other authors in this vein, Carolyn Cooper writes in the acknowledgments of her *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* that the work of these authors "reverses the usual order of privilege of the local and the international" (Cooper 1995, XV).

Regarding the importance of popular music in the Caribbean during the closing decades of the 20th century a number of academic investigations have exposed the role and importance of popular music in Caribbean culture. These include³ Frances Aparicio's *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Culture* (1998); Dick Hebdige's *Cut 'n Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (1987); Peter Manuel's *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (2006); Lorna McDonald's *Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs for Rememory of Flight* (1998); Maya Roy's *Cuban Music: From Son and Rumba to The Buena Vista Social Club and Timba Cubana* (2002); A.G. Quintero-Rivera's *Music, Social Classes and the National Question of Puerto Rico* (1989); Julie Sellers' *Merengue and Dominican Identity: Music as National Unifier* (2004); and, Norman Stolzoff's *Wake the Town*

³The citations included in this section are based on texts available to the author in Barbados. Their listing does not attempt, in anyway, to suggest an academic, cultural or social ranking of their content. Rather, the list seeks to give an idea of the breadth of publications available on Caribbean popular music.

and Tell the People: Jamaican Dancehall Culture (2004). Without access to relevant and associated sonic texts, writings on or about Caribbean popular music occur in a vacuum. Listening to music is integral to any musicological investigation; therefore, collections of popular music are critical to work of this nature. Collections of Caribbean popular music illustrate, support and extend the value of written texts on this type of popular expression (Schurk 1992, 92).

While the popular music of each Caribbean space has its own idiom, the commonality of experiences in terms of enslavement, European conquest and post-colonialism has created a musical signature which is universal to the region. Quintero-Rivera spoke to this in his paper *Music, Social Classes and the National Question of Puerto Rico* when he wrote:

(that) while each island has its own unique musical idiom there is an underlying cohesiveness to Caribbean popular music. Salsa, in fact, shows [that] one of the most important characteristics of contemporary Puerto Rican popular alternative cultures is its comprehensive Caribbean character. Salsa integrates not only different national musical traditions with their uniquely shared Caribbean roots but also performers of different national origins (Quintero-Rivera 1989, 5).

This inter-relationship between Caribbean popular musics also has implications for collection-building activities in libraries. While the main focus of popular music collections is necessarily the genres of the host community, acquiring the music of other Caribbean territories is also necessary and important in order to support comparative research, a linchpin of musicological study.

The Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur, Prime Minister of Barbados underscored the universality of Caribbean popular culture when he remarked:

We are a creative people; a people who have survived the trauma of genocide, wars and invasions; have risen above slavery and indentured servitude; a people who transcending language and ethnicity have forged our own creolised culture, our own

identity ... (The Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur⁵. Quoted in Glenford Howe p .5)

These words recall shared historical experiences and indicate that despite several traumatic events, many of which have occurred over time, the culture of the Caribbean which mainly privileges that of the enslaved is a central aspect of Caribbean life. Popular culture is one of the leading post-colonial narratives through which Caribbean people have been able to attain a sense of self and re/affirmation of who they are as a people in this era of globalization. Unquestionably, of all the areas of popular expression found in the Caribbean, music is the cultural expression that has the widest appeal and largest number of practitioners. The development of Caribbean popular music collections in regional academic institutions therefore becomes an imperative.

Why Should Popular Music Be Collected by Caribbean Academic Libraries?

The titles of the works listed in the previous section indicate that in addition to its recreational and entertainment functions, popular music in the region is also important in/for other spheres of Caribbean life. This statement is valid for both large countries like Guyana or small islands such as Carriacou. Caribbean popular music serves as an identifier, a unifier, a communication medium, a means of signifying gender relationships, a means of retelling the past, linking the past with the future and also as a medium of privileging cultural forms and norms in ways that colonial society did not permit. Thus, as Guilbault posits, in addition to its recreational and entertainment roles Caribbean popular music has an important social value in Caribbean societies and cultures.

For predominately oral societies as those in the Caribbean, sonic re/sources replace written texts as knowledge keepers. In

⁴ Extracted from an address delivered by The Rt. Hon. Owen Arthur on February 14, 2001 at the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, 12th Inter-Sessional Meeting held in Barbados.

the Caribbean, the tradition of writing is not of long standing. Historically, song has been one of the main means used to capture and preserve records of Caribbean life. Song is also a source of memory. Thus, there has always been a close union between popular song and all aspects of Caribbean culture. Through calypso and latterly reggae song texts, a researcher can trace Caribbean accomplishments and trials, gain insights into the attitudes of the populace on political, social and economic changes and developments and also get a good understanding about how people felt about their lot in life. In a piece reflecting on the importance of calypso as a cultural form in Barbados, Trevor Marshall coined the phrase 'auditory newspaper' to describe the central importance of calypso lyrics to Barbadian society and culture. On the lyrical value of calypso he notes that

... they [calypsoes] also function as a kind of auditory newspaper spreading information about current issues. No topic is too trivial or too touchy to be the subject of a calypso song - themes range from corrupt politicians to potholes in the road, a controversial beauty contest to a nosey neighbour (Marshall 1990, 235).

Caribbean popular music has and continues to serve several other purposes. The words and sounds of Caribbean popular music have served as vehicles of resistance, rebellion, call-to-arms, ways of addressing issues associated with migration (salsa) as well as conduits of memory, heritage and remembering. Such diverse uses of popular music are not restricted to the Anglophone countries of the region. Rather, the deployment of popular music for a multiplicity of purposes is a feature of all linguistic groups in the Caribbean. The enslaved and indigenous populations of the region had always perceived a very close relationship between popular music and all aspects of their daily lives. Caribbean popular music therefore has been and remains a very important part of the social, cultural, political and ritual landscapes of the majority of Caribbean people.

Within the English-speaking Caribbean, particularly in those territories lacking an abundance of natural resources to support

manufacturing and other industrial pursuits, the development of creative economies and cultural industries is encouraged at the highest levels. There are several positives inherent in the development of creative economies and cultural industries: they depend entirely on the innate creativity of a nation's human capital; creative economies and cultural industries do not require large outlays of capital investment to develop an infrastructure; in addition to its principal artists, the creative economies and cultural industries foster several spin-off activities which in themselves become additional sources of employment; and, within the international arena the output of the creative economies and cultural economies make it possible for all countries to have a similar status regardless of differences in size, location, language, ethnicity or any other qualifier used to distinguish geographical entities. For example, the universal appeal of reggae bears no relation to the geo-political or economic standing of Jamaica. Similarly, the enduring international stature and iconic standing of the late Bob Marley and the late Celia Cruz, Caribbean super stars, bear no relation to the size of their native lands. The development of popular music collections in the Caribbean therefore creates an affirmative tripartite relationship between academia, popular music and economic pursuits grounded in popular culture.

Ensuring and maintaining social and cultural relevance with respect to the institution's host community/society are some of the important functions of and challenges that academic institutions face in developing regions like the Caribbean. An important aspect of this relevance is to develop library collections which protect and preserve information of significance to the host culture. Another aspect is to develop collections that support the research needs and interests of members of the university community. The growing interest in Caribbean popular music as an academic activity therefore demands the development of collections of these sonic texts.

Collection Building - Academic and Socio-Cultural Significances

While the general case for the importance of developing collections of Caribbean popular music in the region has been

made, this section of the paper will examine specific advantages that arise from the development of popular music collections in Caribbean academic libraries. In many developing countries, academic libraries are critical sites of professional skills required to address new developments within the profession. Academic librarians should therefore take a leading role in the development of popular music collections given the national value of these materials. Currency in professional trends is also an area in which academic librarians usually have a competitive advantage given the role and function of libraries within the academy. Thus, for many reasons academic librarians should be the progenitors of Caribbean popular music collections.

Audiovisual formats such as sound carriers have an advantage that print texts do not afford. They can be accessed by multiple users at the same time. A single playback can be heard by one person or an infinite number of listeners, the only restriction in this regard being the size of the facility in which the playback occurs and/or the capabilities of the playback equipment. Communal listening also supports group work, the development of aural listening skills and the sharing of ideas, all of which are important proficiencies in today's world.

While a popular sound recording is generally made in response to a creative need, a single sonic text can also support academic work in a variety of disciplines and at several levels. For example, a social commentary calypso recording can be investigated from different perspectives by linguists, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, musicians, culturalists, historians as well as by those researching the recording industry. A single track can therefore support work in a diversity of academic disciplines and in ways that a written piece may not.

Popular music research extends opportunities for academic investigation and scholarship. The intertwining of popular music with all aspects of its host community creates unique research opportunities in a range of social, historical, cultural and political realities. Popular culture research work also engages the academy with its body politic. Popular music research is also a way of establishing new and niche areas of investigation for researchers who come from the creating society. Popular culture researchers

generally have better insights into the ethos of the material rather than someone whose relationship is that of being an 'Other'. Additionally, an area of research often helps to indicate an area of critical national concern, an activity that also helps to guide the collection-building.

Although libraries are not the main institutions charged with protecting and preserving the sonic patrimony and heritage of a nation, the existence of popular music collections in academic libraries provides additional support for the national need in this regard. Developing popular music collections in nations where this genre of music is an important economic activity renders the work of an academic library relevant to national economic developments. Linkages of this nature between 'town and gown' help to make the university more relevant to its host community.

These are some of the compelling factors that make the development and maintenance of popular music collections in Caribbean academic libraries a good union that is beneficial to all.

Collection Building - Challenges and Issues

The development of popular music collections in the Caribbean is affected by several challenges and issues, a number of which will be explored in this section of the article.

The former absence of positive attitudes towards popular music in terms of as how academic librarians viewed these materials and whether popular music is an 'appropriate' area for academic examination are some of the issues that worked against the development of popular music collections in Caribbean academic institutions. While there is ongoing attitudinal change which the development of collections like that of the LRC reveals, resistance remains. A growing intra- and extra-regional interest in the scholarship of Caribbean popular music are added stimuli for changes in opinion towards popular music materials.

On the issue of the personal taste of librarians impacting on popular culture collection development policies, Elizabeth Watson previously observed that

Personal musical tastes and cultural values have to be subjugated in order to ensure that the collection comprehensively represents the gamut of national popular music (Watson 2003, 15).

The absence of a biased approach towards collection development is one of the tenets promoting the existence of balanced collections and a cardinal principle of collection building.

The release and trade arrangements for the record industry are considerably different to those for the print world. For Caribbean sound recordings there is no equivalent to either Books-in-Print or British Books-in-Print. While Caribbean artists whose work is internationally released may have a listing in international publications, within the region there are no guides that provide information on the products, composition and personalities of the industry. The absence of manuals that assist with routines such as ascertaining availability, publisher details and cost negatively affects popular music collection development. Frequent visits to record stores and listening to radio programs are the main ways of identifying new releases of Caribbean popular music. Reports of interviews with artists in the local media also help the collection development process.



Some 33a rpm discs from LRC's collection

As new formats are created and older ones become everyday facets of life, the nature of popular music collections will change. In 1991, B. Lee Cooper saw compact discs (CDs) as being unusual library items given that they were then relatively new on the market (B. Lee Cooper, *Somewhere between ...* 1991. Quoted in Moran, 1992, 9). CDs have now become standard music formats and are widely available and used. CDs are now being superseded by newer [and better] sound carrier technologies, which at this stage are not normally found in many Caribbean libraries. Thus, whereas print has remained a stable technology, rapid changes and developments endemic to audiovisual technologies make it difficult for libraries to maintain hardware or software currency, a challenge and issue for collection developers.

Many popular music recordings have a very short shelf life. For 'out-of-print' releases, the development of a knowledge base of local and international vendors of pre-owned materials is an imperative. Reluctance or an inability to purchase discs at the time of their release forces collection developers into the second hand market. The earlier the date of release as well as level of local and international interest in an artist are some of the factors which can cause a (pre-owned) disc to cost several times more than it did at its time of release. A recent LRC experience illustrates the issue. The late Jackie Opel (Dalton Bishop) was a Barbadian singer who acquired international fame in Jamaica during the late 1960s. 45 rpm discs were his main recording format. Recently the LRC acquired one of his 45s for the sum of US\$250 (the original cost of the disc being approximately US\$11!). Therefore for financial reasons alone, acquiring popular music at the time of its release is essential.

Another factor affecting collection-building activities is the making of prudent decisions about which artist as well as which track/s of a given artist should be purchased. Well-grounded acquisition policies which support not only the work of current researchers but also those of the future must guide the purchasing of popular music. Recognizably this is can be challenging because it calls for a certain amount of 'reading of the tea leaves'.

While popular music is usually taken to mean commercially available work, within the Caribbean there is a large body of po-



Some 45 rpm discs from LRC's collection

pular music which, although widely known, has never been recorded. In Barbados, this would include traditional folk songs sung by amateur groups and several musical pieces composed by individuals like calypso and folk song maestro Gabby (Anthony Carter). Never-the-less recordings of performances by and of Gabby's work are known and are heard from time-to-time over a number of Barbadian radio stations. This reality can create unfilled expectations as hearing a work makes some listeners incorrectly assume that the work is commercially available and therefore it ought to be in the library. This situation exists in other islands of the Anglophone Caribbean.

Sonic texts have particular physical requirements: access depends on hardware availability and each format has its specific own hardware needs; sonic formats also have specialized storage needs because interfiling is not appropriate, e.g. vinyl discs require more space and a different physical formation than do compact discs or audio tapes (Watson 2003, 15). In addition, the design of spaces used for listening has to take into account the possibility of noise polluting either other teaching spaces or the library. Retrofitting old buildings to facilitate listening can be costly, and

the cost for new facilities for listening usually exceeds that of traditional lecture room space or reading rooms in libraries.

Despite the known challenges and issues that impact on the development of popular music collections in the Caribbean, every effort must be made to create and sustain these collections. Given the social, cultural and historical importance of sonic formats to Caribbean life, the development of popular music collections in Caribbean academic libraries is obligatory. Without the existence of such collections there will be a disconnect between regional academic institutions, scholars and host societies.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to explore whether popular music collections in Caribbean academic libraries were an unholy alliance or the basis of a good marriage. In order to arrive at a determination, several issues and challenges were examined as were a number of benefits and reasons which made the existence of popular music collections a valuable development in Caribbean academic librarianship.

While in the past popular music collections were an uncomfortable presence in Caribbean academic libraries, the value of sound recordings and current research interests in popular music demands affirmative action with respect to the acquisition of audio texts. Caribbean popular music is not only an important creative output but also as a signifier, communicator, identifier and idiom which links the people of the region. Popular music is one of the hallmarks of creolization, an important paradigm in the understanding of Caribbean societies and culture. The presence of popular music in Caribbean academic libraries is therefore undoubtedly a signal that regional librarians have fostered the development of a good marriage between formerly estranged entities.

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