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Raiders of the Lost Archives

Abstract

Fantastic Man (2014) and *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012) mobilize tropes of discovery occurring in the filmed process of collecting and curating the work and identities of two reluctant, elusive and resistive figures. They are part of a discourse of collectability which is marked by the urge to discover and to narrate a “quest” that has its precedents in record collecting as obsessive cultural practice (Straw, 1997; Shuker, 2012), and in the fetishizing of obscurity (Thornton, 1995; Hesmondhalgh, 1997). Furthermore, they can be seen as “performances” of the A&R process but for a “post-rock” era in which the customary roles of A&R (“artiste and repertoire”) have largely been eclipsed by social, economic and technological changes to the music industry: the “(re-)discovery” of Onyeabor and Rodriguez exemplifies an increasingly common fusion of, rather than oscillation between, novelty and nostalgia in the music industry, as “old” artists are “newly” discovered through practices of media archaeology aimed at unearthing artifacts of cultural and economic value from an ever bigger and denser digital archive.

Keywords: archives, collecting, discovery, celebrity, nostalgia, A&R

Fantastic Man (2014) and *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012) are two recent documentary films that focus on the urge to track down and make public hitherto “unknown” musicians. The first concerns William Onyeabor, who was releasing material in the early-to-mid 1980s in Nigeria. The second narrates the search for Sixto Rodriguez, the shadowy creator of two albums popular in South Africa during the years of apartheid.

Fantastic Man is a 31-minute documentary streamed on Vice’s *Noisey* site, which is geared towards a youth audience well versed in music and subcultures. *Searching for Sugar Man* is a full-length feature film, enjoying theatrical release. Despite these differences in scale and location, this article sees in them a trend that others too have followed (e.g. *Finding Fela*, 2014). Firstly, we are interested in how they mobilize tropes of discovery occurring in the filmed process of collecting and curating the work and identities of two reluctant, elusive and resistive figures. In particular, we argue that this is part of a discourse of collectability which is marked by the urge to discover and to narrate a “quest” that has its precedents in record collecting as obsessive cultural practice (Straw, 1997; Shuker, 2012), and in the fetishizing of obscurity (Thornton, 1995; Hesmondhalgh, 1997). A related point is that the films’ narratives of quest and discovery can be viewed as “performances” of the A&R process but for a “post-rock” era in which the customary roles of A&R (“artiste and repertoire”) have largely been eclipsed by social, economic and technological changes to the music industry: scouting for talent is now more often undertaken via metrical analysis of which emergent artists have the most hits on YouTube or other online platforms, while “artist development” usually devolves almost entirely onto artists themselves. From the perspective of both the record collector and the record-company executive, these two films are marked by nostalgia for an era in which the quest for new music involved an actual physical search

rather than a virtual one accomplished by a few clicks. Finally, we posit that the “(re-) discovery” of Onyeabor and Rodriguez exemplifies an increasingly common fusion of, rather than oscillation between, novelty and nostalgia in the music industry, as “old” artists are “newly” discovered through practices of media archaeology aimed at unearthing artifacts of cultural and economic value from an ever bigger and denser digital archive.

Who is William Onyeabor?

Fantastic Man narrates the search for the mysterious William Onyeabor. The title is also that of a track off the compilation album, *Who is William Onyeabor?*, released on the Luaka Bop label the autumn prior to the film. It features Luaka Bop executives (who were also the executive producers); Nigerian music historians, journalists, studio engineers, producers and artists; British label owners and record collectors – among them, Damon Albarn; and, fleetingly, William Onyeabor himself. The narrative hangs on the quest for Onyeabor, whose music had entranced those record collectors like Duncan Brooker and Luaka Bop producers, Yale Evelev and Eric Welles Nystrom. The film is a retrospective piecing together of moments of revelation (of what a rarity Onyeabor was), determination (of how to get his music released and to interview him), and speculation (from those who are able to reveal stories about him from their own indirect and direct experience of him). What emerges from the film is a picture of a group of record enthusiasts and producers for whom he became something of a challenge and of a man whose refusal to operate within the recognized parameters of music-industry promotion has rendered him even more enigmatic. The film starts with typescript in yellow against a black background: “A few years ago, a small record

company in New York City set out to release a compilation of songs from the 70s and 80s by Nigerian electronic musician William Onyeabor. They didn't know a lot about him then...they still don't". In an age of over-information, when musicians appear across a multiplicity of online platforms in (self-)promotional media, when they are the subject of interviews across a plethora of online music magazines and blogs, Onyeabor is notable for his absence.

Onyeabor was working as a musician in the east Nigerian city of Enugu in the early-to-mid eighties, and had a major hit in 1985 with *Everything You Sow*, which, says Lemi Ghariokwu, an artist who had worked on Fela Kuti album covers for Polygram, came "out of the blue...from the east". Western readings of this period of Nigerian music are focused almost solely on Fela Kuti, whose life and work has been curated (in the Barbican in London) and represented (in *Finding Fela*, 2014), eclipsing other musicians of the time. Unlike Kuti (and Sunny Ade), Onyeabor did not play live or travel abroad, recording exclusively in his studio, 345 miles east of Lagos, where the Nigerian music industry was concentrated. And it is this place and its instruments that add to the myth of Onyeabor being somehow out of place and therefore difficult to categorize. This is despite the fact that he sang in English, not in Pidgin, as Kuti did – a creole mix of Igbo and English, nor in Igbo, like Sunny Ade – so there was not a language barrier to his music travelling out of West Africa, but this is where it stayed until 2013.

EMI's Lagos studio played host to Paul McCartney and Wings in 1973. McCartney wanted to record *Band On The Run* in an "exotic" location, using an African locale to lend something "Other" to his sound. EMI's presence in Nigeria arguably linked Nigerian musicians with the Empire and its recording techniques, knowhow and networks. Even Kuti, who established his own club and recording studio in The Shrine, a

compound in Lagos, recorded with EMI in Abbey Road for the 1973 album *Afrodisiac*. Onyeabor sat outside this accepted rubric of recognized Nigerian musicianship. Key to his sound, which like Kuti's, was characterized by call-and-response lyrics, were synthesizers. The film offers us stills of Onyeabor dressed in a pin-stripe suit and a Stetson, surrounded by banks of analog synth keyboards: Elkas, Moogs, Polymoogs; he had the use of electronic kit that no one else in Nigeria at that time had access to. This, the film muses, is a mystery, not least where he got them or how he could afford them as they were a luxury in Africa at the time. Various potential explanations are offered up: that he had brought them back from Eastern Europe, that he had Russian contacts. Both of these conjectures imply a man whose potential business dealings are shady, perhaps that he was even somehow allied to Communism at a time when the Cold War was still, though in its last days, in effect.

His use of these analog synthesizers adds a dimension to his music that was not prominent in Kuti's and Ade's Afrobeat and High-Life. Kuti borrowed from and reconfigured jazz techniques and sounds, fusing them with the vernacular traditions at his disposal but Onyeabor seems, according to the film, to have co-opted the spirit of Georgio Moroder and New York disco, of Parliament and Clinton's Afro-futurist and acid-funk sound, if not the modernist European futurism of Kraftwerk. Ed Keazor, a music historian and self-declared Kraftwerk fan, argues that Onyeabor was "ground-breaking" and "avant-garde" in his use of these synthesizers. Not only was his sound straying from the parameters of Nigerian traditional sounds and those of jazz and funk as melded into Kuti's Afrobeat sound, but it was using techniques and equipment that could not be accounted for to make music that had no precedent. It lacked a lineage. Damon Albarn comments on film that it "sounds too modern". In another context, Eric

Welles Nystrom (2015) has stated that Onyeabor's attraction for the Luaka Bop label was that "this was the only music we had heard from Africa that was made for records and not made to be played live".

Collecting Onyeabor

Fantastic Man is a filmic document of obsession and collecting, where the authorial voice is driven by a compulsion to return an object (Onyeabor) to a collection (the *Luaka Bop* roster). Work from the early through to the late twentieth century on collecting (e.g. Benjamin, 1931; Appadurai, 1986; Baudrillard, 1994) has noted the role of passion in the collector, how an *objet d'art* is a cause for passionate pursuit, and how such pursuit is played within specific rules like a game. Indeed, Baudrillard recalls the infantile urge to collect as a manifestation of the desire for control over the world, a control that Onyeabor resists in his refusal throughout his musical career to reveal his motives to the media and, in the film, to be interviewed. The film can be read through the lens of work on record collectors (Shuker, 1986), particularly when the collectors are white men (Bannister, 2006).

Shuker's (2012) work on record collecting as a specific cultural practice illuminates much of the compulsion that emerges in the film itself and in the reviews that accompanied its release. He notes how the "process of collecting can take on the nature of a ritual":

Many collectors refer to the thrill of the chase... Frequently it is the search itself that provides gratification, although the anticipation of a "find" is central to this. Examples of

major “finds”, especially if they’re cheap, and discovered in the most unusual locations, are part of the folklore of collecting (Shuker, 2012, p. 109).

Let’s not forget that there is an industrial synergy between the album and the film, that they are intermeshed, with the latter wholly reliant on the former acting as a promotional tool for the commodity that is *Who is William Onyeabor?* As such, it is useful to look back to Appadurai’s (1986, p. 46) work on commodities and cultural perspectives, where he reiterates how, within a long tradition of (colonial) collecting, collectors are driven by the “obsession with the original” within what he terms a “cultural regime of authentication”. Within this regime, the collected items become “pieces”, their use value now measured in how they fit the collection, their veracity and provenance catalogued. Onyeabor resists this. Despite the collectors’ urge to fix him somewhere, the film illustrates how he evades such capture. As this review of the album indicates, the obscurity of the artist was the very point of ignition in terms of his potential collectability:

Last year, a compilation LP was released that set tongues wagging across the music scene, from crate-digging nerds to rock royalty. As its title implies, ‘Who is William Onyeabor?’, the 5th release in New York label Luaka Bop’s World Psychedelic Classics collection, asked more questions than it answered. Who was this JD Salinger of Nigerian synth-funk? How had music so idiosyncratic and exciting managed to stay hidden for so long? How were the records made? Who financed them? Who played on them? And how the hell do you pronounce ‘Onyeabor’ anyway? (Huddleston, 2012)

In a digital era of phonographic saturation, what is scarce, obscure even, is both valuable and anachronistic. The fact that no one had ever heard of Onyeabor only served to augment his standing within a world/dance music scene which has long been predicated on a specific type of subcultural capital by which the obscurity of the record stands in almost direct correlation to the standing of the DJ/producer (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Thornton, 1995). This was a prized object and Bourdieu's work, much utilized, again offers a way into reading what is at play in this documentary. He notes how the "exclusive, avant-garde or simply high culture" sit at the opposite end of that which is "generic; i.e. *common*, easy and immediately accessible" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 32).

Onyeabor's work was released on a label that is bound up with residual notions of the avant-garde and the intellectual, albeit within the milieu of "world" music and with an emphasis on "classics" rather than new releases. Luaka Bop was founded by David Byrne, who brings with him a history that includes being lead singer of Talking Heads; a landmark collaboration with Brian Eno on *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981); and, more recently, work with St Vincent, herself situated at the experimental end of popular music. Onyeabor is therefore filtered through this prism of a particular kind of musical authentication process. This, the recasting of him for a Western audience as somehow "exclusive" is at odds with his standing within Nigeria. The film notes how in the mid 1980s, when his songs enjoyed radio play and his tracks were as easy to buy as those of Ray Parker Junior or Lionel Richie in the record shops of Lagos, Onyeabor was "accessible", but only to Nigerians. This illustrates how there is a differentiation in cultural capital that is afforded by place and positioned audiences. By lifting Onyeabor's work out of its original context, Luaka Bop affords it a different kind of commercial life and a different sort of taste status as a recherché symbol of post-

colonialism. Straw (1997a, p. 10) notes how “male record collectors often adopt a bohemian, anti-commercial stance. They contest hegemony, then, by setting up their own canon of ‘great work’ ”. This film, the Luaka Bop label, and the record collectors and fans of Onyeabor in the film are all part of a canonization process in which an obscure product from a former British colony is re-appraised and re-commodified upon its “return” to the cultural citadels of post-colonialism.

Chasing Onyeabor

The hunt for Onyeabor, as the opening titles suggest, is doomed. Nevertheless, the film depicts the chase from New York record label office to remote east Nigerian mansion. The following promotional copy is posted up under the film and is peppered with the language of chase and evasion:

You Need To Hear This is proud to present 'Fantastic Man', a documentary investigating Nigerian musician William Onyeabor, a man shrouded in mystery and myth. Directed by Jake Sumner..., the film tells the story of a label's attempt to track William down, speaking to fans such as Damon Albarn, Caribou and Femi Kuti and travelling to Nigeria to meet those who've worked with him in a bid to uncover the truth about his story (Noisey 2014).

Onyeabor, is discursively positioned as the quarry of a hunt to be “track[ed] down”, as a mystery and myth to be “uncover[ed]”, a problem to be solved. The narrative arc of the film is one of challenge, discovery and disappointment. It begins with the realization (on the part of the Luaka Bop executives, notably Eric Welles Nystrom) that

something of interest (Onyeabor) lies perhaps beyond their reach, which they then pursue only to be dogged by evasion and momentary revelation before a final disappointment. Onyeabor appears mostly as others remember or imagine him and only momentarily at the end of the film, in person. The film's trajectory of the remembered tale of a compulsive search for an elusive object mirrors the sequence of events that characterizes the record collector in Shuker's work. He writes of how

Hunting metaphors abound in the general literature on collecting, and collectors frequently refer to notions of pleasure and desire in the pursuit of items for their collection. For record collectors, this is a process involving competition, effort (visiting sites of acquisition; the physical act of sorting through records) and choice...underpinned by a strong element of compulsion (Shuker, 2012, p. 11).

The film documents to this "effort", from the beginning when the realization that there was a rich "mine of music" is articulated, to the arrival of Onyeabor himself on camera at the end. This journey is illustrated in one scene towards the end in which a plane flies from New York over a hand-drawn map of Europe, heading down through North Africa to Nigeria. Montage shots of street scenes in Enugu follow: markets with women carrying large loads on their heads, young boys playing football barefoot on dirt pitches, evangelical Christian messages on hoardings and shacks lining the streets of Enugu. And then we get to Onyeabor's old studio, now a school. Pictures of the studio during its heyday are on the walls, acting as testimony to Onyeabor's presence, who, as producer and artist, is now gone. Towards the end of the film, the crew find him at a remote white mansion, where he allows them to film his grand entrance hall

with a stairway lined with framed photographs of him in the 1980s and of religious icons. At the bottom of the stairs is a Polymoog keyboard and other trophies of his musical past and his religious present. An old, silver Mercedes with a Swiss “CH” sticker is parked outside the house: more mystery. We see Onyeabor walking towards us in traditional Nigerian dress. We hear a voice though it is unclear whether it is his as it is over-dubbed. It tells us to “live a good life and follow Jesus”. Then he walks off.

Commentators throughout the film, such as Albarn, describe Onyeabor as “rare” or “unique”, both in his musical output and his personality. The film positions him, through the descriptions of the record collectors, the Luaka Bop “hunters” and the Nigerian artists, producers and record shop sellers who knew him and of him, as an enigma. It could be tempting to argue that the process of tracking down Onyeabor is illustrative of a potentially colonial curatorial endeavor, whereby he is a trophy brought back from Africa and displayed to a Western audience, trafficked and commodified (Gilroy, 1993; Gardner, 2015) but this does not account for the Nigerian voices that have equal weighting in this film. The discovery of Onyeabor that is recounted here is one in which the object of desire, Onyeabor, is singular not just to those Western executives and musos, but for the Nigerian musicians and music industry people of the time. He not only came out of Nigeria when the West was focused on it in regard to Kuti but he came out of the eastern part of the country. This was a man operating not just beyond the parameters of the transatlantic music industry, whose tentacles were firmly established in Nigeria, but of the Nigerian Lagos-centric record industry as well. And for all of those who had tried to Google him, Onyeabor still could not be found.

Searching for Rodriguez

Searching for Sugar Man contains a “detective” or “quest” narrative similar to that of *Fantastic Man* but with rather more suspense and revelation, though it is notable that even after the object of the film’s “search”, Sixto Rodriguez, has been “tracked down” and interviewed on camera, he retains an enigmatic quality and key questions remain unanswered, perhaps even unanswerable. (The “Sugar man” of the title refers to the opening track on Rodriguez’s first album.) In the words of its director, Malik Bendjelloul, “the film is about a man who didn’t know he was famous” (*Searching for Sugar Man*, 2012). Rodriguez recorded two albums in the early 1970s but, in spite of enthusiastic backing from prominent figures in the US music industry and some favorable reviews, the albums went largely unremarked upon and failed to sell. Rodriguez returned to the “hard labor” of demolition, renovation and restoration by which he made his living in his native Detroit, where he was also a community activist, running for city councilor numerous times. Unbeknownst to him, his music found an audience among white South Africans or “Afrikaners”, particularly those who were anti-Apartheid and who identified with song titles like “Establishment blues” and, moreover, with the earnest soulfulness of Rodriguez’s voice married to the searing social and political critique of his lyrics. One of the film’s unsolved mysteries is exactly how Rodriguez’s music first arrived in South Africa. (There are rumors that a young American woman brought a copy of Rodriguez’s first album with her when she was visiting her South African boyfriend and that, initially, taped copies of his music circulated among groups of friends.) What is known is that Rodriguez sold a lot of records there. A conservative estimate puts the figure at half a million, which would be very sizeable indeed for a country with a relatively small population; Afrikaner fans remark in the film that he was more popular than Elvis or The Rolling Stones. Another

unsolved mystery is where all of Rodriguez's South African royalties ended up; the fact that he never received them – and, worryingly, continued not to up to the point the film was released in 2012, even for new sales – meant that, for the best part of three decades, he remained unaware of the fact that he had a large and devoted fan base on the southern tip of Africa. In order to build narrative drama and emphasize the legend of "American zero, South African hero", as he was described in a newspaper headline dating from his (re-)discovery in the late 1990s, the film glosses over the fact that Rodriguez also had a following in Australia and, furthermore, one he actually knew about, having toured there twice in the early 1980s. His songs also enjoyed radio airplay in New Zealand, as well as in other parts of southern Africa – Botswana, Zimbabwe – though, here again, one surmises that he didn't know about this and wasn't remunerated.

While the *Fantastic Man* documentary *enacts* a largely unfruitful search for its quarry, *Searching for Sugar Man* uses a combination of interviews, archive footage and animation to *reconstruct* a search for Rodriguez already undertaken in the late 1990s by a coterie of South African journalists, record collectors and musicians. Rodriguez's story is viewed, then, for the most part, through South African eyes, and it is this that creates such "an air of intrigue and mystery" around him. For those white South Africans who owned his albums *Cold Fact* (1970) and *Coming from Reality* (1971) and for those members of the Johannesburg and Cape Town alternative-rock scenes whom he inspired, Rodriguez was a paradox, a "superstar" about whom virtually nothing was known, though myths and legends abounded: that he'd been blinded after having acid thrown in his eyes by a jealous lover; that he was working in a gas station somewhere

in the American Mid-West; that he'd committed suicide onstage, either by shooting himself in the head or by dousing himself in gasoline and setting himself alight.

The investigative steps by which these myths are dispelled and Rodriguez is revealed to be alive and well and living in Detroit – are indicative of a faltering shift from a pre-internet era, in which clues regarding the whereabouts of a person had to be sifted from an assortment of print media and other documentation, to our current era in which restrictions of geography and time can usually be circumvented by posting appeals for information online or by accessing such information directly. In 1996, Stephen "Sugar" Segerman wrote in the liner notes for the South African CD release of *Coming from Reality* that there are "no concrete cold facts about the artist known as Rodriguez. It is not known if he is even alive or dead. Any musicological detectives out there?" This acted as a spur to the music journalist Craig Bartholomew-Strydom, who enquired into where Rodriguez's royalties had gone, set up a webpage called "The great Rodriguez hunt" and scoured Rodriguez's record sleeves and lyrics for references to specific places. Information gleaned from these efforts enabled Bartholomew-Strydom to track down Mike Theodore, the Detroit-based co-producer of Rodriguez's first album, who, during a long-distance phone call between the two men, quashed rumors of Rodriguez's tragic demise by revealing that Rodriguez was still living in Detroit. Satisfied that the search was over, Bartholomew-Strydom published a print-based article entitled "Looking for Jesus" in which he recounted the amazing "discovery" of the "lost" artist. (Rodriguez had helped wrong-foot his pursuers by crediting his album tracks to various alter egos, among them "Jesus Rodriguez".) Slightly improbably, a paper copy of Bartholomew-Strydom's article found its way into the hands of Eva Rodriguez, Sixto Rodriguez's eldest daughter, who then went online

and posted a response on the “Rodriguez hunt” webpage, including her contact details. “Sugar” Segerman phoned Eva, explained who he was and how his nickname derived from his love for her father’s music, and asked if there was any chance he could speak to him. Later that night, Rodriguez himself phoned Segerman; direct contact between artist and fan, pursued and pursuer, had been made, setting in motion a train of events that would lead, in March 1998, to Rodriguez playing his first ever concerts in South Africa to rapturous audiences still shaking off the suspicion that his alleged existence had been part of an elaborate promotional scam undertaken by an impostor. In a clip taken from one of these six concerts, Rodriguez says to his audience, “Thank you for keeping me alive”; these shows represented, for Rodriguez’s South African fan base, a “revival” not just of his fortunes as a musician but an almost-literal physical one too, a displaced homecoming to a “home” he’d never had.

Global connectivity, the internet and the chase for fans

In *Musica Practica*, Michael Chanan (1994, p. 222) notes that “when the record industry first took off, it was immediately – like the medium of film – international in character. A recording could be made anywhere and then transported across the ocean to be mass produced in a different location.” As an example of this, he cites Caruso’s version of “Vesti la giubba”, which was recorded by the tenor in Milan in 1904 and became the first gramophone record to sell a million copies, in part through its enthusiastic reception among Italian migrant communities in North American cities. However, one can think of other historic recordings that are suggestive of a less-globalised music industry, which demonstrate, instead, that the record-buying public in the era before the internet was sharply divided into geographically- and linguistically-

defined “territories”. In this context, a record’s international reception was far from guaranteed and owed much to happenstance, as was the case with The Evening Birds’ “Mbube”, which, travelling in the opposite direction from Rodriguez’s *Cold Fact*, was recorded in Johannesburg in 1939 in what was, at the time, the only studio in sub-Saharan Africa. The record eventually found its way into the hands of Pete Seeger in New York, when the folk-song collector Alan Lomax passed on a box of discarded African 78s. Seeger’s group, The Weavers, used the same melody and arrangement to record “Wimoweh” in 1952 and perform it at the Carnegie Hall in 1957, with it also being a hit for The Kingston Trio in 1959 before being re-written as “The lion sleeps tonight” – a hit in 1961 for The Tokens and the basis for numerous cover versions. The Evening Birds’ original record sold over 100,000 copies in southern Africa in the 1940s but nothing elsewhere, in spite of their composition eventually becoming a tune recognized the world over, with revenues estimated to be in excess of \$15 million (Erlmann, 1996).

Throughout *Searching for Sugar Man*, various white South African interviewees stress how cut off from the rest of the world they had felt during the apartheid era. As Lewsen (2013, p. 455) points out, the film’s final concert sequence is subtly and problematically positioned “as a moment of celebration over the new possibilities enabled by the demise of apartheid and the rise of an increasingly integrated global culture”. The ecstatic (re-)unification of singer and audience spans various social, political and cultural divides – though not really those between white and black South Africans – serving as a newly-won symbol of globalised (post)modernity. The recognition of this as a moment of global connectivity in the post-apartheid era is a recognition too of the unlikelihood of something similar to Rodriguez’s story ever

happening again, an impression reinforced for the film audience watching fourteen years later in 2012. *Sugar Man* positions Rodriguez as “a man who lives his whole life in obscurity without knowing, at the same time, he’s a superstar”, aware that this will be all the more incredible for a contemporary – rather than a late-nineties – audience for whom connectivity, instantaneity and simultaneity via internet-enabled devices have become a condition of everyday life.

When the film finally reveals to us Rodriguez as he is today rather than as he was in photos from the early seventies, we are shown a person distinctly out of step with contemporary notions of fame, celebrity and artistic self-aggrandizement. Though he is instantly recognizable as the enigmatic artist from his album sleeves and publicity photos due to his black clothes, long black hair and dark glasses, we see him stoking the fire of a rudimentary wood burner inside a ramshackle apartment in downtown Detroit. Footage of him traipsing through the snow-covered streets of his local neighborhood reinforce earlier accounts of him as a wandering street-poet, the unacknowledged voice and conscience of a harsh urban environment, while, in interviews, he is guarded and self-effacing. If Rodriguez is, belatedly, a “star”, it is because he ultimately remains distant and unreachable, the source and expression of his shining talent a mystery; this places him alongside William Onyeabor and in marked contrast to the ubiquitous lifestyle “celebrity” for whom full disclosure is the key to making themselves “relatable” to their public (Dyer, 1980; Rojek, 2001).

Rodriguez and Onyeabor exist, then, historically prior to, and temperamentally askance from, our contemporary celebrity culture, particularly in its meshing of neo-liberal ideology with the technologies of the internet, which has manifested in a widespread tendency for media-users of all stripes and persuasions to view themselves

as “brands”, with “market positions” to be maintained through social-media updates and worth that is gauged in terms of accumulated “hits”, “likes” and “friends”. What this means for musical culture is that aspiring artists today are expected to “find” their audience as much as their audience is expected to “find” them; they must lean forward in the direction of their fans and other interlocutors instead of slouching away from them, be approachable rather than aloof, as evidenced by the numerous manuals (e.g. Chertkow and Feehan, 2009) instructing musicians how they can use the internet to tap into existing communities of potential fans and maximize traffic to their websites.

The novelty of nostalgia: discovering “old” new music and “new” old music

Part of the appeal of *Fantastic Man* and *Searching for Sugar Man* is nostalgic in that both films evoke a time when records, the music industry and the broader musical culture were very different. Onyeabor’s and Rodriguez’s original album releases belonged to an era of relative scarcity in the cultural industries whereas each of the compilation albums twinned with the release of each film belong to our current era of abundance; the conundrum facing musicians today is not how to make their music accessible to the public through one or other of the “old” media channels or retail outlets but, rather, how to monetize access to it in the face of free streaming sites and file sharing. As each film painstakingly demonstrates, Onyeabor’s and Rodriguez’s records were originally consumed as physical artifacts – vinyl albums – that stand in contrast to the 21st-century culture of dematerialization but, paradoxically, also fit alongside it as luxury items for sale in “hipster” emporiums. (Luaka Bop’s *Who is William Onyeabor?* album was promoted especially prominently in record stores in its collectible vinyl format, reflecting its status as a product of distinction in a hierarchical

culture of small but significant differences.) Furthermore, their albums are testament to the considerable labor and material resources required to produce them – the access that each of them had to professional studios, Onyeabor’s amassing of banks of synths, or the intricate string arrangements on Rodriguez’s albums – all of which help to ground these recordings in a particular time and place. One might go further and state that they stand as sonic “structure[s] of feeling”, allowing us to hear the sensuous particularities of the social and material realities that these musicians inhabited (Williams, 1961). All of this makes them stand out from the “curatorial” practices of digital culture, in which musical materials from disparate eras and regions can be worked together into a seamless whole (Reynolds, 2011, p. 426). In this context, Onyeabor and Rodriguez are the beneficiaries of an authenticating nostalgia, described by Guesdon and Le Guern (2014, p. 74) as “the idea of a now lost ‘fundamental purity’ [that] makes its mark as an inevitable component of delight for the listener-consumer”. Guesdon and Le Guern (*ibid.*) continue by paraphrasing Simon Frith (1991): “the industry cynically exploits the use of anti-commercial pictures to guarantee ‘the authenticity’ of the products they help sell”. This comment helps one focus on the central appeal of *Fantastic Man* and *Searching for Sugar Man*: their subjects are discursively positioned as “authentic” artists due to their apparent obliviousness, indifference or hostility towards the commercial exploitation of their music, yet it is this very “authenticity” which helped sell the films and/or their accompanying compilation albums. Similarly, it is the “oldness” of their recordings, plus their accompanying aura of silence and obscurity, that makes them stand out as different, as “new”.

We are lead, then, to our own historical moment in which there is both “old” new music and “new” old music, the former in the sense of new music that sounds old and

the latter in the sense of old artists, recordings or compositions that have been newly discovered. Clearly, the history of phonography has thrown up many examples of both kinds of music: “pop always refers to its history and increasingly relies on it..., bygone days have become the raw material for novelty” (Guesdon and Le Guern, 2014, p. 70). However, we would agree with Simon Reynolds (2011) and others that this process has intensified in the era of the internet and that popular music has entered “an archival period” in which the amassed weight of music from the past has become oppressive (Lopatin quoted in Reynolds, 2011, p. 423). Reynolds’ argument is that rather than deliberately, or accidentally, crossing a *frontier* into something new, contemporary musicians now navigate an increasingly sophisticated *network* of creative possibilities circumscribed by what has gone before. This is largely to do with the unprecedented ease of access to music from the past – and, indeed, to music originating from far-flung geographical locations; in a manner adumbrated in the work of Fredric Jameson (1991), the internet has made the whole of the past symbolically present but in a way that levels out or distorts our historical sense. It is our contention, however, that the musical “future-rush” that Reynolds (2011, p. 428) says he craves might already be available were it not obscured or drowned out by the mass of other musical material currently being produced – the better publicized or more spectacular examples of contemporary pop or rock, or whatever else can hold people’s attention among an almost limitless supply of options. The creation of an almost-infinitely large archive that is attendant on digital culture, particularly as we proceed further into the era of cloud computing, will mean that a retrospective sorting out of what music is worth listening to will become an even more pressing concern than it has been up to now. Practices of media archaeology will be required in order to “dig” down into an ever-expanding

archive and salvage something of value and, as these two documentaries abundantly demonstrate, compelling stories will have to be constructed around these salvaged artifacts in order to focus people's attention on them.

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