Mapping Popular Music Exhibitions in Australia

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Introduction

The Australian Music Vault, situated in the Arts Centre Melbourne, opened in December 2017. Prior to the creation of the Vault, a survey had listed some eight exhibitions featuring Australian popular music or musicians in major Australian cultural institutions (Waller and Waller 2016). A wider survey would have revealed more at minor institutions throughout the nation.

The "heritagisation" of popular music is part of a global interest in remembering popular music's past as cultural heritage, an interest which has been paralleled by academic attention. This paper will outline preliminary considerations for a project seeking to trace the narrative of Australian popular music history within exhibitions in Australian cultural institutions. I'll begin with an overview, then focus on the Australian Music Vault, outline some initial considerations, and then make some concluding remarks.

Overview

The Waller and Waller Survey of popular music exhibitions in Australia indicated audience enthusiasm for the experiential engagement being offered. It concluded that popular music exhibitions held the potential to attract more diverse, and increase numbers in, museum visitors.

Australian cultural institutions have, over the last decade, hosted exhibitions that originated from overseas such as *David Bowie* and *ABBAWORLD*. At the same time, locally curated exhibitions have focused on aspects of Australian popular music. The NSW Powerhouse Museum exhibited *spinning around: 50 years of festival records*, *The 80s are back*, *The Beatles in Australia* and, in capturing a young audience, *The Wiggles*. The Arts Centre Melbourne's exhibitions have included *Nick Cave*, *Peter Allen*, *Rock Chicks: Australian Women in Music*, *Kylie25*, *A Sunbury Day Out*, and *Kylie on Stage*. *The Making of Midnight Oil* exhibition travelled to numerous city and regional centres throughout Australia from 2014 to 2017. In this city, the Canberra Museum and Gallery has exhibited *Head Full of Flames: Punk in the Nation's Capital* and *Wendy Saddington: Underground Icon*. This list is far from exhaustive but it does reflect each of the rationales for popular music exhibitions identified by Marion Leonard (2007: 153): canonic representations, contextualisation as art, and the presentation of popular music as social or local history.

Waller and Waller argue that the phenomenon of music-themed programs in the museum space is part of the trend of "heritagisation of twentieth-century cultural expressions and history, often informed by nostalgia as the previous century recedes" (2016: 52).

Catherine Strong (2017) recently noted that many scholars have documented this increasing fascination with the past in Western cultures. She also notes that for popular music this "memory boom" manifests most clearly as the continued dominance of a music canon mostly created between the 1960s and 1990s. She sites Tony Bennett's (2009) argument that popular music heritage is at one significant level a self-serving exercise committed to the uncritical reproduction of a dominant canon that expunges vast tracts of musical production, performance and reception from popular memory.

While not engaging deeply with this critique, Waller and Waller (2016) acknowledge concerns about commercial influence and the possible loss of independence and objectivity by the curatorial team or institution. They also did not investigate the narratives being articulated in relation to Australian popular music history.

The mediation, manipulation and presentation of a collection of music and/or music-related items as 'curated' has evident implications. An exploration of what, how and by whom curation occurs directly informs understanding of the curated objects and collections themselves.

A curated collection may be seen as one organised by 'experts' or it might suggest a more localised, handcrafted, artisanal, personalised experience. At the same time, an exhibition might reinforce a dominant historical narrative or as Leonard (2007) articulates, it could imply a more critical, 'hidden' or 'alternative' popular music narrative, previously untold or overshadowed. Research conducted by Sarah Baker, Lauren Istvandity and Raphael Nowak (2018) noted that little scholarly focus on the curatorial strategies behind the exhibition of popular music's past has been undertaken. They discuss eight concepts within a framework that allows for comparison of institutional practices: dominant (hidden) histories, projected visitor numbers, place, art and material culture, narrative, curator subjectivity, nostalgia, and sound. They also recognise that curators are limited in the extent to which stories of lesser known artists, labels and so on can be highlighted in an exhibition. Additionally, they note that narrative is arguably the most dominant structuring concept in the curation of exhibitions in popular music museums. Previously, Baker et al (2016) had recognised three curatorial approaches to narrative: story-based; concept-based, and object-based. Importantly, Baker et al (2016) note that curatorial practice is very much bound up with living memory and lived experience – that of museum staff and of the visitor.

Australian Music Vault

I visited the Australian Music Vault in mid-2018, especially prompted by Catherine Strong's late 2017 article that claimed that it moved the Australian popular music canon beyond "pub rock".

The Vault is a key initiative of the Victorian Government's Music Works Strategy. The Vault incorporates the Australian Recording Industry Awards (most often referred to as ARIA) Hall of Fame, the Australian Performing Arts Collection, and is a collaboration with the Australian music industry. Its partners include the National Film and Sound Archive, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Melbourne Radio Station Triple M, and the Herald Sun newspaper.

Its location in Melbourne contributes to that city's reputation as a "music city", a political framework that sees music as central to Melbourne's tourism and economic growth. As Strong (2018) has recently argued this has seen the inclusion of popular music in heritage discourses that enable diverse claims to authority being made in relation to heritage.

The Vault declares itself as a celebration of the Australian contemporary music story – past, present and future. The Vault's patrons are industry legends Michael Gudinski, from Mushroom Records; Ian (Molly) Meldrum, music journalist and well-known host of the ABC music program *Countdown*; award winning singer-songwriter Archie Roach; the globally recognised Kylie Minogue; and Tina Arena, also widely known.

The Vault's displays at the time of my visit were *The Real Thing* (a reference to a major hit in 1969 for Russell Morris produced by Molly Meldrum), *Two-Way Traffic* (a theme on musicians coming into and out of Australia), and *The Wild Ones* (a reference to Johnny O'Keefe's 1958 hit), *Agents of Change, Punk/New Wave,* and *The Ted Albert Award*, with Midnight Oil being acknowledged for its outstanding services to Australian Music. Currently, *Hip Hop* has replaced *Punk/New Wave*, and the latest recipient of *The Ted Albert Award*, is country music manager, agent and promoter, the late Rob Potts. One of his early talents was Keith Urban.

Unfortunately, there is little time to address the physical arrangement and the technology in use at the Vault but it contains similar elements to what Leonard (2010) developed for *The Beat Goes On*, the popular music exhibition at National Museums Liverpool in which she was a curator.

Ultimately, the physical exhibition in the Vault is dynamic and the displays are thematic rather than chronological which is to be applauded. This approach does not immediately seem to grant elevated historic importance to past decades or musical genres.

In addition to the physical exhibition the Vault's website is extensive, including providing an event calendar and resources for teachers and students. Music stories from a variety of Australian musicians can be accessed, one can make a mixed tape from the Vault's Spotify playlists (which can also be done at the Arts Centre Melbourne), and it displays the instagrammed selfies of visitors.

Strong (2017) observed that the Australian Music Vault had taken longer than in other parts of the world to come into existence. This, she noted, is only partly to do with debate about popular music's worth. More crucial, is how popular music is "tied up with tricky questions of national identity". She recognised the local industry's struggle to find a unique way to translate music with its roots so strongly in North America and the UK. I would add, that part of the struggle might have also been to really shift away from the dominant narrative of the "Australian sound" perpetuated by the once hypermasculinist popular music industry and popular music journalism. That discourse celebrated male bands in the mythology of "Oz Rock", with phrases such as "blood, sweat and

beers". Strong has previously discussed the "symbolic alignment between men and rock in the collective memory of Australian music" (2015) and the neglect of other contributors. The prevalence of this "grand popular" history has, as Shane Homan argued, "privileged industrial and celebrity stories [which] has left considerable space for alternative histories" (2017: 443).

It has to be acknowledged that the curators of the Vault have included women artists. Beyond Minogue, are Missy Higgins, Chrissy Amphlett, Little Patti, Judith Durham, Courtney Barnett, Helen Ready, Eva Vandal, and Wendy Saddington, but there remain many women musicians and bands from the past that are absent.

In a recent publication (Rickwood 2018) on Wendy Saddington, most well-known in the late 1960s and 70s, I explored the poor documentation and celebration of women's contributions to Australian popular music. I argued that Saddington was undermined by the industry which had little capacity to encourage and support a woman of non-heteronormative sexuality with a unique talent. Such a musician was simply not encouraged by the industry and her contribution had subsequently been neglected. Her inclusion in the Australian Music Vault was therefore unlike the majority of artists featured, she was an outlier. Her inclusion, I suggest, was most likely prompted by the earlier regional exhibition but it shows some flexibility to move beyond industrial success.

Past and current female musicians were well celebrated at the inaugural 2018 Australian Women In Music Awards. Founding Director and Executive Producer, Vicki Gordon, said they were "overwhelmed with support which we continue to receive from artists, the music community and the broader creative sector all of whom agree that the time for change has come". She added "we received nominations from every state and across all areas of diversity, the quality was exceptional with a broad representation from artists and music practitioners who operate outside the mainstream industry" (Williams 2018). This indicates that the Vault could certainly go further to ensure appropriate representation of women musicians in its celebration of Australian popular music.

The Vault has considered other issues of inclusion ensuring that First Nations musicians are featured. Information on the bands Yothu Yindi and No Fixed Address can be found, as well as singer-songwriters Kev Carmody (in partnership with Paul Kelly) and Archie Roach (with reference to his deceased wife Ruby Hunter). The recent inclusion of Hip Hop has shifted this representation more so, as it has for the representation of women; especially online. Within an article titled "Australian Indigenous Hip-Hop – A Force to be reckoned with" by Suzi Hutchings, an Arrernte academic, links to various artists can be accessed.

When I presented an earlier draft of this paper at an international conference in Austria I was promptly reminded of the over 20% of Australians whose first language is not English and who didn't seem to be very much present in The Vault. I agreed. This diversity could be encountered only occasionally in the exhibitions at the time; glimpsed visually on the wall of posters and audibly picked up in the soundtrack that played in the public spaces beyond the exhibition. But you did need to be paying attention. Again, the inclusion of the exhibition focusing on Hip Hop has shifted this somewhat but it is still lacking in the music genres that came earlier.

Strong (2017) concluded the Vault has the potential to reframe as well as celebrate Australians' relationship to popular music and to move our cultural memories past the pub rock canon. My visit and more recent engagement with its website recognises this attempt but nonetheless it remains still partial, incomplete. The Vault, I argue, is constrained by its own collection and its collaborators, most crucially the music industry, to be able to move too far away from a dominant narrative which concentrates on industrial and celebrity stories.

Conclusion

Simon Reynolds (2011) prompted considerable critique from a number of researchers for his cursory understanding of contemporary museums and the range of mediations they create to enable an affective connection between museum patrons and popular music. My brief engagement with the Australian Music Vault and some earlier popular music exhibitions reinforced how powerful those mediations can be, but, also raised considerable concerns about the narratives being perpetuated. Those experiences have prompted a desire to further investigate those narratives. An extensive investigation might simply reveal that shifting the dominant narrative in Australian popular music history is an ongoing challenge, as the Australian Music Vault demonstrates. Any exhibition will always be constrained by the collections, collaborators and curatorial practices of the institution. Nevertheless, an investigation that traces the turns and revolutions in the arc of popular music exhibitions over a number of decades might more readily reveal a popular music history that extends the dominate narrative; one that better reflects the multicultural, multi-genred, and multi-gendered nation that is Australia, including and beyond industrial success.

For, as Shelley Brunt and Geoff Stahl (2018) have recently argued:

> The history of popular music in (Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand) is one bound up in the complex relationships of syncretism that can only emerge from multicultural nations… It is a history in which settlers and their descendants have borrowed from indigenous repertoires, and vice versa; where migrants connect with their homelands as well as integrate into local custom and ritual, and it is a history of music-making that taps into international musical idioms and works to domesticate them.

Now that's a good narrative to be constructing in our cultural institutions.

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