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## Displacing the Past. Mediated Nostalgia and Recorded Sound

*Remplacer le passé. La nostalgie médiée et l'enregistrement sonore*

**Elodie Roy**

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

# Displacing the Past

## Mediated Nostalgia and Recorded Sound

by

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**Abstract:** The audio past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it is stored in both material and digital collections, is largely and almost effortlessly accessible to contemporary audiences. The recycling or revival of former musical pasts seems to be an inescapable and familiar reality (Reynolds, 2011). In light of two case studies borrowed from contemporary British audio culture, I determine how nostalgia has become a strong, yet paradoxical, shaping practice for contemporary independent record labels. The first case study is dedicated to Ghost Box records and examines the prevailing practices of hauntology and sampling. The second case study focuses on hyper-specialised British reissue record label Finders Keepers, which help to salvage and rehabilitate semi-forgotten recordings from bygone eras. In this article, the notion of nostalgia is constructed as a relevant *dimension* of contemporary audio cultures rather than its superficial (or fashionable) *correlative*. The links between early phonography as a technology of early presence and the rise of nostalgia are also discussed.

**Keywords:** *collection – heritage – label – phonography – sampling.*

**Résumé :** Le patrimoine musical du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, archivé de manière physique et numérique, est largement et facilement accessible aux publics contemporains. Le recyclage ou retour de formes musicales passées semble être une réalité indiscutable (Reynolds, 2011). Mobilisant deux exemples issus de la culture musicale britannique contemporaine, je détermine comment la nostalgie informe les productions des maisons de disques indépendantes contemporaines. La première étude de cas est consacrée à Ghost Box Records et examine la pratique hantologique du label. La deuxième étude de cas s'attache au label de réédition hyper-spécialisé Finders Keepers, qui aide à préserver et réhabiliter des enregistrements à demi oubliés issus de la vaste culture matérielle du passé. À travers cet article, la nostalgie est abordée comme une *dimension* essentielle des cultures musicales contemporaines plutôt que comme un *corrélatif* superficiel et éphémère. Les liens unissant les débuts de la phonographie (conçue comme technologie de téléprésence) et la nostalgie sont également explorés.

**Mots-clés :** *collection – patrimoine – label – phonographie – sampling.*

In *Retromania* (2011), music critic Simon Reynolds describes ordinary, everyday encounters with the recorded past in the form of obsolete music formats. Surplus or discarded “dead media”, such as tapes or vinyl records, now effortlessly saturate offline and online second-hand markets. These innumerable traces of the (commodified) aural past may slowly sink into oblivion, or acquire a new status, benefiting for instance from a collector’s gesture of redemption. Reynolds is concerned that today’s culture of recycling may signify the demise of creation, and ultimately impede the future of music. His concept of nostalgia is mainly that of an empty and compulsive retro-consumerism, plaguing both contemporary listeners and producers of recorded sound. He asks: “Are we heading towards a sort of cultural-ecological catastrophe, when the seam of pop history is exhausted?” (Reynolds, 2011: xiv), suggesting that, with the internet, “[w]e’re becoming victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data” (2011: xxi). Reynolds proposes that, once it has been entirely consumed (that is recycled, repackaged and re-consumed) by the public and the industry, the past will have disappeared completely. The thesis of the recorded past as a static and exhaustible territory of objects offers uncanny resonances with Lowenthal’s description of the past as a tangible, inescapable, environment:

“The past is everywhere. All around us lie features which, like ourselves and our thoughts, have more or less recognizable antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience... Whether it is celebrated or rejected, attended to or ignored, the past is omnipresent.” (Lowenthal, 1985: xv)

*The cultural past is everywhere.* It seems indeed inevitable that everything which is and has been preserved in matter is likely to be encountered again, and potentially recycled and re-assimilated. Just like household objects, recorded music objects have been continuously (mass-)produced, commodified and collected ever since the record industry was established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recorded objects appear as fragments and signifiers of past socio-technological realms, whilst songs themselves may involuntarily evoke memories of days gone by. It might be that, from the early twentieth century onwards, the past has become inseparably entwined with the capitalist “industrialisation of memory” (Samuel, 1994; Stiegler, 2009) and the nostalgia market.

In the UK, independent record labels such as Ghost Box (founded in 2004) or Finders Keepers (a reissue record label founded the same year) carefully weave past phonographic traces into the music they release. For these two labels, nostalgia can be understood as a practice and performance of the past, underpinned by an active and quasi-archaeological relationship to the territory of recorded sound. I will use the spatial or archaeological metaphor in order to understand the recorded past as a territory, but also (more crucially) as the primary space of a material *practice*. Instrumental to this understanding are Benjamin’s insights into the materiality of memory, as formulated in “Memory and Excavation” (1932):

“He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one

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turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth [...].” (Benjamin, 2005: 576)

Both Ghost Box and Finders Keepers practice a media archaeology (unearthing old formats) and a phono-archaeology (unearthing old music, genres, samples). As they revisit both the geography and history of recorded sound—by excavating, sampling and redistributing forgotten artefacts—these two niche record labels also propose a rewriting of the recorded past. Theirs is a reflexive and dynamic approach to the past, which relies on the massive availability of past objects in the present. As Ernst states in his manifesto for the media-archaeological method, “Archeaeology, as opposed to history, refers to what is actually there: what has remained from the past in the present like archaeological layers, operatively embedded in technologies” (Ernst, 2013: 57).

The aim of this article is less to provide a definition or linear narrative of nostalgia (for nostalgia may not be a motionless “state”) than to determine what nostalgia may—in practice—“do”, uncover and engender. I begin by thinking of nostalgia in the context of technologies of memory, considering phonography (a technology of telepresence) as a potential *instrument* of nostalgia, and addressing the relationship between the ungraspable phonographic “ghost” and the tangible music object. Drawing from this initial reflection, I consider the two record labels under study to be determined, but not helplessly bound, by a nostalgic techno-culture. I examine how they deliberately act

upon it in order to re-present the past, ceaselessly seeking to release it from its original ground.

## Is nostalgia a technological condition?

“Spectrality [...], far from being reduced by the rationality of modern technology, found itself, on the contrary, amplified, as if this medium (photocinematography, teleperception, teleproduction, telecommunication) was the very site, the proper element of [...] a fantastical phantomaticity [...]. Every culture has its phantoms and the spectrality that is conditioned by its technology.” (Derrida, 2010: 39)

In the introductory pages of her study on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001) proposes to return, after Starobinski (1966), to the origins of the word “nostalgia”. Drawing on the early medical meaning of the word, she insists that “one of the early symptoms of nostalgia was an ability to hear voices or see ghosts” (Boym, 2001: 3). Nostalgia is primarily a painful longing for home, that is essentially for a lost childhood, the intensity of which may lead to auditory or visual hallucinations (Starobinski, 1966: 90). The notion of nostalgia as an everyday multi-sensorial experience helps conceiving of, and measuring, the formidable banality of nostalgia. Whilst Starobinski considers hallucination as immediately induced by an anxious, sick imagination, the media philosopher Kittler has audaciously thought of hallucination as a *technologically-mediated* effect. Meditating upon the influence of the printing press, he says: “once memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts, become technically reproducible, readers and

writers no longer need the power of hallucination. Our realm of the dead has withdrawn from the books in which it resided so long". (Kittler, 1999: 10) On reading *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Kittler's theses on nineteenth century technologies of telepresence), one is led to believe that the realm of the dead may be fully alive within the realm of the living, as it is daily mediated (or hallucinated) through sound or photo technologies. For all their determinism and their inflexible pessimism, Kittler's ideas on media and memory can enlighten our understanding of contemporary nostalgia as a relative rather than an absolute, trans-historical condition.

### Phonography, or the art of materialising ghosts

Since the inception of phonography in 1877, quickly followed by other technologies of telepresence such as the radio, the cinema or the television, one can hear voices and see ghosts effortlessly. It might be that spectral voices have become banally, quasi-imperceptibly, woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. In such a case, seeing ghosts may be less of a personal symptom than a social symptom, that is to say a signifier of *normality*. Michael Bull, writing about auditory nostalgia and the iPod, underlines that

"[n]ostalgia and mechanical reproduction go together: experience is reproduced (the dead come back to life), and that which is forgotten is bathed in a light of recollection. Mediated nostalgia—nostalgia generated through the record player, the

photograph, or the iPod—reverses the irreversibility of time in the mind of the subject." (Bull, 2009: 85)

To deal with phonography (the realm of reproduction and repetition) could thereby mean to deal with the realm of ever-returning ghosts. When he invented the phonograph in 1877, Edison famously declared that: "We will be able to preserve and hear again... a memorable speech, a worthy singer... the last words of a dying man... of a distant parent, a lover, a mistress." (cited in Chanan, 1985: 24-25) It suddenly became possible for the voice to exist without a body, beyond or outside mortality as it were. In the early 1920s, Edison dreamt of fashioning some sort of ultimate phonograph, the "ghost box" (Kluitenberg, 2011: 59). The machine would allow not only to record and replay the voices of the living, but also to capture the voices of the dead, thus becoming an über-instrument of telepresence. Edison was then an ageing man, both preoccupied and fascinated with the idea of immortality through recording technologies—an idea which very much betrayed his indefectible attachment to Victorian dreams of spirit communication. The ghost box remained, of course, an imaginary—and arguably impossible—medium; though it helped in nurturing ideas of radio communications with past aural traces (in the form of Electronic Voice Phenomena). It could be argued that the notion of creating and conserving aural ghosts was always already core to phonography. From the moment a sound is recorded it becomes potentially immortal, and likely to return. To listen means to *listen back*. What is recorded and materialised will

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exist forever, at least ideally. Records will survive in space and time as objects. Such objects may become scratched, damaged, unreadable, yet they will at least survive as traces, perhaps as visual memories of sound.

This leads us to consider the first, and perhaps strongest, paradox of recorded sound. On the one hand, recorded sound evokes the fleeting, ungraspable ghost, the voice freed from the mortal body. On the other hand, recorded sound is clearly embodied or “re-materialised” in a format; it is simultaneously an eminently tangible and visual reality (the record). With the advent of phonography (and the rapid development of the record industry from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards), music was increasingly considered as a three-dimensional product (“canned music”) which was mass-distributed as any other capitalist commodity. The logic of music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the logic of the record. It is both a logic of the commoditised object and a logic of reading, of “playing” back, of decoding. The record is simultaneously, indefatigably, what stays and what returns. It belongs to a culture of the trace, and has to be linked to archival memory which, for Nora, constitutes the main form of memory in the twentieth century (Nora, 1989: 13). The material persistence of cultural forms of the past make it possible for listeners “to browse, to sample, to investigate masses of music of all periods” (Day, 2000: 216).

## Ghost Box Records: the hauntological moment

The Ghost Box label has released, since its creation in 2004, a small range of vinyl records, compact-discs and printed ephemera. The music released on the label is sample-based and relies heavily on past phonographic, but also audio-visual, citations (as it is often informed by British television shows from the 1970s). Reynolds has emphatically described the Ghost Box genre as “hauntology”—a word which aptly conveys the uncanny lightness and childishness of the tracks composed by acts such as Belbury Poly (whose first release, *Farmer’s Angle* (2004), is reminiscent of English children’s television shows from the 1970s such as *The Magic Roundabout*). However, the use of the term “hauntology” is not unproblematic. In its original Derridean context, hauntology refers to a state of living with the ghosts of incomplete historical moments, their unfulfilled promises lingering on (the context of Derrida’s hauntology is the failure of communism; see Derrida, 1994). In the case of Ghost Box, hauntology is more simply a matter of living with the vast heritage of recorded sound and of making use of it. It is obvious that the art of Ghost Box is mostly an art of the reference, both to past technological or media realities and to past everyday contents. The records released by the label (mainly distributed by mail-order) are visually arresting, with designs which are often reminiscent of the English Penguin paperbacks of the 1960s and the 1970s or stylized layouts of University textbooks of the same era. But the music especially does what Edison’s imaginary medium never did: it evokes the aura and the total

phantomaticity of the past, realized in a soft halo of unrecognizable voices, of mumbled words merging with more recent analogue synthesizers or drum machines. On hearing, the music is blurry, not so much in terms of recording quality (the tracks are carefully mastered and mixed), but rather in terms of readability. It is a rather confused chaos of samples, though most often one main instrument leads and sustains the track. More importantly, these sonic vignettes, which indefatigably evoke the past, prove impossible to date.

In *Capturing Sound* (2010), Katz provides an apt and insightful demonstration of how every new recording technology redefines and reinforces the relationship of the musician to his/her music as well as to past recording technologies, thus suggesting that nostalgia is an ingrained principle of music-making, a thesis also supported by O'Brien when he mournfully writes:

“The age of recording is necessarily an age of nostalgia—when was the past so hauntingly accessible?—but its bitterest insight is the incapacity of even the most perfectly captured sound to restore the moment of its first inscribing. That world is no longer there. On closer listening, it probably never was [...]” (O'Brien, 2004: 16)

For Katz, the past is implicitly contained within the present technology of recording. He globally refers to a “phonograph effect” to describe that which is “a palpable manifestation of recording’s influence” (Katz, 2010: 155). Additionally the phonograph effect is to be found in the way new recording technologies, such as digital recordings, can imitate old recording technologies. For instance, the characteristic noise of a vinyl record

is often featured as a sample in the music released on Ghost Box (for instance on Belbury Poly’s 2011 album *The Willows*). Such a phonograph effect has become quite banal, especially in commercial hip hop and electronic genres (Katz develops the example of Fatboy Slim’s 1998 big beat hit, “Praise You”). Its banality is such that the phonograph effect is commonly used to refer to the undetermined, timeless “past”. As Katz suggests,

“This noise, real or digitally simulated, is now firmly part of our modern sonic vocabulary and can be powerfully evocative to listeners. [...] In the age of noiseless digital recordings, this sonic patina prompts nostalgia, transporting listeners to days gone by (whether of their own or some generalized past) [...]” (Katz, 2010: 155)

The “sonic patina” can be heard as a comment on current recording technologies and by extension a comment on the culture they belong to. On the one hand, it may prompt nostalgia, evoking lived or borrowed memories of vinyl records spinning on record-players. On the other, it also implicitly creates an awareness by staging the technological differences between the past and the present (for vinyl records have ceased to be the most common way of playing music), ultimately suggesting that the past and the present might after all exist simultaneously. Ernst (in the wake of Kittler’s media theory) has defined how media machines, which embody a temporality of their own, disrupt and undermine linear chronologies. In other words, a record played on a record-player literally replays the past in the present (for the moment of playing back inexorably belongs to the present). Taken in its most extreme form, this idea suggests that the past always already collapses the present and that



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no separation can be made between different temporalities: “[a]s long as media are not mistaken for their mass-media content, they turn out to be non-discursive entities, belonging to a different temporal regime.” (Ernst, 2013: 56)

The fact that most of the Ghost Box catalogue is pressed on vinyl record (even though it may be digitally recorded) clearly indicates the possible coexistence of different time zones. It does not simply illustrate a retro tendency but a more complex relationship to the tangibility of the recorded object, commonly threatened by digitization (such appropriation of old formats has occasionally been termed “technonostalgia”; see Bijsterveld and van Dijck, 2009). The music released on Ghost Box simultaneously indicates presence (this type of music, characterised by digital sampling, is very much of the twenty-first century) and absence (this type of music is as if it were out of date, or without a date) of the present. Ultimately it constructs an ambiguous temporal zone.

When Belbury Poly use the characteristic sound of an organ to evoke the soundscape of a children television program from the 1970s it manipulates the listeners’ memories and falsifies images, precisely before it cuts the sounds from the images. Indeed Ghost Box operates a narration or invention of the past, through the medium of the record. Each record can be seen and heard, from the very record sleeve, as a tale. The meticulously-crafted Ghost Box records resemble books, inviting us to “go beyond the auditory threshold, to hear with our imagination” (Bachelard, 1994: 166). Bachelard said of visual tales that they were “duplicated by [...] a miniature of sound’ and

were ‘at home in the space of an ear’ (Bachelard 1994:166). The aesthetics of the vignette and the sample is central to Ghost Box, and made explicit in a title such as Belbury Poly’s “Adventures in a Miniature Landscape” (on 2009 album *From an Ancient Star*). Sampling is not so much an operation of addition than of subtraction and selection. Instead of contextualizing and monumentalizing sounds in time, samples permit their manipulation in space, by transferring them from one medium to another. Chanan observed that “sampling produces the effect that existing pieces are no longer fixed nor clearly authored; nor is sample music notated. Added to the practice of multiple mixes for different formats and media, sampling thus brings the manipulated echo of previous records, as if the new is simply another possible version of the old” (Chanan, 1995: 162). The other possible version of the old is a smaller, shorter version. Sampling allows the miniaturisation of the past, perhaps in the hope of comprehending it: for Bachelard, to miniaturize the world means to possess it (Bachelard, 1994: 150) but also to manipulate and re-invent it.

Susan Stewart complementarily proposes that nostalgia “is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (Stewart, 2003: 23). The technological means of the twenty-first century enables the sampling artist to reorganize the recorded past. That is to say that the recorded past can be reshuffled and re-narrated, and some of its past possibilities explored. Through records, which are tangible manifestations, Ghost Box



seems to establish a narrative of the past which is potentially counter-intuitive: most of all, the Ghost Box artists are story tellers. Because of its reliance on mediation and narrative techniques, we can see the label as a battle against *topos* that is to say against situated memories. The artists resist the idea of the past as a finished and frozen place and see it as an endless movement and moment, offering a reflection on mediation and travel, and the way technology simultaneously remembers and forgets, saves and destroys, locates and displaces. The label simultaneously offers a reflection on various media or writings. With Ghost Box the past comes back to haunt the listener through various channels, various forms. Ghost Box, an iconoclastic and multimedia venture, may illustrate the multiple forms of memory, and imitates its dynamic, unpredictable structure. The past is literally re-mediated and re-presented, in a fashion which is both repetitive and codified (subscribing to the aesthetics of a genre, hauntology) and atypical and a-topical (the past is without a place other than that of the record catalogue). What is re-mediated might also be redeemed, that is to say salvaged from oblivion: this music, made of reminiscences, comes to signify a fiction of the past. This fiction can itself be understood as a critical or sub-versive reading of the past—sub-versive to the extent that it says that the past is a *changing* country. In the end, the work of interpretation is left to the listener, rather than imposed upon him or her: it requires an individual, emotional engagement with the material. One may argue that feelings of nostalgia are truly and fully realized the moment they

are relayed by the listener—without a listener, a Ghost Box record primarily indicate a *possibility of nostalgia*.

### Finders Keepers: the “desire for desire”

If, as Susan Stewart posits, nostalgia is the “desire for desire” (Stewart, 2003: 23), then the example of Finders Keepers is especially fitting. Finders Keepers (2004-), run by three music collectors (Andy Votel, Doug Shipton and Dom Thomas), has been progressively fashioning an archive of found recorded objects, assembling the debris and fragments of mass-produced artefacts. The record label (named after a short-lived British collectors’ magazine published in the early 1980s) reissues material which has remained so far vastly ignored by Western audiences (mainly because it was not distributed outside of its country of origin or, notably in the case of film soundtracks, was never commercially released). For instance, one of the core genres the label markets is Czech new wave. Between 2004 and 2010, several soundtracks from 1970s Czech films (some of them censored at the time) have been rediscovered and reissued, including *Daisies*, *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* and *Saxana—Girl on a Broomstick* (which were respectively released in 1966, 1970 and 1972).

The reissuing practice in itself is common in the recording industry. American record labels such as Moses Asche’s Folkways (which was founded in 1948) or ethnomusicologist label Yazoo (founded in 1995) have notably compiled and

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rereleased hitherto buried musical gems from around the world. The work of such phono-archivists was mainly determined by the will to make the material accessible to new audiences. Yazoo for example manufactured compact-discs containing tracks previously recorded (for research purpose) on wax cylinders. In 1952, archivist Harry Smith compiled for Folkways a now classic collection of American folk songs from the 1920s and 1930s, *The Anthology of American Folk Music*; the songs had been previously available on largely forgotten 78-rpm records. Reissuing, which is bound with a fear of cultural loss (see Ward, 1990), is expressed with the transferal of the recorded data onto the most recent storage formats. However, reissuing can also be tied to more obvious commercial concerns. For instance in the 1960s and 1970s the label RCA Records had its own “nostalgia series”, enticing listeners to revisit the popular songs of their youth, whilst Columbia and Decca “re-released their backlists of big band and jazz recordings” (Guffey, 2006: 91).

And yet, with Finders Keepers and neighbour record labels (such as Trunk Records, Sublime Frequencies or Numero Group), the music which provokes nostalgia is a music whose existence had been hitherto unknown to the listener. “Are you ready for funky progressive rock from communist-era Hungary? How about film soundtracks recorded in Lahore during the golden age of Pakistani cinema? Or maybe 1970s psychedelic Turkish protest songs?”, muses a BBC reporter in an article about Finders Keepers and Trunk Records (Plummer, 2009). What the record label does is that it artificially creates a lack, and a subsequent

desire for this music, appealing to collectors’ mentalities, and offering a retrospective construction of the recorded past.

### **Nostalgia for an imagined past: naming and mapping the past**

Quite cynically, one could say that the record label strategically proposes both the poison and the remedy, instigating a sense of lack within record collectors. The label prides itself in bringing to the world “Japanese choreography records, space-age Turkish protest songs, Czechoslovakian vampire soundtracks, Welsh rare-beats, bubblegum folk, drugsploitation operatics, banned British crime thrillers and celebrity Gallic Martini adverts”—the list is a juxtaposition of rather obscure and unconventional denominations. Just as Ghost Box samples “name” or “designate” without clearly situating, the nearly-arbitrary names invented by Finders Keepers’ founders transform the recorded past into an endless and confused wonderland. These names, most of which are self-referential and anachronistic, retrospectively create and shape the recorded past. It is generally held that “the norm of the music industry is to apply a descriptive label, any label, to all new music” and that “every new song, new recording, and new performance is categorized, quantified, classified, and pigeonholed” (Steffen, 2005: 84). It might be further argued that these recordings, which were up to this point nameless, start to exist for the music industry and audiences alike once they have been named and literally put on a map. The metaphor of the map is useful, if one considers

that traditionally “maps were used to legitimize the reality of conquest and empire. They helped create myths which would assist in the maintenance of the territorial status quo” (Harley, 2005: 57). It follows that naming—a process of delimitation and definition—is the first step towards controlling. Names are the indispensable basis for a new construction of meaning. But these names do not necessarily have to be neologisms; above all they have to be free from strong connotations, and likely to be recoded or re-signified. One of the mottos of the Finders Keepers label—“Always Czech—the label”—is a good example of this. The motto is notably used in the label’s promotional material. To an averagely-educated Western European audience, “Czech” may be associated with a few sedimented images, ranging from the “Eastern Bloc” in general, to the Prague Spring, Milan Kundera or even Antonín Dvořák—the network is loose, the narrative fragmented and incomplete. When it authoritatively, and perhaps ironically, affirms itself as “always Czech”, Finders Keepers romantically redefines what “Czech” means, reducing it down to the notion of “Czech New Wave” (not unproblematic itself), creating a longing for a romanticised past.

Names seem to create the possibility for nostalgia, and desire. One cannot miss something with no name; but names generate, independently of what they designate (which can remain imaginary), the weight of existence and the possibility of phantasm. The record label function as an organ of representation, as it constructs both the past and especially an exotic, otherworldly past. Each recording is primarily identified as a place where it

is from. However the very act of naming and cataloguing undermines the relationship to the material and the way listeners relate to it. The listener may indeed become a curious tourist, enticed to visit the recorded past.

### **Authenticating and consuming the marvel**

There is an interesting comparison to be drawn between the work of vinyl archaeologists, who travel the world’s flea-markets and online platforms (such as Discogs, GEMM or eBay) in order to locate old recordings, and that of earlier self-styled and self-titled European archaeologists. Rose Macaulay (1953), in her study of the ruin and the pleasures of ruin-seekers, has narrated the trips taken, from the eighteenth century onwards, by wealthy, Western “tourists”, visiting Oriental countries in search of tangible remainders and treasures of “a stupendous past”. For tourists, the material object functions as a souvenir, a trace of the past. Real or counterfeited, this souvenir is both a fragment and a miniature of the place where it has been “found”. It mostly expresses a desire for legends and tales rather than for historical authenticity.

Each Finders Keepers release is carefully authenticated by extensive liner notes, written by one of the label’s phono-archeologists, as well as photographs which document the original context of recording. The liner notes, complete with the pictures, act as evidences and provide the artefact with a potential fictive narrative of origins

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and a life story. Redemption of lost recordings is mainly a redemption through discourse and language. This seems to suggest that records alone cannot mediate anything, let alone transmit themselves, unless they are mediated by language and a story. Left to themselves they signify nothing. It follows that liner notes exist so that objects can “speak”, through the voice of their finder. For instance, Andy Votel’s liner notes to *Valerie and her Week of Wonder* (2006) read as an autobiographical account, in which Votel depicts his first (accidental) encounter with Luboš Fišer’s soundtrack, and the feverish ten-year quest for it which followed. The story or souvenir has to be understood as a way of authenticating the past (Stewart, 1993: 151). It therefore adds an aura of mystery, but also of credibility, to the recording which only “surrendered” after a relentless hunting. This hunting is also an operation of conquest, a colonisation of what had remained remote until then. More importantly the liner notes deliver the recording along with a past context, already endowed and encoded with biographical data. The souvenir becomes part of the music. On reading the liner notes, the listener internalises and appropriates it, albeit imperfectly and partially. The function of the liner notes is reminiscent of that of the labels in museums, which simultaneously provide the object with a historical context and a legend. The vinyl archaeologist enjoys a type of authority similar to that of the museum curator, as he explicitly indicates that a recorded object is worth preserving, hailing it as a marvel, an exceptional finding.

But the narratives also participate into the commercial rhetorics of the record label and trigger a collecting consciousness. The records act as evidences of the past. Yet such evidences, as they are mass-produced, are arguably forgeries. They are what can be treasured or fetishized, lifted out of a context of origin which has inevitably been lost. What the consumer/collector fetishizes and collects is not so much the history but rather the product, the object. The collectors do not mourn for a lost world, which would be impossible to recover, but rather for a “lost” record which ceases to be lost as soon as it is acquired. The record itself, as it enters the collection, becomes part of a *system* in which time (and therefore historicity) may be abolished (Baudrillard, 1994 [1968]: 16). Nostalgia can be stopped or “cured” by the consumption of the objects produced by the label: it is a “consumer-algia”. Indeed,

“Research has shown that customers who invest in publishers’ ‘collections’ [...] get so carried away that they continue to acquire titles which hold no interest for them. A book’s distinctive position within the series is sufficient to create a formal interest where no intrinsic interest exists. What motivates the purchase is the pure imperative of association.” (Baudrillard 1994, [1968]: 23)

The ceaseless production of “new old” records might trigger a collecting fever (Muensterberger, 1994: 36). The dissemination of tangible objects is furthermore paradoxically reinforced by immaterial channels such as online second-hand marketplaces and auction websites (such as eBay, a place where to source and secure old, hard to find recordings; see Neely, 2008).

### Conclusion: the unfinished past

Whilst Ghost Box stages the past as a heterogeneous space, Finders Keepers explores it in a fragmented and serialised fashion. The vinyl archaeologist, who shares with the collector a desire to explain and “renew the old world” (Benjamin, 1973: 61), remains essentially a (unreliable) story-teller, prompted by phonographic ruins which can only exist in and for the present. Reissuing a record, salvaging a sound, implies a reactivation of a real or falsified, lived or unlived, memory. It is a literal *anachronism*, which contradicts the general idea that “we appear to live by order, moving from network to cable television; from vinyl records to compact discs, from natural gas to microwave, along the market timelines of consumer society” (Cohen and Leslie, 1992: 49), challenging and disturbing the chronology of con-

suming patterns as well as of technological innovations. Ultimately, both Ghost Box and Finders Keepers engage with the musical patrimony in an innovative way, where nostalgia denotes a fertile and multi-layered practice rather than a passéist revival of cultural forms.

Nostalgia, which can be a way of critically engaging with past recordings, past formats and past technologies, is simultaneously shaped by the past and by the present. “The material world is essentially unfinished, the future is indeterminate and therefore the future constitutes a realm of possibility”, argued Bloch in his writings on utopia (cited in Anderson, 2002: 216). This may also mean that the recorded past, far from being a finished or written place, offers itself as an undecided moment, waiting to be mediated and narrated anew, in the light of the present.

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