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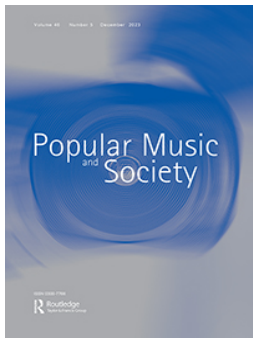
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## Re-Membering Music Worlds: Exhibiting the Rebel Women of Manchester's *Suffragette City*

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# Re-Membering Music Worlds: Exhibiting the Rebel Women of Manchester's *Suffragette City*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a lack of scholarly focus on intersections of memory, gender, and the popular music archive. To challenge the underrepresentation of women, reparative actions must be collaborative, formative, and future-facing. The *Rebel Music* project sought to elevate women's and LGBTQ+ people's seldom heard voices involved in Manchester music, and to redevelop a digital archive to better engage users from these groups. Physical and digital exhibitions were devised to do this, including the *Suffragette City* portrait exhibitions. By centering women's experiences and knowledge, it is possible to contribute to what we call *re-membering music worlds* in more gender-inclusive ways.

## KEYWORDS

Gender; digital archives; music heritage; memory; music worlds; Manchester

## Introduction

Memory intersects with cultural heritage, cultural value (Bennett and Strong), archives, and museums (Baker and Collins; Kibby; Maalsen and McLean), and it is important for transmitting or disrupting dominant cultural discourses (Bennett). While the importance of spaces for the preservation of memory is widely supported, the spaces themselves are contested. Archives are not neutral, and there is an increased awareness in the power of the archive and curatorial practices to support or disrupt specific narratives (Breakell; Ashton; Baker and Collins), a perspective which could be applied to the role of gender in popular music archives. Global cultural organizations, such as the United Nations and UNESCO, have recognized the underrepresentation of women in creative fields and, therefore, as important subjects of cultural heritage and agents of social transformation, although music has rarely featured as a key area in reports (see *Gender Equality*). Likewise, academic discussions have turned their attention to heritage as social justice, particularly in deindustrializing cities (Baker, Istvandy, and Nowak). However, despite the recent proliferation of academic work in these areas, there is an evident lack of focus on the intersections between memory, gender, and the popular music archive, with some notable exceptions (Withers; Reddington; Rodgers). While there is much discussion on

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the impact of the digital on music consumption patterns from streaming platforms, only recently has the digital music archive begun to be explored through a lens of co-creation (Peter). These omissions raise important questions that challenge the rationale behind popular music archives, particularly as digital archives are purported to enable more democratic practices.

Manchester Digital Music Archive (MDMArchive) is a charity that was established as a volunteer-led online community in 2003 to celebrate Manchester's music and related social history. The archive covers over 300 years of rich heritage. The aim of the project, *Rebel Music: The Sound of Politics and Protest in Manchester* (Rebel Music), was to elevate the seldom heard voices, namely women and LGBTQ+ communities, that have shaped the diverse music worlds and social movements that contribute to a wider narrative of Manchester as a "rebel" music city. A further aim was to redevelop the digital music archive to make it more user and device accessible, and in doing so to increase the participation of women and LGBTQ+ people as users and subjects of the archive. Engaging with people still alive but from various eras, the project was conceived to exploit two major national memorializing events through the development of overlapping digital and physical exhibitions. The first memorializing event was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year (2017) of the decriminalization of homosexuality. The *Queer Noise* exhibitions, at the People's History Museum (physical) and on the MDMArchive website (digital), set about documenting the contributions of LGBTQ+ communities in Manchester to the city's vibrant club and music scenes as well as the political and cultural activism that accompanies it. The second, the *Suffragette City* exhibitions, took place at the Refuge in Manchester (physical), a popular entertainment venue located in the iconic Clocktower Hotel on a bustling student-centered Oxford Road, and on the MDMArchive website (digital). Both exhibitions capitalized on the second memorializing event in 2018, the celebration of a centenary of women's (partial) suffrage. The *Suffragette City* exhibitions were designed to showcase the hidden contributions of women to music and to encourage women to remember and document their own and others' musical histories in order to expand the narratives of Manchester's popular music heritage. These two key social history milestones were leveraged to enable the MDMArchive team to reach out to members and networks in a bid to increase participation from these two communities with the digital archive through physical and digital events.

This article focuses on the development of the *Suffragette City* portrait exhibitions (digital and physical) and the women that feature as portrait subjects and discussion panel speakers, referred to as "subjects" throughout the article. It explores the intersections of gender, technology, and digital archiving; how music worlds can be remembered within and beyond the archive in a gender-positive way; the power of digital and physical photographic exhibitions; and their legacy and impact. As the *Suffragette City* exhibitions sit within the wider *Rebel Music* project, *Rebel Music* is mentioned in the context of broader engagement with new and returning archive users and the technical aspects of the overall project. Other participants are described as "volunteers" and include all those working on the various digital and physical exhibitions and participating in skills workshops and website testing.

We call into question the gender disparity evident in the way popular music's cultural memory is recorded, enacted, and sanctioned by and about specific musicians, bands, venues, institutions, and organizations. In doing so, we offer a theoretical extension and

a practical application of Roberts and Cohen's critical framework concerning the "unauthorizing" of popular music heritage, something they call "heritage-as-praxis," claiming that it "works in dialectical opposition to authorised heritage" (244). MDMArchive is an example of these dialectical processes in action, with the *Suffragette City* exhibition succeeding in changing the record on women's knowledge of, and participation in, Manchester's music worlds, "unauthorizing" a woman-focused account of Manchester's music worlds to counter the well-known male-dominated discourses.

### Popular Music "Heritage-as-Praxis"

Roberts and Cohen discuss the production and consumption of "big H" heritage, where "heritage-as-object" exists along a continuum. This ranges from self-authorized music heritage which is often intangible, subjective, and mediated by self or small local groups, through to stages where it is legitimized by various grants, charity status, and knowledge exchange activities, and to officially authorized music heritage, which is tangible, institution-led, subject to formal eligibility criteria, and nationally or internationally recognized. Identifying weaknesses with the self-authorized modes of music heritage, despite their democratizing intentions, Roberts and Cohen note, "the only real obstacles to overcome in terms of authorizing a plaque are bureaucratic and financial" (249). This is in contrast to English Heritage's strict criteria for its authorized blue plaque scheme, which provides historical markers on buildings for notable people and events. However, there are additional degrees of risk associated with unauthorized heritage organizations, which can potentially have a negative impact on the reputations of those musicians or celebrities associated with them when things go wrong. For example, the Heritage Foundation that Roberts and Cohen discuss, according to the Charity Commission, stopped trading under its charitable nomenclature The Arts and Entertainment Charitable Trust in April 2018. The Charity Commission was made aware of issues with the foundation following the cancellation of a paid event with over 200 attendees to coincide with the unveiling of a blue plaque for George Michael at his former school. All online traces of the organization have disappeared since. Unauthorized heritage organizations may struggle to sustain themselves even in the absence of issues. For example, Music Heritage UK announced in May 2018 it had ceased trading. Citing "personal and professional reasons," the "founder and chief executive [said] he can no longer devote as much time as he'd like to promoting, protecting and preserving music heritage." The organization left a positive legacy along with small financial donations to other groups with similar aims, but the burden of continuing was too much on one individual.

Other organizations, like the Music Venues Trust (MVT), have stepped in to support the preservation of venues with significant cultural heritage history, and to maintain focus on the importance of keeping grassroots venues going as living music spaces. MVT have developed from a small activist group to a formalized campaigning network with sustainable operational structures, and has a strong presence in Manchester. In this context, "heritage becomes an asset in the absence of (officially sanctioned) listed status but also a strategic tool for preserving a building's social, cultural and economic value, and enabling its continued use for music-making and the music industries" (Roberts and Cohen, 251). Manchester, perhaps more than many other deindustrializing cities in the UK, has lost a significant number of high-profile music spaces to development, despite

many of these sites remaining undeveloped since they ceased trading. These venues have well-documented cultural narratives associated with them, with stories attached to prominent men in bands, or running clubs, venues, and labels. Less known are the names of women managing those venues, organizing club nights, DJing, engaged in Artists and Repertoire (A&R), and documenting vibrant music worlds through photography and music writing. The *Suffragette City* exhibitions within the context of the *Rebel Music* project sought to make visible the women whose connections with place (Manchester) and space (venues) have been neglected in the city's music narratives.

The approach to popular music "heritage-as-praxis," put forward by Roberts and Cohen, draws on "cultural bricolage" from the everyday and develops individual and collective memory, crafting heritage, with a "little h," that functions as "anti-heritage," or an unauthorizing music heritage. We extend this idea by proposing a woman-focused music memory-making praxis to enrich the digital popular music archive that is collaborative, formative, and future-facing. The method is less interested in canonized history and traditional conceptions of heritage, turning instead to narratives, networks, and transferring knowledge into and beyond digital spaces, while still recognizing the importance of place. By centering women's experiences and knowledge, we argue it is possible to contribute to what we term *re-membling music worlds* in more gender-inclusive ways: the action of remembering becomes a deliberative act of collaborative recollection, naming, and narration.

Challenging the underrepresentation of women in the popular music canon and archives requires reparative action from a range of actors and organizations across physical and virtual boundaries. The task is not merely about increasing the representation of women in music archives or museum spaces (Schmutz and Faupel), but also about contesting structural and intersecting inequalities that exist across the cultural and creative industries and the wider social divisions they may signify (Taylor and O'Brien). Although this article focuses on the popular music worlds of Manchester, England, our collaborative approach to unpacking the hidden histories of women's broad contribution to, and knowledge of, place-based music worlds is applicable to a variety of city, regional or national contexts and to other art worlds such as film, theater, and the cultural industries more broadly.

## Behind the Scenes

Over the years, in our separate yet interrelated roles as activists, curators, and educators, including Surtees's role as co-founder of MDMArchive, we have been contacted by many people interested in finding out more about key women in Manchester's music worlds. At a lively Manchester Music Legacies Centre Debate in 2017 we were approached by young activist members of Ladyfest Manchester for advice. They were looking for reasonably well-known women in music to potentially take up ambassadorial roles for their collective. Ladyfest is a global feminist festival movement, which for over two decades has helped, at a local level, to redress the imbalance of women's participation across different sectors of the music industry. The festival provides a woman-focused outlet for performance, skills-sharing, and feminist discussions (O'Shea, "Embracing"). Without wanting to revert to the same handful of women more widely known for their contributions to the city, and as such disproportionately shouldering the burden of

representation, it was difficult to nominate a suitable woman with enough of a public profile across the generations to make the role meaningful. We appreciated that there were many more women hidden behind the scenes, who should be remembered as playing key roles in the city's cultural life in the recent past and, in many cases, who continue to make a significant contribution today. Participation in this debate, and the discussions that followed, reassured us that there was both an interest in and an identifiable need for the project.

It is worth contextualizing further the cultural and political landscape within which MDMArchive, the *Rebel Music* project, and the debate, sit. Manchester is a rapidly changing city where high-rise buildings are populating the skyline at great speed, and where green spaces and canal basins are being commandeered for pop-up markets, large-scale events, or apartments. Areas like Little Ireland, steeped in the social history of an industrial past and contemporary musical importance, are repeatedly at risk of disappearing in the name of gentrification. The well-loved mid-sized live venue Sound Control has already disappeared from the area. At risk too are small venues like The Thirsty Scholar, home to eclectic performers, and old pubs steeped in heritage, like The Salisbury and Grand Central pubs, both with historical Engels connections and contemporary popularity with an ever-diminishing heavy metal community. These and other familiar cultural hubs housed in historic buildings, which have for decades been sanctuaries for grassroots activists, are being razed to make way for the formal edifying artistic spaces befitting a government sanctioned "Northern Powerhouse" economic project.

Music venues are particularly susceptible to rapid city center development and nationally many have fallen victim to urban regeneration and the ensuing noise complaints that follow an increase in city center dwellings (Behr et al). In Manchester, there is friction between new city center dwellers and long-standing live music venues, like Night and Day Café. People move to Manchester for the excitement, nightlife, and music but, due to poor planning and noise abatement legislation, venues increasingly find themselves in court or under threat of closure. University students are attracted to Manchester for many reasons, one of which is its music heritage and associated nightlife, making it one of the top destinations for university applications in the country. As a result, students have a direct economic impact on the city and their spending power is as important as their engagement with the diverse music experiences on offer. However, increasingly the nightlife in Manchester is being curtailed. The one constant amongst all this flux is the role of Manchester music as a mnemonic for the city's cultural capital and economic promise.

Heritage is often associated with historicization. Nationally, this is evidenced by the growing number of official-authorized memorializing plaques awarded by the English Heritage trust and adorning the walls of many London buildings. On the wall of the Haçienda apartments, where the infamous Haçienda Club once stood, a blue plaque awards importance to the site from the Performing Rights Society for Music, to the band James and not too far away to a venue called The Boardwalk. Across the road from the Haçienda apartments is the purpose-built cultural center, which features the new art-house cinema, HOME. The square in which all this is situated is named after one of Manchester's most loved and frequently misquoted mavericks, Factory Records founder Tony Wilson. For some, acknowledgment through plaques and statues is welcome, placing Manchester firmly on a global cultural map. For others, the focus on big league

legacy bands, such as Joy Division, the Smiths, The Stone Roses, and Oasis, stifles cultural progress with a focus on nostalgia that can obscure the diverse contemporary musical talents of the region, including the contributions of women. The important role music plays in the city and its heritage demands greater recognition of women's contributions and participation to challenge the mythologizing of Manchester's music as male-dominated.

## Methods and Outcomes

The *Rebel Music* project sought to elevate the seldom heard voices of women and LGBTQ + people involved with Manchester music and social justice movements, and to redevelop the digital music archive to better engage new and returning users. To do so we took a pragmatic multi-method approach to data collection. Relevant to the overall project, questionnaires (46 respondents) provided feedback on the experience of being involved with the project and three skills-based workshops attended primarily by volunteers and some exhibition subjects. Qualitative feedback from volunteer website testers (12 in total) informed the redevelopment of the website as the online exhibitions progressed. This encouraged a flexible and responsive design process sensitive to user experiences and accessibility issues. Descriptive statistics gathered from the archive website and social media pages, before and after the website relaunch, provided demographic details, particularly in relation to gender, user behavior, and the impact of the exhibitions and related events on archive use and artifact and story sharing.

In relation to the *Suffragette City* exhibitions, three public-facing focus groups were conducted, which consisted of volunteers, members of the wider MDMArchive network, and interested members of the public. Focus groups allowed for discussion, shared meaning, and memory-making opportunities. A closed Facebook group associated with MDMArchive's main page was set up to facilitate online participation enabling more people to contribute to the collective re-remembering and to crowd-source nominations to appear in the *Suffragette City* portrait exhibitions. In-person and e-mail interviews (14 women), and short documentary interviews (5 women) with the *Suffragette City* portrait subjects provided information on women's experiences of finding their creative voices in Manchester, their attachment to music related artifacts that helped them to connect to memories, and the barriers they encountered in their professions. They also discussed their experience of being involved with the exhibitions as part of the wider *Rebel Music* project. The portraits were an additional source of visual data and the label attached to each photograph provided context to the industry role occupied by the subject and their relationship to a specific artifact.

Surtees initiated the *Rebel Music* project, delivered the key objectives, managed data collection and *Suffragette City* filming, and evaluated the impact and reach of the overall project across various stakeholder groups. O'Shea contributed to the *Suffragette City* data gathering sessions and the exhibition events; conducted interviews with exhibition subjects (in-person and via e-mail); and directed the thematic analysis. The rest of this section provides a timeline of activities for *Suffragette City* exhibitions and further reports on the outcomes of various activities.

Partnering with the *Louder Than Words* music literature festival in November 2017, a *Black Female Voices* panel officially launched the *Suffragette City* phase of the *Rebel*

*Music* project. The recorded discussion explored intersectional issues in the music industry with a focus on how Black women have shaped and developed music in Manchester over the years, touching on the issue of ghost singing and the uncredited contributions of Black women on hit dance tracks. Over 40 members of the public attended the talk, many of whom were young people studying music, as well as other women in the industry. The panel (see Figure 1) was hosted by Karen Gabay, producer and program maker with the B.B.C. and ITV, who has written substantially on issues facing Black women in the industry, and included Henrietta Smith-Rolla, DJ, Producer, Performer (AfroDeutsche, Sisters of Transistors); Melanie Williams, writer and performer (Sub Sub, Butterfly Jam); Ruby-Ann Patterson, singer, writer, activist (Mancnubian); and Yvonne Shelton, vocalist/entrepreneur (Urban Voice, Simply Red, George Michael, the Beautiful South). In an effort to recognize the contributions of women, including those on the panel, the *Rebel Music* project carried out a series of online and in-person remembering events that informed the *Suffragette City* exhibitions. These workshops, focus groups, and social media spaces offered room for discussion and collaborative memory making.

The MDMArchive community then nominated over 270 women across five key areas related to music: writers (lyricists, critics, bloggers, song writers); performers (singers, musicians, bands, DJs); managers (artist/talent repertoire, venues, labels); sound (tech, engineers, producers, roadies); and image (PR, photographers, promoters, graphic

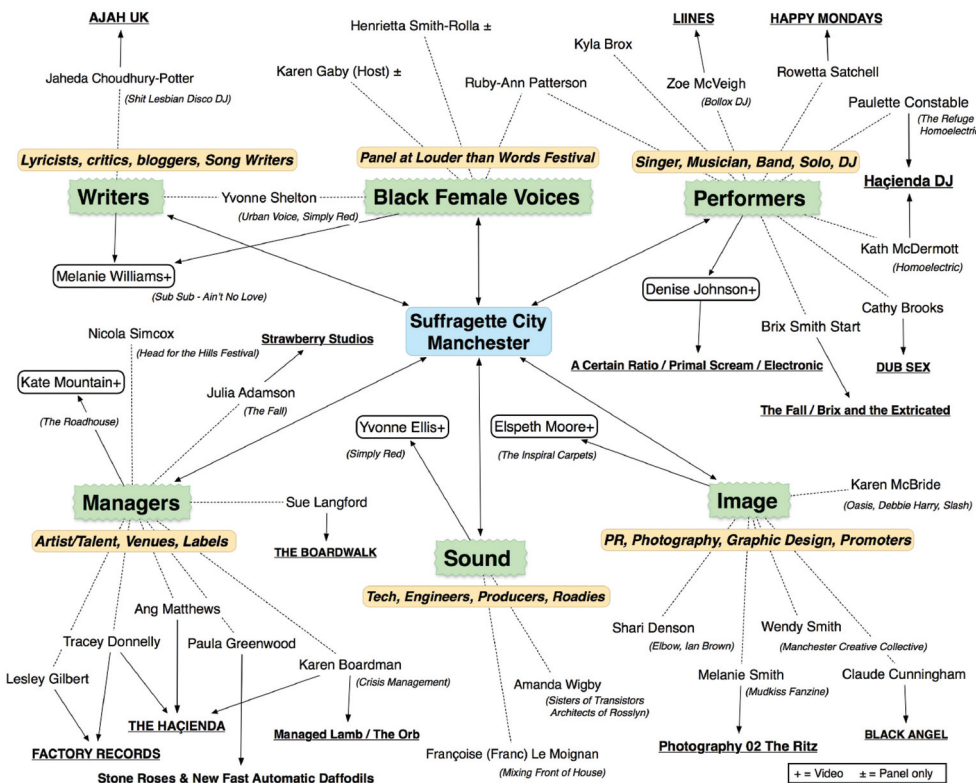


Figure 1. The women of *Suffragette City*.

design). 736 people participated in a public vote that resulted in a short list for the *Suffragette City* exhibitions. [Figure 1](#) is a visual representation of the 25 women that were shortlisted to have their portrait taken and feature in the exhibitions. Many of these women were and continue to be fundamental to the musical landscape of the city across several categories. Finally, another public vote identified a winner in each category, and Surtees produced five short documentaries. The films featured Yvonne Ellis (sound engineer), Melanie Williams (singer/songwriter), Kate Mountain (venue owner), Elspeth Mary Moore (photographer), and Denise Johnson (singer). The films attracted over 3,200 views at the time of the *Suffragette City* exhibitions, and many more since, with over 20,100 views altogether.

During the months of January and February 2018 the portraits and short documentaries were prepared. The *Suffragette City* physical exhibition in March 2018 was accompanied by a sold-out women-focused DJ and performance party, with an additional music event at the same venue a year later to mark the end of the centenary celebrations in March 2019. There were over 400 people in attendance at the opening and closing events with thousands more viewing the physical exhibition over two months. A parallel digital exhibition can still be viewed on the MDMArchive website. Since the centenary celebrations, a DJ collective using the name *Suffragette City*, including women featured in the portrait exhibitions, continues to put on charity events. In 2020, the collective hosted a fundraising dance music event, just days before Manchester went into COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020, and a series of high-profile live-stream dance events took place throughout 2021 to raise money for charities supporting women and refugees in Greater Manchester. The popular fundraising event continues each year around International Women's Day.

Over the life of the *Rebel Music* project, the MDMArchive Facebook page was very active, gaining over 250 new members, and attracting a greater number of stories from women and LGBTQ+ people than the MDMArchive website typically did. Facebook contributions were ultimately moved to the website, in order to record and preserve the stories. The closed Facebook group was set up to encourage open discussion about the nominations to be shortlisted for the portrait exhibition and short films; to promote issues relevant to women in music; and to share creative ideas. Recognizing the expectations of users of closed groups, we do not provide an analysis of the topics discussed but, to give a sense of scale, the group had 176 members at the end of the project and is still active with 236 members. The archive's Twitter account gained over 700 new followers and, during the initial month of the *Suffragette City* exhibition, the Twitter account achieved 94,000 impressions, the most ever received in a month. The increased visibility of the MDMArchive enabled the project to extend its reach beyond the usual followers, connecting with well-known artists in the process. The overall share of female followers across all social media modestly increased.

In the year following the launch of the *Rebel Music* project, 2,492 new artifacts were uploaded; there was a steady increase in the number and length of sessions compared to the previous year; and the number of mobile visits to the site increased by over 18%. Over 56,000 people who never visited the website before used it during the *Rebel Music* project period with 4,517 people using the exhibitions menu as their landing page, compared with only 48 the previous year. Membership logins on the site increased by over 50% with 300 new people creating membership accounts.

Much of the *Suffragette City* qualitative data referred to in the following sections is now publicly available, in their original formats, through the MDMArchive website (including portraits, accompanying text, and video contributions). Where subjects have been involved with the public representation of the project and permission has been received to reproduce their words and images, they have been identified. Data from volunteer questionnaires and sensitive comments have been anonymized.

## Gender, Technology, and Digital Archiving

Faced with the need to update the platform's technology, the MDMArchive team took on the additional challenge of identifying and addressing gaps in participation from those who share artifacts on the site. Since the archive relies on the production of content by contributors, the breadth of its content is wholly dependent on who is willing to share.

Frequently in the spaces of self-authorized heritage and "heritage-as-praxis," the boundaries between consumer and producer are blurred. Unlike commercial companies (like Facebook) whose business models rely on the free content production of users, however, contributions to digital archives like MDMArchive are based on democratizing heritage practices, rather than economic gain. The reliance on contributions is not without issue, notably in the clear gender imbalance of content producers. According to the transactional data gleaned from the MDMArchive website and user accounts, men have predominately produced and consumed the archive's content, reflecting a male dominance in both technology-based activities and in spaces of popular music knowledge exchange. In their work on record collections as musical archives, Maalsen and McLean highlight how record collecting has been conceived as a masculine activity with "implications for the curating of popular music heritage and particularly whose tastes are being canonized" (45). In similar ways, MDMArchive had been dominated by male catalogers and creators, and thus told a particular story that was lacking women's perspectives and voices. There were a small number of "super-uploaders" that skewed the site content toward male-dominated punk and post-punk narratives. In order to bring women in as subjects of and contributors to the digital music archive, we had to change the narrative around uploading to the archive, ensuring that people understood that the purpose is to preserve heritage and make items searchable and conserved for future views and generations. The archive was first launched during web 2.0, and although it won a Big Chip Award in 2007 for best digital nonprofit organization across the North of England (beating B.B.C. Manchester), the near immediate dominance of Facebook with its device ready and simple uploading systems presented immediate competition.

To an extent, MDMArchive could be understood as suffering from more widespread gender inequalities around technology, and how gender mediates the perceived importance of women's histories and contributions as being worthy of documentation in digital spaces. A UNESCO study (West et al.) highlighted the continued and growing gender inequality in technology globally, despite efforts to close this digital literacy gap in the last decade. The report finds that women are 25% less likely than men to know how to manage digital technology effectively for day-to-day purposes and they are four times less likely to engage with computer programming. The authors suggest the "stereotype of technology as a male domain is pervasive in many contexts and appears to affect girls' confidence in their digital skills from

a young age” (West et al. 20). For several women volunteers and exhibition subjects, issues around confidence in using technology was one of the reasons cited for lack of engagement with the website. Several examples on gender and Wikipedia support this perceived confidence gap and the value placed on women’s narratives and contributions. Tripodi highlights the problematic deletion of women’s accounts from Wikipedia due to their “non-notability” as an example of the active erasure of women’s histories from digital spaces. Adams and Brückner suggest that many women and global majorities are excluded from the potential of digital democratic knowledge production because of the prevalence of technical jargon and the knowledge and skills required to negotiate editor communications in order to contribute effectively to digital platforms such as Wikipedia. According to Ford and Wajcman, fewer than ten percent of Wikipedia editors are women which, they argue, contributes to the gendering of technoscience in favor of men, rather than fulfilling the potential to redefine what counts as knowledge and expertise. DataReportal was used as a starting point to understand how and when people use the internet, including via mobile phone. DataReportal is an online reference library offering free reports and new insights into data citing trusted third parties and is used extensively by technology sector professionals, global companies, governments, and academics (see “Digital”).

With a grounding in technology use and barriers to participation, the *Rebel Music* project included women and LGBTQ+ people at different stages of the website redevelopment to make it more responsive to user needs, to be more attractive, accessible, and user-friendly. Volunteer testers were enlisted from the MDMArchive membership and networks to provide feedback on the website’s accessibility and ease of use. In return, they had the opportunity to feed directly into the redesign process and gain new skills. Feedback led to the development of a three-part training program for over thirty volunteers. The first workshop focused on researching women’s and LGBTQ+ histories in physical archives, in conjunction with the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM). (There is an ongoing project with RNCM to make their physical archives more accessible through exhibitions on the MDMArchive site.) The second and third workshops focused on how to build exhibitions online and concentrated on improving digital skills and confidence. On completion, volunteer questionnaires asked if they had achieved the personal aims stated before the sessions. All strongly agreed or agreed that their confidence had significantly improved in using smart phones, scanners, or cameras. Equally, they felt there was an improvement in more general skills such as IT, communication, and interpersonal skills. Volunteers reported that knowledge of digital archives had remained the same, an unsurprising result given that they were already engaged with the MDMArchive before the training events. However, many felt more confident in using digital archives, and expressed a better understanding of the work that MDMArchive did. Additionally, volunteers planned to upload more material to the site because of the training. One volunteer tester remarked, “I have improved my skills on how to give constructive feedback and feel confident in my approach communicating ideas and suggestions.” Skill development was a common thread for all volunteer testers, with another stating, “I’m not the most tech-minded and so learned a great deal about all aspects of what is involved in a digital project of this kind.” Improving women’s digital skills and confidence is important for the long-term good of digital music archives and

cultivating the representation of diverse narratives. However, digital skills alone are not enough to ensure visibility, and training is not practical for all potential contributors: digital archives must adapt to encourage engagement from a broad range of contributors.

## Re-Membering Music Worlds, Within and Beyond the Archive

Popular music is conceptually more than a product, particular sound, style, or a depoliticized pleasurable leisure practice, but a vehicle for individual and collective memory making. Capable of providing a dynamically layered social map of a particular place or space, popular music is both temporally salient and capable of transcending the boundaries of time, while being intrinsically linked to personal and public memory assemblages. From the volunteer questionnaire, one person stated how they found being involved with *Suffragette City* allowed them to see how heritage can be user-led:

Personal stories and artefacts help build vibrant narratives about whole communities. Making a small contribution to an archive can have far reaching effects encouraging others to contribute and share histories that might otherwise be forgotten. Things that happen today become our heritage legacy of the future and should be documented, shared, and built upon. (Volunteer 1)

Volunteers found the experience of working with the digital archive and exhibitions empowering:

I have learnt that heritage has huge potential in its power to preserve and interpret collective memories through archives. It has the ability to bring communities together under one voice in ways that can help to promote cross community dialogue and partnerships through sharing the histories that have defined us, and most importantly connecting our past in order to understand our present. (Volunteer 2)

However, they were also aware that effort was still required to ensure diverse voices are not lost.

I've learned that women underrate their input to an excruciating degree but that this exhibition has brought that out and encouraged more collaborations. I also realize that I can contribute to that history as a volunteer. (Volunteer 3)

We know from developing the *Suffragette City* exhibitions that women occupied many different roles in Manchester's music worlds with influence in management positions at Factory Records, venues such as the Hacienda, the Roadhouse and the Boardwalk, with bands like Lamb, the Orb, and Stone Roses. They occupied roles in sound engineering and production, on the road, and in the studio. For example, Amanda (Mandy) Wigby is a producer with Sisters of Transistors and Architects of Rosslyn, and Yvonne Ellis has worked with Simply Red. In image, from public relations to photography, Shari Denson has worked with Ian Brown and Elbow, and Melanie Smith (Mudkiss Fanzine) is resident photographer at O2 Ritz. Women also had significant musician and singer roles, like Denise Johnson in A Certain Ratio, Primal Scream, and Electronic, or Brix Smith Start with the Fall and her solo projects (see [Figure 1](#)). Archives can help bring such contributions from the periphery to the center. However, archives are only as good as the artifacts they contain and the narratives that surround them and this is directly related to who engages with them.

Popular music archives, whether physical or virtual, rely heavily on artifacts and ephemera (Anderton; Leonard) that contribute to prevailing narratives of who and what constitutes musical heritage (Baker, Istvandy, and Nowak; Reitsamer; Roberts and Cohen). The way in which stories are told, events remembered, and histories authorized can perpetuate masculine hegemony in many music communities. The gender-inclusive *re-membering* we advocate helps bring archives to life by allowing artifacts to steer engagement with heritage, but the bricolage that builds those personal stories moves us beyond archival spaces into “living” territories. The photographs and short films that feature in *Suffragette City* tie the exhibitions together by centering artifacts and this becomes a feature of the online exhibition space in the digital archive. Music related artifacts were used as tools to help subjects remember key moments in their careers to share with a wider audience. Subjects were asked to bring an artifact to be photographed to help them tell the story of their involvement with Manchester’s music worlds. Similarly, for the films, the women were asked to bring artifacts to aid memory and discussion. Many women chose to be photographed with their favorite instrument, platinum selling record for a band they managed, an industry award, treasured photograph, or with their Atari 1040 computer (Figure 2 Mandy Wigby). Some subjects took self-portraits, others took photos of one another, Surtees took a small number of shots and other subjects asked professional photographers or friends, not directly involved



**Figure 2.** Amanda Wigby (sound). Photographer Matthew Norman.

**Amanda Wigby****Musician, Producer, Composer, and Educator**

I came to Manchester in 1988 to study sound recording and got a job as a Tape Op at Out Of The Blue studio in Ancoats. The Atari 1040 is the first computer I used to programme music. I was really drawn to computers and the creative freedom they offered.

*Photographer: Matthew Norman*

**Figure 3.** Label for the Amanda Wigby portrait.

with the project, to photograph them. The portraits were displayed with a label under each one (see [Figure 3](#)), usually describing the category and roles they were affiliated with, their chosen artifact, and a connection with the city.

Photographer Mary Elspeth Moore discusses starting out and photographing the Inspiral Carpets on tour, using a photograph she had taken of them as an artifact item. This was followed swiftly with reference to her distinctive headband:

I donned this headband and it just seemed to be a thing that I always ended up slinging on my hair, usually because my hair is an absolute mess, but often just because once I started it just seemed easy for people to know who I was. People remembered my headband rather than my name. (Moore, Short film)

Despite being new to photography, Moore found support from the members of Inspiral Carpets, but also from fellow photographers in the press pit and in the promotion of her work on social media. However, the headband Moore refers to provides a visual marker, or memory aid, for those around her that might otherwise have not taken note. This is an example of how “heritage, nostalgia and memory are themselves expressions of everyday social and cultural practices, and as such are invested with meanings, values and positionalities of individual and collective forms of habitus” (Roberts, 6). Photography may be an individual pursuit, but it has collective meaning, and in this example a mundane item becomes a symbolic marker of a woman making her way in the world of music photography.

The “archival turn in feminism” as described by Eichorn is matched by a feminist turn in archival studies with Ashton’s manifesto for skilling for activism and organizing. Queer approaches to archive studies that embrace the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos, and the possibilities presented by digital practices, offer up new ways of engaging with and developing collections for documenting women’s cultural heritage (Vesey; Cantillon et al.; Halberstam). Likewise, work that recognizes the importance of digital spaces for the preservation of more precarious or marginalized cultural histories can offer challenges to dominant discourses (Rommies; Srinivasan et al.; Beer and Burrows). These, however, are not without their complications. As an organization, MDMArchive seeks to

democratize heritage, in many of the same ways Ashton describes in her manifesto relating to another Manchester based archive, Digital Women's Archive North (DWAN). To engage in feminist archival practices, Ashton suggests three methodological approaches. These include: *intervention*, a creative engagement with existing archival material that generates "new practices and approaches"; *living*, an embodied approach that pays attention to voice "specifically connecting archive material with contemporary political and activist contexts"; and *reimagined*, creating "new processes and archival structures" by recycling the material into new formats (Ashton 127).

The approaches are reflected in the activities of MDMArchive. MDMArchive stages interventions by encouraging users to engage with existing digital material around particular themes and to reimagine what is possible in an archive. Film nights, talks, and club events are where interventions often take place, deliberately outside traditional museum, or heritage sites, engaging new, or reengaging dormant, archive users through outreach activities. However, since the pandemic there is a greater awareness of the need to provide additional online only or hybrid events to encourage the widest participation possible. Perhaps the most important aspect of the archive is that it is "living," an example of heritage-as-praxis, ensuring that it can represent different voices from across the region by drawing links between past and contemporary activist contexts where music related ephemera and associated memories become the links between different temporal environments, communities, and generations. Interventions often become "reimagined" when new digital exhibitions are created by archive users. Both the *Queer Noise* and *Suffragette City* online exhibitions were supported by a team of volunteers to create narratives from ephemera and conduct background research to support the uploaded images. *Suffragette City* reimagined the popular music landscape of Manchester by creating new processes and archival structures in generating new digital archival material by women, with a focus on women, and by bringing that material to life for them and for audiences with an interest in the music and social history of the city.

There is evidence to suggest that the memorialization of popular music tends to perpetuate nostalgic narratives (Roberts; van der Hoeven) because music evokes a range of emotions tied with personal or public memories (Sloboda and O'Neill; Hesmondhalgh). The MDMArchive team has tried to avoid being trapped in nostalgia narratives, instead focusing on collective experiences, or on individual memories that can tell new stories in social contexts. Digital exhibitions intersecting with physical space allow for multiple versions of music history to be told, where such narratives might have previously been obscured, thereby reimagining what can be thought of as popular music heritage. By *re-memembering* and "unauthorizing," we take the opportunity to re-populate Manchester's music worlds with women's histories in both virtual and physical space, and in real-time. Involvement with the *Suffragette City* exhibitions helped to change the narrative, to build new connections, and perhaps even inspire new ways of doing things.

## Legacy and Impact

The enthusiasm of portrait subjects, archive volunteers, and event attendees has enabled *Suffragette City* to create a self-sustaining legacy with yearly DJ-focused fundraising events around International Women's Day. While this is something tangible, the broader impacts are perhaps less easily identifiable and still emerging. Several subjects knew each

other from past projects, venues, records labels, management companies, or through social media. Others had heard of one another but not previously met. The exhibition afforded the women opportunities to make those connections as subjects of the digital archive, with volunteers, the wider MDMArchive network, and attendees at the opening exhibition and closing events.

As the interviews illustrated, women's experiences of navigating the city's music worlds are variable, with some feeling the burden of being a woman in male-dominated spaces more than others. The roles, level of interaction with the public, and types of experiences may be linked. However, the importance of place (Manchester) and space (venues) in uniting music and activism, as well as the centrality placed through the event and physical exhibition on making connections, is evident from the testimonials provided by those involved. Women remarked how important, vibrant, and nurturing Manchester as a city was, and is, to their creative development, even if they experience discrimination in different domains while carrying out their jobs. One subject claimed that women's achievements are often judged more harshly than male counterparts, leading to a resistance to being vocal about them. Negative views about music-related work tended to focus on structural issues to do with the wider music industry, but some noted that the misogyny, patriarchal bias, and occasional sexual harassment and aggression they experienced had taken a toll on their mental health.

I would certainly not have had the strength to continue without the solidarity, support, and validation that this event and organization gave me. I would encourage more business networking for women specifically, as sadly there are still a number of white middle class men who gatekeep and dictate work, opportunities, and exploit the incredibly talented and diverse pool of professional women. (Subject 7)

Several others agreed that some experiences in music worlds can be negative, but they wanted to emphasize the need to draw on supportive networks and to try to find solutions to problems. The connections made through the *Suffragette City* exhibitions also provided comfort and support:

The event and nomination was helpful in so many tangible ways. I suddenly had connection to other women within the music industry with whom I could information share with, seek advice from and be inspired by! (Subject 7)

When asked about the ways in which women can use music to make their voices or stories heard, *Suffragette City* subjects suggested that women can and should use music to do this by: "Applying to play *Ladyfest* and things like *Loud Women* and *Get In Her Ears*. These really champion women and are very important and supportive promoters" (Subject 5). Subject 5 also added that *Ladyfest* provided her with opportunities to play locally and in Europe which led to her improving as a performer and musician. Subjects mentioned how community spirit and close networks have been intrinsic in shaping careers as well as finding support in a well-established LGBTQ+ community, providing a sense of community and acceptance in the city. Alternative gay club nights provided a space to be themselves and to play and dance to noncommercial music. Subjects also drew on the broader legacy of Manchester music as an influence on them becoming part of its music worlds, from being inspired by the diverse genre-crossing live music scene, the legacy of punk to the influence of Tony Wilson.

For women involved with *Suffragette City*, inclusion in the exhibition and in the MDMArchive has led to greater media attention. Journalists who may have previously relied on their standard list of mostly male Manchester music figures discovered another way into the city's music history.

The exhibition . . . became part of the discourse, and also supported the issues that I had been raising for two years previously about the inequity of the music industry and women's hidden histories in music, arts, politics and culture. My inclusion helped to raise my profile in the press and media. (Subject 13)

Several women have collaborated on projects, or plan to soon. This extract from a more recent interview sums up the potential of "unauthorizing" popular music heritage for women, the ability to instill confidence and to spark momentum.

Being involved in the exhibition for women in music was an incredibly empowering experience for me. It was a platform that made me feel seen and heard, showcasing the talent and contributions of women in a male-dominated industry. The exhibition broke away from the usual suspects and stories associated with Manchester music, offering a fresh and diverse narrative. Seeing my photo displayed alongside other talented women gave me a renewed sense of confidence in what I had achieved as a musician and artist. . . . The exhibition played a pivotal role in pushing me to pursue opportunities for growth . . . which further validated my artistic endeavors and provided me with the resources to continue exploring and expanding my craft as a woman in music. (Subject 10)

The space to connect was considered invaluable, and the need for repeat opportunities to mix and reconnect with women in similar situations was identified. Many were enthusiastic for similar events to *Suffragette City* to happen regularly: "Do more of this! There have been many attempts over the years to bring women in music together, it has happened but there hasn't been any progression. This was such a great event and well attended, it should be built upon" (Subject 3). Subject 14 described how meeting in-person provided the space to not only discuss issues but also to be inspired, to inspire, and to encourage others to participate in similar projects, even if they "didn't manage to maintain uploading" due to time pressures, despite their best intentions. Time constraints and burn out are common features of activism and volunteer related work. Despite the *Rebel Music* project managing to increase engagement with the MDMArchive site while the project was ongoing, and the overwhelming success of the *Suffragette City* physical exhibition, the struggle to "maintain uploading" is an ongoing issue. Even with training in digital skills and knowledge, women remain less likely than men to be regular catalogers and uploaders, suggesting their motivations for archive involvement are heavily rooted in the social and supportive aspects of re-membering.

## Conclusion

The *Rebel Music* project focused on unauthorizing the heritage narratives associated with Manchester music. The *Suffragette City* exhibitions remembered some of the women that were, and continue to be, fundamental to the musical landscape of the city across several areas involving performers, writers, managers, sound, and image. The research offers a significant contribution to the theoretical debates on popular music archives and digital heritage, specifically in relation to gender and memory, including through a future-

focused approach to community building we term *re-membering music worlds*. Drawing on Roberts and Cohen's idea of popular music "heritage-as-praxis," coupled with Ashton's call to action for feminist archival practice, by *re-membering* we suggest a two-fold interpretation. First, the action of remembering, though imperfect, is a deliberative act of collaborative recollection, naming, and narration. Second, by *re-membering* we took the opportunity to re-populate Manchester's music worlds with women's histories in virtual and physical space, centering their knowledge and memory-making. Through a series of public events, workshops, and exhibitions, *Suffragette City* made visible women whose contributions to the city's cultural heritage have been hidden, forgotten, or misremembered. However, we also acknowledge that by engaging in collective remembering we experience tensions, contestations, and contention. By naming and including some, others are necessarily excluded. The process of producing a more inclusive narrative is not perfect, nor is it ever complete.

To enable the Manchester Digital Music Archive to engage with new heritage narratives we first had to assess the ways in which memory, gender, and digital popular music archives intersect, and address the technological and skills-based issues that lead to an absence of women's voices in the archive, and an underrepresentation in the broader cultural landscape of the city. Women and men engage with archives and digital technology differently. Because women tend to use their mobiles more to access the internet, the archive needed to be more device responsive. The redesign of the site improved the accessibility and ease of use. Despite more women engaging with the archive during the project, and volunteers and subjects reporting positive experiences, it was difficult to maintain momentum. Providing social or networking events helped to encourage more women to participate in the unauthorizing of popular music heritage and to value and to share their personal narratives, as well as document the histories of other women.

Challenging gender stereotypes about self-archiving and self-referencing is a slow process. Portrait subjects felt empowered by being part of an exhibition highlighting women's voices in music. While some already knew the other women featured in the exhibition through friends and colleagues, on social media, or through collaborative work, most met for the first time through *Suffragette City* and relished networking opportunities. It is the collective experiences and collaborative opportunities that resonated most with women and what they hope will happen again in the future. Creative collaborations can be inspired by the digital, but in-person connections are equally, if not more, important.

Through the physical and digital archive exhibitions of *Suffragette City* and associated workshops, *re-membering* attempted to rewire the collective memory of the city, leaving something tangible upon which to build the future music industry aspirations of the city's younger women and those starting out in their careers, whatever age they may be. The Do-It-Yourself digital spaces of grassroots archives are not a panacea for creating gender equality in music or unauthorized popular music heritage, particularly in our example of place-based music worlds. Nor is it enough to suggest that the perceived inclusivity of digital spaces is analogous to participation. It takes a lot of work and goodwill. *Suffragette City* also served to inspire and reestablish networks and forge new collaborations that transcend the generations with space to remember those in the here and now, friends no longer with us, and women in the process of making music histories. We argue that it is

essential to see “heritage-as-praxis” so that the “unauthorizing” of music heritage through the digital archive might occur by staging creative interventions, ensuring heritage and the archive is living, and that it can be reimagined. *Suffragette City* made visible and audible the previously underrepresented contributions of women to Manchester’s music worlds, better reflecting the diverse and dynamic roles they occupy.

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