Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with… is a podcast series that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. It is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

As a part of our research process, here we reproduce an email conversation with Vicki Bennett, which took place in Summer 2013.

PDF Contents:

O1. Conversation with Vicki Bennett on her sound collection
O2. Acknowledgments
O3. Copyright note

Vicki Bennett (b.1967) is been an influential figure in the field of audio visual collage, through her innovative sampling, appropriating and cutting up of found footage and archives. Using collage as her main form of expression, she creates audio recordings, films and radio shows that communicate a humorous, dark and often surreal view on life. These collages mix, manipulate and rework original sources from both the experimental and popular worlds of music, film, television and radio. An avid collector, Vicki operates under the moniker People Like Us and promotes an open access to archives for creative use.
peoplelikeus.org

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH…
Vicki Bennett

O1. Conversation with Vicki Bennett on her sound collection

When and why did you start collecting music?

The interesting stage began was when I decided to digitise then get rid of albums and CDs. This was in 2000 – a combination of an extreme lack of living space and the arrival of affordable high-speed broadband and Napster led to this move. Shortly after that came the general arrival of p2p file sharing, then later came album-sharing communities on blogs. The blog sharing has vastly diminished, no thanks to the Megaupload case and other policing and scare mongering of the internet.

What led you to become a sound collector and to what extent is your collection defined or limited to one particular area of exploration?

I have always collected as much as I can – within the distribution limits of the time. With analogue this was mainly second hand record shops and charity shops – sometimes I would get some classic obscure albums from old-people-towns where the collections hadn't been sorted through so much by record dealers. I would often buy them for the cover and not even play them. In the analogue realm I was limited in what I was accessing, both financially and geographically. A lot of the stuff you find online now you couldn't have got anyway because it was deleted or not distributed widely enough.

As an artist working with found material, these albums were my source material, so it was quite frustrating! You can tell from listening to my pre-2000 (analogue) and post-2000 (digital) audio work just what an impact the arrival of broadband sharing had on the range of material I was collaging. At the same time my knowledge of many kinds of musical genres grew, and it continues to this day, as my collection of and enthusiasm for this material also grows. I tend to collect by genre, and this began with experimental/avant-garde music, but it has widened to cover world music, jazz, folk, Latin and, of course, pop.

What are the specs for a record to become a part of your collection?

There are no specs as such – I tend to just go on a rampage. I hear one thing – for instance some Tropicália, and then I find each artist associated with this, then the people they worked with, then I look for parallel genres, and then the wider field and so on. It's a relatively fast process of looking on search engines and then blogs/forums to find material and then I download about a week's worth of material and listen to it all while working or driving and so forth on the iPod. I put the whole lot on shuffle and often laugh out loud at what plays next, because it is so dramatically different and unexpected or just incongruous. This input seeps into my artistic work, or at least I subconsciously take note of compositional styles and arrangements, and it influences my own compositions. Same goes for the feature films, which I access in much the same way.

Having worked on radio projects and shows since 1990 on a regular basis, it's essential to have access to a record library, and being able to tap into online resources has been essential to make an interesting and eclectic radio show, as well as a specialised radio station like Radio Boredcast for instance, where I curated/collected 744 hours (one month) of material on the subject of 'As Slow As Possible'. That would have not been possible without the help of hundreds, maybe thousands of individuals around the world who also wanted to share their knowledge and collections. Bear in mind that when you collect material for a

[Vicki Bennett's hard drives]

radio show or to make an artwork you're only going to use 10% of it, so you do really need to cast the net out, literally

Your case is quite unusual, since it seems that your collecting impulse is mainly driven by your own artistic/professional practice. Can you reflect on how this has that shaped your sound collection? There must be many unexpected sound sources/styles in it. Can you share some dirty secrets?

I do have a very large collection of complete rubbish. They seem to have something embedded into them that makes them pop up on the iPod shuffle ten times more than anything tasteful, especially when you are giving someone you don't know very well a lift in the car somewhere. It will come as no surprise that I have a large collection of yodelling and mountain music, and also a lot of brass bands. And probably something to do with having some WFMU blood in me I naturally have more cover versions of songs than the actual originals, and in fact I tend not to want the original. Often I collect as many versions of a song as I can find. On a similar note I have a huge collection of collage/mashup music by other contemporary artists/music makers. These are more for radio play than for my own compositions, although a lot of my own compositions come about from making collages for radio play. When the layering gets more worked over/complicated there is a fine line between what is yours and what is someone else's. In fact, the only difference is if you list the sources. I always list sources (make a playlist) for radio and never list sources for my own work. Simply because I like to leave mystery and surprise in my own work in what I'm sourcing, then other people have to work it out or discover years later 'Oh! That's what it is!'. Oh, and I have a very large collection of Rod McKuen.

I think it's very interesting how being a plunderphonic artist seems to have influenced your record/sound collection so much. Sentences like 'I tend not to want the original', even sound like a statement of principles...

Ha! Never really thought of that sentence as funny but it is when isolated from the rest of the paragraph! As are most quotes, including sampled ones. I really am not interested in originality, or rather I question originality and I like how we transform to make things our own, that is interesting. I don't want to do anything 'right' – in fact I want to do it noticeably wrong. Or at least turn it upside down so everything falls out of its pockets.

By the way, why Rod McKuen?

Because he is both creepy and angelic at the same time!

I understand your collection is therefore quite functional. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Do you collect to produce you work or does your artistic practice lead you to keep collecting?

As the chicken needs the egg needs the chicken, my relationship with my archive is the same. The motivation of collecting is to use it, although I rarely listen to a lot of what I creatively use for 'leisure', but I do collect masses of audio for that purpose too, so there are actually two strands of usage here, for creative use and for passive, er, uncreative use. Not that I am thinking of which it might be for when I'm downloading it since it could be both. Uncreativity turns out to be more more unique and inspiring sometimes.

Your sound collection in numbers: approximately how many records do you own? I have the feeling that your collection is mostly about digitizing material for you to use as a sound source for your artistic practice.

My LP collection has been massive but I've always sold albums over the years due to lack of living space and poverty! So a few hundred LPs. And I donated about 1,000 from my CD collection to the WFMU record library, digitising it first. The rest are under the bed. Yes, you're quite right, my main collection is in digital form, I can't really count how many albums, but I just dragged my MP3 drive into iTunes and it says that I've 204 days of audio.

How do you deal with so much audio? Do you keep a database? How do you categorise it? And how do you work with such a large amount of information/material?

[Vicki Bennett's hard drives]

I label it in A-Z folders, surname, and forename then album names inside. I used to be very hardcore with this labelling ten years ago but I've got too much stuff now, and basically I also have a life. Ha ha! I am not a saddo; I don't need to make 'info.txt' folders to validate my existence, or the quality of a recording. The rest is left to memory, which comes and goes! If I'm in the zone (composing or making radio) I find the memory flows well in terms of associating one recording with what would sound good with it. And if the associations get tired and predictable then I know I'm burnt out and I stop and don't do it any more. I got burnt out on making radio shows at the moment and so I've stopped until I have something new to say. It was actually Radio Boredcast that burnt me out, curating and compiling that 744 hours of slow really killed me. Although I like knowing what is in my collection I'm very pleased not to know – it's a lovely surprise to keep finding something new. When I made Radio Boredcast I borrowed Kenny Goldsmith's hard drive and copied it into mine, and now there is all this other crap coming up in the mix too – oh yes, he has a LOT of crap as well, ha ha! You get a lot of crossover in sourcing if you're using the same blogs to get material from too, or record libraries (like WFMU).

So how has the format changed your way of collecting and listening? Do you have any observations on the shift in listening patterns, from music fans who once learned certain recordings off by heart, to the current paradigm where many fans approach a new artist by devouring their entire album catalogue all at once?

Very much so. The shift from restricted to abundant couldn't have been more extreme. When I was pre-14 my taste was shaped by or limited to around twenty LPs in the house, and the LPs borrowed from friends' parents. As a result I was a Beatles fan. And Readers Digest. From fourteen onwards my taste was shaped by the limited amount of vinyl/cassettes that I'd get (maybe three for birthday for instance) and I'd know the lyrics to everything, and still do. Then of course radio was essential – I would record radio shows of BBC Radio 1 DJs, particularly evening shows like Kid Jensen and John Peel, and that was the way to get to play everything the necessary 2,000 times until the cassette eats itself. This concentration and obsession with a relatively narrow field of musical taste serves a certain purpose when you are young, in that it is very important to learn to focus. I am not advocating attention deficit disorder in older people but it is also important to have the opportunity to branch out and widen your awareness to new things, and so it is essential to have abundance rather than restriction, coupled with the self-discipline of making your own restrictions. This is important in whatever you do of course, but speaking as an artist, if you do not have this ability your work will be confused. I don't see a problem with devouring an entire artist back catalogue over the course of a couple of weeks – the only problem is finding the time. This is the ironic part of being someone making new audio and visual material, finding the extra pair of eyes and ears to actually take it all in.

Some of your own works also use sampled material extracted from sources other than records, i.e. classic movies, or the stuff you digitised when you accessed the BBC Archive. Do these samples coexist with your sound collection? Soon enough you'll become a hard-disk collector as well!

I also have hundreds, maybe thousands of films on other drives! My entire moving image works are archived, I don't throw any of it away in case I need to re-edit it. So that is a collection in itself. Not as unique as the audio in content, but the results of the edits are definitely one of a kind.

By the way, do you have any back ups of your collection? If so, do you have even more than one? It's kind of scary how much we trust digital media, the Cloud and the internet, taking for granted that they will stay there forever.

Yes, I always buy two drives at a time, and work on my main computer drive and back up on two separate drives. So I have everything twice. I learnt this the hard way. A back up is not a back up unless it's… backed up! I don't trust the Cloud or external hosts, I believe strongly in keeping personal copies of everything. It is worrying that drive systems and so on become obsolete so fast, it's one reason why when I have made a piece of work I share it online so it duplicates itself every time someone downloads it.

Digital music is also seeing a new breed of sound collectors, the 'completists', as William Bennett called them in his lecture for us a couple of years ago... What do you think about this new paradigm? Would you call yourself a completist?

No, I'm an incompletist. I hope I never am reaching the end of what there is. Actually, if you consider something complete then you need to interact with it more and you'll find that actually there is always something next, that is connected to it. None of this material is isolated; the stream keeps flowing into the next place.

Is there such a thing as digital hoarding? Do you think you might be a digital hoarder?

I have been and am from time to time – if I find a large collection where I see a possibility to find new things then I will grab it, yes. Because it might not be there when I go back! Thankfully I don't collect carrier bags or old car parts. Doesn't really matter if it's on the LaCie drive.

In our conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith, he claimed that 'archiving is the new folk art'. He also said that: 'categorically the term "collector" seems a bit quaint' and he preferred the concept of 'archivist'.

Rick Prelinger also said that archiving is a kind of folk art. I have said the same of working with collaging 'found' (actually 'selected') footage, that this is urban folk-art, or folk art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Yes, the language has changed, and some 'analogue' terms don't completely translate into a world where it is you that does the reproducing and sharing rather than an authority (publisher, library, etc.).

Yet, that's exactly what makes this question particularly relevant: when technology makes it possible for individuals to do something that institutions can't (Ubuweb being a perfect example of this) for all kinds of different reasons (from copyright issues to the inflexible nature of structures like museums, archives, etc…), should the same standards be applied?

The original rules need changing, diversifying, updating, with no blanket rulings. Quilts, yes – blankets, NO! The rules on access/use should never be entirely based around someone's ability to pay either. If something is published i.e. put into the public realm, not kept personal/private, it has limited powers on what then happens to it. It's sort of obvious really. A certain degree of usage is to be expected on anything that we experience, in many different ways. There are already way too many standards being applied that limit the use of what is in the public domain – there should be standards about standards!

The internet, the Cloud and the digital era have kind of democratised tools that allow an individual to handle, organise and share huge amounts of data and content.

The internet has democratised tools, yes. When it comes to using these tools the 'democracy' comes into question if it is either an illegal act or an act that holds a place in law (i.e. fair use etc.) that needs fighting with lawyers/funding, not to mention two years of your time and energy. Also, behind the Cloud is a big machine run by big companies who don't give a damn about your freedom or your data. Talk about an ironic name for what it actually is.

The more people use democratising tools the more the demand becomes recognised, accepted then exploited – then privatised and sold for profit. If everyone freely shares this massive library called 'the past' then key holders will try to legitimize in order to capitalise. Then a whole new bunch of things will be made illegal or private by their own success. But when has it not been the case that you have to wilfully take a lot of things for yourself that should never have been taken away in the first place? Same as so many things in society.

Free up- and downloading obviously offer great advantages to listeners and collectors. I completely understand and concur with that position; nevertheless, as my dear friend Chris Cutler often points out, the other side of the question should also be kept in mind. As he always reminds us, these artefacts are all the products of human labour – and of considerable investment in both time and money. Paradoxically, the conditions

that produced that rich archive no longer apply, and equivalent new work is not being supported, dragging us back to endlessly recycling the past. The recession is not helping either, and a lot of funding is being cut. Is there a solution for this dilemma, from your point of view?

Yes, I totally understand and respect his point of view. It's not in opposition to my point of view; it's just another way of looking at it. I think one reason why my golden rule is to be transformative is out of respect for the original. Even when I'm being playful I'm hopefully not wishing to be nasty. I get very upset when people have said my transformations are sly or even sarcastic, those people are so wrong, it says more about them than me.

I understand that if things are not transformative in a really engaging way it is recycling the past for its own sake – it's often just nostalgia, which I really can't stand. I firmly exist in the present and 'the past', which I might remind you is everything we know without exception, should always be mindfully observed in relation to the present.

As for the recession – once again, I know… I am a self-employed artist. The only way anyone makes any money is to do concerts; I've had this conversation with Chris myself.

The solution? I have no idea except to work as hard as possible, so if I am exploiting someone else's labour I am at least working hard doing it!

Academics like Wolfgang Ernst have come up with concepts such as the 'anarchive'. In the digital era Ernst says that the archive actually changes from an archival space into an archival time, in which the key is the dynamics of the permanent transmission of data. The archive then literally becomes a 'metaphor', with all the possibilities this entails.

The key is the transmission. And the transmission is reliant upon the keys to open the door. I have quoted this all too many times but…

'Information is like a bank. Some of us are rich, some of us are poor with information. All of us can be rich. Our job, your job is to rob the bank, to kill the guards. You go out there to destroy everybody who keeps and hides the whole information.' GPO in the film *Decoder* (1984)

That was written pre-mainstream internet! And I write this at a time when our government is closing down public libraries because apparently we don't use them anymore. The attitude is that if people don't use it you take it away. And if it is used you take it away anyway so that you can give it back in a more controlled form.

And how might this seemingly wider access to material have changed the behaviour and the role of individuals?

It has levelled out the playing field, for better and for worse. Photocopiers, cassette decks, cut and paste and broadband bring wider access to and from more people, and a much larger potential for learning, and sharing information. The rest is the decision of the individual, and the always-opposing authority.

Back to collecting, compulsive object-music collectors, like Ed Veenstra for example, confess that as soon as they have what they are looking for, the mystique is gone. Are you also a treasure hunter with ADHD?

No, I'm not that obsessed with collecting, I'm far more into the journey than the destination – I like to search for things, both media but also information, and through that I get very inspired, and the occasional idea for creating new work. To me the process is the product. Sometimes the product is the process since there is no actual 'product'.

And talking about the thrill of the hunt, what are you looking for that you can't find?

If I knew that I would have found it by now ☺

I was looking for the TV movies of *The Rockford Files* for a long time, but I've found those now, thanks.

Can the thrill be as intense with digital music as it is with objects?

Absolutely. It's still physical, the experience, it's still experienced through the senses.

What's your relationship with other collectors exploring similar aesthetics or material?

Those people are probably my friends. We'd have met either through the process or the product, i.e. we met through the search, or we met because we are creative and saw a hint of the essence of something that seemed the same. But wasn't.

03. Acknowledgments

This email conversation between Vicki Bennett and Anna Ramos took place in Summer 2013. Thanks to Chris Cutler.

04. Copyright note