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"I Want to Take You Higher": Popular Music Museums as Social Fields for Legitimizing Popular Music Memories

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For my big brother Chris, without whom I never would have realized I could make an academic project out of my obsession with music.

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Preface

When someone says "*rock n' roll*," the last image to pop into our heads is a leisurely stroll through a maze of glass cases, each with silent musical instruments on display. If we're to visualize anything at all, it would likely be accompanied by sound, something that museums – often quiet spaces to accommodate the reading of plaques or the analysis of art – tend to lack. Though they derive from the same etymological ideas related to the Muses, the experiences of music and museums seem irreconcilable at first glance. It is important, then, for social scientists to contend with the reality that is the emergence of several popular music museums and exhibits cropping up nationally and internationally. Why do Americans want to remember and legitimize popular music history, and how does the site of the music museum achieve this effectively, if at all?

This sociological and ethnomusicological inquiry comes directly out of my personal experience as someone who grew up impassioned and virtually obsessed with learning about every nook and cranny of music history. While record stores and streaming services served as interactive exhibits where I could dig deeper into the sounds of music's past, popular music museums such as the ones I engage with in the study that follows provided a different kind of lens for understanding significant events and scenes that we no longer have direct access to. Listening to Sly Stone through my headphones at home had a decidedly different effect from watching archival footage of his band's Woodstock performance in the Bethel Woods Museum's theater; the 1969 crowd sang along with him, chanting "Higher!" in a moving and synergistic call-and-response that impacted me enough to approximate what that audience may have felt in

that moment. Coupling a sonic education with a somewhat immersive historical education influenced me deeply, as I began to understand the inseparable connections between music, history, and cultural meaning, a framework that I've taken along with me all the way to this study.

That moment I experienced in the Bethel Woods Museum's theater was replicated across several different music museums I visited growing up: seeing John Lennon's white piano at a Hard Rock Café in Florida; the early incarnations of the first Martin guitars in Pennsylvania; listening to Prince's demo tapes at his studio in Minnesota. Space had the potential to transform my sense of time, seemingly bringing me back to experience music history's past as if I traveled through time. This simulated time travel changes how we look back on the past, how we make sense of the present, and how we prepare for the future. Embedding myself within moments of music's past has influenced me to eventually ask myself why these musicians and why this music makes me (and so many others) feel nostalgic, euphoric, and a part of something larger than myself. Popular music museums exist not only to enhance these emotions but to bring some sense of intellectual clarity as to why people care about Woodstock, Prince, Motown, or other musicians and musical scenes in the first place. In effect, these museums both create cultural significance in the present *and* explain cultural significance from the past.

That being said, there have been countless stands against museums and other cultural institutions by musicians, in particular, who have rallied against the anti-rock 'n' roll ethos of the whole enterprise. What's so rock 'n' roll about induction criteria, award ceremonies, and costumes behind glass? Maybe popular music museums *don't* give visitors the ideal rock 'n' roll, hip-hop, or punk experience they intend to, and maybe music history *isn't* meant to be

remembered if musicians believe it goes against music-making's immediacy. Regardless of the moral dilemma of calcifying and legitimizing music history, our collective sonic past *is* being legitimized and remembered by institutions like music museums and halls of fame, and what does this ultimately mean for the music-consuming American public who visits these places and keeps up to date on Grammy Awards and Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductions?

In the pages that follow, I will contend with these questions as a researcher, stepping back from my own music history obsession to delve deeper into the how's and why's of the American public's institutionalization and legitimization of popular music history. From Virginia's Patsy Cline to Minnesota's Prince, this ethnographic study of America's popular music museums definitely will not cover all aspects of pop music history, though it will certainly look at a variety of locales and scenes that make up its tapestry of sound. Before turning to the study itself, I want to reemphasize this impossible image of a tapestry of sound, which serves as an apt metaphor for the sensory tensions between museums and music. How can a world of sound be materialized for the purpose of capturing a cultural memory, and what is lost and gained when it's eventually threaded and hung on the walls of a museum?

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Introduction: Situating and Defining the Project

Popular music museums are cultural institutions dedicated to the preservation of a nation or region's collective memory of popular musicians, musical styles, and music scenes through the collecting of historical ephemera and the narrativizing of significant moments in music history. These museums are distinct from art museums and history museums as they contend more readily with the role of *sound* in their curatorial practices, as well as differently contending with a world of cultural meaning-making that may be at odds with the legacy of cultural institutions like museums. Simon Reynolds outlines this tension in his book *Retromania*, saying that, "a museum – a becalmed resting place for works of art considered to have passed the test of time – is opposed to the vital energies of pop and rock" (Reynolds 2011, pp. 3). This results in either museums as *attractions* – as tourist-trap amusement parks with learning objectives functioning as side dishes – or museums as *institutions* – in which case the power of the learning objectives overshadows the emotional facets of popular music, though it can also manifest in a deft blending of the two. These tensions between popular music and cultural institutions conflict and coalesce in fascinating ways that require in-depth sociological research, which I will explore with this study.

Academic inquiries of and about the social dimensions of museums have been undertaken by a wide variety of scholars from diverse disciplines, as I will discuss more in the literature review. Studies of *popular music* museums make up the academic road less historically traveled by, for reasons including popular music museums' more recent development compared to other types of museums as well as popular music studies' marginalization within the academy (Baker, et. al. 2020; Cohen 1993). However, an academic interest in popular music museums has been

increasing over the last few decades, particularly due to the centrality of pop music museums in a collective mission to institutionally recognize pop culture as cultural heritage (Baker, et. al. 2020). The increasing number of popular music museums nationally (in the U.S.) as well as globally indicate that music history is imbued with cultural meaning, value, and significance, leading to its sacralization and preservation within heritage and cultural institutions. One of the earliest popular music museums to open in the United States was the National Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota, which was established in 1973. The most notable popular music museum in the United States is undoubtedly the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, one of the eight museums I will discuss in this paper, established in 1995. Comparing these grand-opening years to those of other major museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1929, Philadelphia's Franklin Institute in 1825, or the Charleston Museum (thought to be the first museum in the U.S.) in 1773, it becomes clear that popular music has become a new cultural and historical phenomenon that we (read: Americans; read: humans) want to remember and honor for posterity as evidence of our modern cultural heritage.

While popular music museums are a relatively new type of museum, the relationship between music and museums goes far back, starting with "proto-museums" in Greek temples which preserved large collections of Hellenistic musical instruments as offerings to deities (Gahtan 2014). We can extend this divine worship to that of music industry stars like Prince, Ella Fitzgerald, Janis Joplin, and the Beatles that are honored in halls of fame and museums alike with their stage costumes and instruments on prominent display behind glass. The enterprise of developing popular music museums requires the perspectives and resources of multiple social actors, not limited to powerful curators and nostalgic visitors but extending to musicians and

other music industry figures who usually act as the repositories of rock and roll myths and underground histories. The star worship involved in the *sacralization* of pop music history – a term that Lawrence Levine uses to refer to the elevation of popular culture's social value – is both enhanced by and in conflict with the agency of musicians who can either agree to collaborate with cultural institutions in pursuit of a common goal (either money-making or music-making) or openly disparage the institutionalization of music, as the members of the Sex Pistols did in response to their Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction in 2006 (Levine 1988; Reynolds 2011).[1]

The cultural debates relative to the question of popular music museums' authenticity and productiveness are ideal for sociological inquiry, especially in light of increasing discourse about an activist turn in history-telling, both in the case of museum curators who are narrativizing history (Reilly 2018**;** Vergo 1989) and in the case of a culture increasingly more attuned to absences in historical narratives (Gibson 2022). How can sociologists contend with popular music museums as spaces that both legitimize collective nostalgia and as institutions with the responsibility to relay historical narratives and cultural meaning in productive and accessible ways? There are several conceptual and practical tensions related to curatorial practices, community values, marketing strategies, and academic goals that arise in the case of popular

[1] The Sex Pistols, a London-based punk band active in the mid-to-late-70s, emphatically rejected their nomination into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2006 with a strongly-worded handwritten letter: "Next to the SEX-PISTOLS rock and roll and that hall of fame is a piss stain. Your museum. Urine in wine. Were [sic] not coming. Were [sic] not your monkey [sic] and so what? Fame at $25,000 if we paid for a table, or $15000 to squeak up in the gallery, goes to a non-profit organisation selling us a load of old famous [people]. Congradulations [sic]. If you voted for us, hope you noted your reasons. Your [sic] anonymous as judges, but your [sic] still music industry people. Were [sic] not coming. Your [sic] not paying attention. Outside the shit-stem is a real SEX PISTOL" (Reynolds 2011, quoting John Lydon 2006).

music museums that are ripe for deeper examination and discussion in order to critically engage with what popular music museum curators are doing and begin to envision what and how they could potentially do better in the pursuit of honoring and legitimizing pop music history.

This study tackled multiple questions related to popular music museums, particularly regarding the various tensions that are laid out above. If these questions were to be distilled into one primary research question, however, it would likely ask: What are the curatorial practices that museum professionals use in exhibiting music history, and how do they contribute to popular music museums' project of remembering, honoring, and legitimizing popular culture? This question involves an in-depth typology of curatorial practices into categories related to the two interacting goals of popular music museums: *entertainment* and *education*. Though I will divide my two chapters into individual discussions of entertainment and education respectively, it is crucial to acknowledge that entertainment – spectacles, interactive activities, and leisure facilities that draw in visitors – and education – visitors' acquisition of cultural, scientific, or historical knowledge – are often deftly blended in popular music museum curatorial practices (Greenhalgh 1989). In separating the two into chapters, I will break down their appearances in museum exhibits more squarely and consider the practical challenges that may arise in contending with their contentious relationship.

In tackling this dichotomy between education and entertainment, I will discursively explore other aspects of popular music museums, such as the role of *nostalgia*, the *self-curation* of museum visitors, the inclusion or exclusion of *sound*, the use of physical *artifacts*, historical projects of *canon-setting* or *rearticulating history*, and, ultimately, the impact of popular music museums on the legacy of *cultural hierarchy*. These discussions will helpfully culminate in a

theoretical rearticulation of popular music museums as spaces of education to spaces of historical memory and cultural legitimization. Overall, the purpose of this project is to legitimize popular music studies within academic discourse by demonstrating the cultural significance and meaning-making of popular music as manifested by the emerging case of popular music museums.

I: Literature Review

This study on popular music museums necessitated a thorough review of the literature in several fields and subfields. Sociology of culture and, more specifically, sociology of museums are the central subfields my study is situated within, as well as related work in archaeology, anthropology, and American studies. Ethnographic, theoretical, and historical work on music museums is few and far between, though there have been a number of scholars and researchers who have tackled this niche in the museum industry, particularly in the context of *heritage studies* (Baker et. al. 2020). Because of the lack of scholarship on popular music museums directly, I necessarily engaged with surrounding literature on musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music theory, and museology to inform my analysis.

The sociology of museums is a scholarly enterprise particularly taken up in the British context in the 1990s by social scientists interested in researching "the social context of the museum" (Fyfe 2016). Sociologists within this field have led scholars and museum professionals to reconsider the supposed "universalism" promised by museums in their dedication to educating a generalized public, turning instead to the "reality of visitor profiles" such as working class visitors to art museums that Bourdieu found were "uneasy…[and] haunted by thoughts of their unworthiness" while viewing art made for patricians (Fyfe 2016; Bourdieu 1969) or disabled

visitors who contend with accessible or inaccessible exhibits in the space of the museum (Mangione 2016). Museums' accessibility is central to their public usefulness, so it necessarily follows that social scientists grew interested in identifying what was functionally ineffective in the ways museums are designed, marketed, and operated. This particular focus on tensions between blueprint and reality from the discipline's early beginnings continued in the form of curatorial activism on the part of museum professionals (Reilly 2018) and the subfield of The New Museology (Vergo 1989), which has special academic emphasis on the role of museums as institutions with political and social responsibilities and agendas that are both derived from and influence the greater social world (Stam 1993).

Though much of the sociology of museums and The New Museology looks at museums through political and social lenses, museums can additionally be thought of as sites of *cultural meaning-making* because of their role in legitimizing collective memory and shared heritage. *Heritage studies* is central to this discourse, related to the development of national identity as it is negotiated with and within the institutional power of museums (Baker et. al. 2019, *Ibid*. 2020). A book-length ethnographic study by a group of researchers from an Australian university brought this framework to bear on popular music museums around the world, investigating curatorial practices and their contribution to national identity discourse, popular music history education, as well as the extent to which they encourage visitor engagement in processes of curation (*Ibid*. 2019). This study is highly effective at synthesizing researchers' observations, interlocutors' perspectives, and sociological theories on heritage institutions and popular culture, a methodological structure that emphasizes the museum as a site of discursive

cultural-meaning-making. Baker necessarily frames and justifies the study's focus on popular music in a way that is relevant to academic inquiries about cultural products:

> Popular music is often not deemed 'legitimate,' or worthy enough, to be featured in a heritage institution, where it is seen by some as an ephemeral, throw-away, or meaningless product of the cultural industries that does not deserve safeguarding within the museum. Despite this, there has been a recent move towards the celebration and preservation of popular music in vernacular and professional spheres. The question of its status, or of its appreciation…is superseded by the acknowledgement that popular music has a cultural significance that makes it worth remembering and preserving. Not only have popular music heritage initiatives and practices flourished over the last few decades but the very idea of preserving the heritage of popular music has become somewhat of an 'obsession.' (*Ibid*. 2019)

Baker goes on to conceptualize popular music as *heritage* and the act of remembering and preserving popular music's past as *heritage practice*. Heritage can best be defined as a collection of legitimized traditions or historical events, while heritage practice can be thought of as collective inheritance, preservation, and reverence of past traditions. Baker ultimately connects heritage to national identities, such as breaking down the role a British museum dedicated to British music history and culture plays in establishing a sense of British identity and nationalism within and beyond the museum. Recognizing popular music history and culture's contributions to larger structures like national identity and heritage emphasizes how popular music is culturally significant to people around the world, necessitating as well as explaining the emergence of museums dedicated to remembering and legitimizing popular music history.

Concepts like heritage and accessibility are examined through interview-based or ethnographic engagements with *curatorial practices*, referring to the methods through which museum professionals (either individually or collaboratively) design and execute the material and spatial manifestation of museums and their exhibits. *Curation* is a central key concept to museum work, providing social scientists with a practical lens through which to investigate the

development of museums from inception to execution, engaging with both the philosophical ethoses of curators that differentially frame museum designs as well as the practical skills and challenges that make up the process as a whole (Vergo 1989; Baker, et. al. 2019, *Ibid*. 2020; Homer 2014).

Historically grappling with curatorial practices and museums also requires acute attention to contemporary developments surrounding curation. The music historian Simon Reynolds contended with popular culture's "obsession with its own past" through an exploration of how *retro* has emerged as an intentional affect of contemporary art and media, in particular music (Reynolds 2011). He argues that Western obsessions with shared cultural pasts is exacerbated by the advent of streaming services that allow average consumers to *curate* playlists as they so choose, eventually contributing to (in his opinion) the demise of new, innovative, and underivative popular culture products. Reynolds not only looks at curation from the vantage point of consumers but also from that of musicians, as Atton does in his study of musicians' self-historiographical projects in which they rerelease their own catalogs (Atton 2014). The amateur practice of curation coupled with a relatively collective value for the "retro" (Reynolds 2011; Baker et. al. 2019) forces social scientists to contend with the nestedness of curatorial practices within a larger frame of political, social, and cultural meaning that has only begun to emerge recently. In short, how does the curation of music history exhibits within the museum change in meaning and practice when musicians as well as average music fans can curate music history with reissues or Spotify playlists?

Just as historical context is integral to ethnographic inquiries of the social world and cultural meaning, *space* and *place* are equally consequential and important, especially within the

discourse of museology (Gieryn 2000). Museums are necessarily to be recognized as places embedded with social meaning, and music history necessarily contends with the development of places significant to certain music scenes or musical icons. Within the discipline of archaeology, Darvill has studied place production and memorialization of historical spaces within popular music history, such as Highway 61 and Route 66 (Darvill 2014). He notes the role of museums and heritage centers in transforming spaces into historical sites to be remembered such as the Highway 61 Blues Museum in Mississippi that historically grounds the highway's connection to blues history and culture. Place-making is central to the work of museums and is thus relevant to my study, especially as I take into consideration how the locations of museums relate to the history being remembered, such as the Museum at Bethel Woods being located where the Woodstock Festival was held or the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame residing in Cleveland, where "rock and roll" was first coined by radio DJ Alan Freed. A central guiding question from this study that I apply to my own is: How does history transform spaces, and how do spaces transform history?

As Gieryn points out in his survey article on the sociology of place, *materiality* is one of the fundamental aspects of what makes space a *place* (Gieryn 2000). Material objects are thus central to the place-making of historical sites in music history – such as the Apollo stage and the instruments on it – and equally central to the visualization of history on the part of museums. Artifacts and material objects are a recurring element of museums as an enterprise, as they provide visual representations of historical narratives, evidence of historical events, or stand on their own to be artistically appreciated or analyzed. In the case of music museums, the representation of *sound* with material objects is a contested curatorial practice, as discussed in

Baker's sociological research and Reynolds' infamous critique of music museums (Baker, et. al. 2019; Reynolds 2011). The role of material objects in popular music museums was particularly explored by Reising in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Seattle's Experience Music Project (now "MoPop"). Reising writes in the context of American studies, journalistically describing each museum and grounding his observations with historical context, though his article simultaneously captures the spirit of sociological ethnography, simulating thick descriptions of exhibits, artifacts, and interactions with museum professionals. Reising's article highlights the complicated relationship between intangible culture – music – and tangible culture – physical objects, which are both inseparable from one another and not transplantable upon one another (Reising 2001; Homer 2014).

There's perhaps no other discipline more acutely focused on the tensions that arise when representing *intangible culture* with tangible culture than ethnomusicology, as Homer explains in her ethnographic study of music museums, saying, "ethnographic museums have been the obvious choice as repositories for the ethnomusicologist's material evidence of music" (Homer 2014). Though museums suited the early goals of ethnomusicologists, contemporary scholars like Homer have moved to question the cultural misrepresentations inherent to the project of ethnographic museums, particularly focusing on the Eurocentrism and colonialist discourse embedded within the legacy of Western museums' exhibiting musical ephemera from non-Western cultures. Homer deals with this squarely in her 2014 study in which she ethnographically engages with four museums that have exhibits with non-Western musical instruments, paying particular attention to the language used in framing these instruments to visitors with plaques or in relation to other artifacts. Homer's primary research question involves

ethnographically identifying if "ethnomusicology [is] apparent in museums," effectively measuring the responsibilities of museum curators to those of ethnomusicologists, who (like Homer) have been contemporarily responding to the harmful imperialist and colonialist discourses that have historically shaped both the discipline of ethnomusicology and institutions like museums (*Ibid*., pp. 9). Homer's ethnomusicological engagement with museums is relevant to my study, as I necessarily considered the imperialist and colonialist legacies that accompany museums generally as being present in popular music museums, as well, particularly as it relates to the exclusion or centering of historically marginalized voices in music's past and present.

Finally, the field of musicology deals more squarely with European classical music, though musicologists have also considered museums as an integral point of discussion in the culture of classical music. J. Peter Burkholder is a primary voice of these theories, drawing out this concept of *museum culture* by historically grounding it in changes in classical music composition, performance, and education (Burkholder 1983, 1984, 1986). His work on Johannes Brahms as a simultaneously conservative and progressivist composer highlights a historical shift in the typical compositional approach of classical composers, illustrating the trend of composers writing music with the end goal of its being memorialized in the musical museum of the concert hall. Classical composers' orientation towards the past in their compositional approaches lends themselves to being duly compatible with the project of museums, which intend to memorialize and preserve the past. While I am not focusing on classical music for this project, his emphasis on musicians' perspectives is imperative to research on music museums in order to consider the role of (in my case) popular musicians as agentive historical narrators with personal stake in how they are framed in exhibits. Reynolds specifically discusses punk musicians as being on the

opposite end of the spectrum of "museum culture," referring to the anti-establishment ethoses central to the mission of punk musicians (Reynolds 2011). There exists, according to Reynolds and Burkholder, a relational compatibility between the project of museums and the values of the musicians being memorialized. Classical composers' relationship to the past is one of reverence, while punk musicians tend to look to the future, if we take Burkholder and Reynolds' comments at face-value. Musicians are thus another agentive social actor with a meaningful stake in the project of popular music museums, and I considered how musicians' perspectives factor into popular music museum work.

In this project, I will be responding to the legacy of sociological, musicological, and ethnomusicological studies of museums and music museums in particular. This literature review served to highlight the primary findings in these related fields, particularly those that have direct resonance with my project. In the next section, I will lay out the main theoretical foundations from outside of museum discourse that I will be bringing to bear on my ethnographic findings.

II: Theoretical Foundations

The primary theoretical frameworks I will be consulting in my ethnographic analysis include Trouillot's theories of *historicity***,** Durkheim's theory of *collective effervescence*, Bourdieu's *field theory***,** and scholarship on *cultural hierarchy*. These theoretical foundations helpfully frame my analysis of popular music museums in terms of curators' and visitors' webs of cultural meaning-making and social involvement.

While curation is more readily received as a reference to the material and spatial design of museums, curation can also refer to the process of *historical narrativizing.* Anthropologist Trouillot discusses the biased processes of experiencing, relaying, and receiving a historical

narrative, culminating in somewhat distressing conclusions about how much of history is lost to society through intentional and accidental distortions by historians, journalists, and curators (Trouillot 1995). *Historicity*, the process of curating or producing history (and all of the challenges it entails), complicates the already complex curatorial practices of museum professionals that contend more readily with history. This directly relates to the discourse and shared mission of curatorial activists and New Museologists, who call for museum professionals to acknowledge and contend with the historical development of political elements of curation in order to reform the influence of the (at times) harmful legacy of powerful institutions like museums, manifested in educational gatekeeping and cultural imperialism (Reilly 2018; Vergo 1989; Gibson 2022; Stam 1993; Levine 1988).

Trouillot's framework around *historicity* also emphasizes the agency of historical actors – those who were physically present during significant events, saying:

> Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word 'history' in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process. (Trouillot 1995, pp. 2)

Trouillot identifies two major groups responsible for the production of history: actors and narrators. As discussed above, *narrators* can be used as a framework for thinking about museum curators, those who are responsible for cultivating a streamlined historical narrative to be consumed by a general audience. *Historical actors*, then, are those who were directly involved with or those who witnessed significant historical events in real time. Just as much as narrators, actors can also have biased understandings of history because of their personal engagement with

them (the inverse experience of narrators' distance from historical events). History is a slippery slope with inaccuracies and biases, as Trouillot continues to explain in his book, and this is a necessary point to consider in my analysis of museums as sites of historical production.

Another necessary point to extract from Trouillot's distinction between historical actors and historical narrators is that of the role of memory. Trouillot critiques what he calls the "storage model of memory-history," the idea that "history is to a collectivity as remembrance is to an individual" (*Ibid*., pp. 14). Essentially, Trouillot disagrees with conceptualizing history as a one-to-one retrieval of collective memory because it suggests that history is "accurate and accessible at will" (*Ibid*., pp. 14). This raises the question, then, of how collective histories are transformed into collective memories and vice versa. What is the mechanism through which historical narrators – museum curators – construct histories out of a sense of collective cultural memory?

As Trouillot eventually suggests with his example of plantation slavery in the U.S. as a past that is "constantly evoked as the starting point of an ongoing traumatism [experienced by] African-Americans," *emotions* are a core mechanism and impetus for making and remembering history (*Ibid*., pp. 17). Historical actors both directly and indirectly experience historical events emotionally, contributing to a collective memory of history as a remembrance of tragedy or joy. The music history events narrativized in pop music museums are similarly imbued with emotional aspects, necessitating an engagement with scholarship on *emotions*. Patsy Cline's death, for example, was a tragic historical event that music fans either personally remember or

contemporarily understand as the loss of a beloved musical icon.[2] On the more positive end of the spectrum, 1969's Woodstock Festival and Harlem Cultural Festival were significant joyful events in music history, for hippie culture and the Civil Rights Movement respectively.[3] Concerts are a great example of historical events that give rise to *collective effervescence*, a theory Emile Durkheim derived from his interpretation of indigenous Australians' spiritual gatherings as rituals that produced social solidarity:

> Such gatherings…increase rates of interaction, leading to heightened emotional arousal…Out of these escalating emotions, or 'effervescence,' individuals sense that there is a 'power' external to them; eventually, this power is attributed to 'mana,' which, in turn, is symbolized by a totem and other 'sacred' objects. Once beliefs in mana are established and totems are accepted as symbols of the power inhering in mana, rituals directed at the totem arouse emotions and reinforce beliefs about the supernatural realm…Later theorists recognized that cultural symbols need not be religious, but in fact all elements of culture constrain and control individuals' activities and have the power to arouse emotions. (Turner & Stets 2005, pp. 72)

Though the theory of *collective effervescence* originally focused on religious and spiritual activities, the framework has expanded to extend to all aspects of cultural life, rendering it relevant to my discussion of music consumption. The basic idea that Durkheim uncovered about social life is that large social gatherings generate emotions due to 1) the higher frequency of social interactions within the space and 2) a collective experience of an external power symbolized by meaningful objects or actions. Durkheim's use of words like "mana," "sacred,"

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[2] The Patsy Cline exhibit in the Virginia Musical Museum – one of the museums I visited – concentrates on Cline's death by displaying her will, the final photo of her before she died, and a newspaper article that announced her death.

[3] While the Harlem Cultural Festival was not the major focus of any of the museums I visited, the Woodstock Festival has an entire museum dedicated to its memory in Bethel, New York, which I will speak about at length in the following chapter. Mention of Woodstock is usually accompanied by mention of its motto "Peace, Love, and Music," which speaks to the positive emotions typically associated with this historical event.

and “totems,” again, are particularly helpful in the context of religious or spiritual ceremonies; these words can be replaced with more general terms like “culturally meaningful” instead of *sacred* or “cultural objects” instead of *totems*. The *power* that causes *collective effervescence* is essentially a mass revelation that there are other individuals who are emotionally invested in and impacted by a specific cultural phenomenon. A concert, for example, can be emotional for one individual, though the individual’s emotions are multiplied in the presence of others experiencing the same concert.

Because many musical events are marked by unadulterated displays of emotion on the part of fans and musicians alike, we subsequently remember them as emotional events. When historical narrators (curators) take historical events and begin to construct historical narratives, they effectively regenerate and reawaken past emotions through present conditions, thus producing *nostalgia* in museum visitors. Curatorial practices that historically narrativize music history events endeavor to link past emotional events to present emotional memory as a means of generating a sense of shared cultural heritage, thus legitimizing visitors’ emotions. Nostalgia, specifically, is a concept that has been explored in multiple disciplines not limited to the sociology of emotions (Wilson 1999) but extending to popular music studies (Baker, et. al. 2019; Reynolds 2011), philosophy (Howard 2012), and historical studies (Fritzsche 2001), usually in the context of discussing constructions of collective memory of the past. I’ll return more squarely to discussing nostalgia in the following chapter.

Another theoretical framework that I will be referencing in this study is Bourdieu’s theory of *social fields*. Bourdieu describes a social field as a *meso-level site* in the social world, meaning that it animates the relationship between macro-level social structures and micro-level

social interactions in a tightly-knit network of meaning-making. Social fields, then, are characterized by meaningful interactions between the *social actors* within it, whose meanings are derived from larger-scale social structures like capitalism, education, or law (Hilgers, et. al. 2014; Calhoun 1995). Social actors' collections of internalized meanings, values, and behaviors – which Bourdieu refers to as *habitus* – are impacted by these larger macro-level social structures and reproduced through meaningful social actions across social fields. These meaningful social actions then lead to individually-acquired *social* or *cultural capital* – another Bourdieusian term that refers to the symbolic value of social assets like level of education, for example; these acquisitions of capital are field-specific, as they are imbued with symbolic meaning dependent on the site in which they are active (*Ibid*. 2014; *Ibid* 1995).

In short, social fields are sites for accruing field-specific cultural capital through interactive and meaningful social action. The basic aspects of Bourdieu's framework can be applied to popular music museums, as they are institutions within a larger field committed to the values of education and historical preservation. If education is the field-specific goal, museum professionals necessarily need to produce effective learning conditions for museum visitors, thus giving the museum cultural capital and renown within the broader social field of museums and educational institutions. It is necessary to frame the actions and values – particularly the curatorial practices – of museum professionals and visitors as imbued with social meaning that contributes to larger field goals in collaboration with other institutions within the same field.

Crucially, Bourdieu also asserts that a field is primarily characterized by a struggle for power in the form of social/cultural capital, wherein existing social orders between the dominant and the dominated are reinforced and reproduced within the field (Kluttz et. al. 2016). Fligstein

and Kluttz have done extensive work on expanding the utility of Bourdieu's theory in social scientific research, bringing out its capacity for considering the *agency* of social actors within a field, rather than taking the relationship between Bourdieu's "dominant and dominated" as a static power dynamic. These researchers reconstruct how field theory considers agency and conflict, allowing for a richer, more nuanced theoretical view of the social field (*Ibid*. 2016). Their research results in the conclusion that power struggles are *not* inherent to social fields as Bourdieu thought; social fields don't necessarily have to be divided into "dominated" and "dominant" social actors. This is true of popular music museums, which are characterized by two major social actor types that simply have power *differences*: museum professionals and museum visitors. Museum professionals create the spatial and sensory conditions with which visitors engage, while visitors can optionally donate to museums to support their work. Fligstein and Kluttz's emphasis on agency allows me to acknowledge visitors' agency and their important position within the social field. If museum professionals have no people to educate, then the museum is rendered socially and functionally useless.

Framing popular music museums as social fields shifts how we may consider their social purpose through the eyes of visitors and curators alike. A visit to the museum promises engagement with exclusive cultural objects that are inaccessible to the average person in everyday life. What is the purpose of bringing *popular culture* to the average person, then, especially in a world where music and music history are available with a few taps on a screen? The answer lies in the inherent tensions between the social fields of popular music and the museum – a cathartic sonic experience and a quiet educational experience – and the resulting

product of their fusion: a transformation of the cultural meanings that characterize popular music and culture.

The social field of popular music museums, then, is a site of contending with the cultural meaning and value of popular culture mediated through didactic, educational goals. Curators are agents responding to structuring schemas that work to conceptualize popular culture, such as *cultural hierarchy*, a complicated and problematic concept deeply embedded in our society. Bourdieu's designation of fields as sites of power dynamics betrays the extent to which hierarchy is present within fields already. The legacy of cultural hierarchy – a spectrum dividing cultural products into "high" elite or "low" frivolous categories – is undeniably relevant to popular music museum work, and I will end this section with a historical outline of scholarship on cultural hierarchy.

Cultural theorists like Pierre Bourdieu as well as those from the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin wrote extensively on the dichotomy between "high" and "low" culture, additionally investigating the related concepts of "mass culture" and "popular culture." Though Adorno's work came first in this historical trajectory, I will begin with Bourdieu's classed interpretation of cultural hierarchy in the 1980s before bringing in Adorno's criticisms of popular culture from 1947. Next, I will discuss Lawrence Levine's historical work on Western cultural hierarchy in 1988, briefly bringing in a critical review of his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow* that will lead into a discussion of the drastic shift in Western cultural hierarchy outlined by scholarship in the 1990s and 2000s on *cultural omnivorousness*. The relative depth of this particular section of my theoretical foundations is justified by the vast

scholarship on this topic and its unavoidable relevance to the topic of cultural products, public taste, and cultural institutions.

Bourdieu's influential empirical work in *Distinction* is core to defining what exactly Western cultural hierarchy looks like and how it operates in society. Bourdieu designates "three zones of taste" according to the relationship between his participants' "educational levels and social classes" and their engagement with certain types of art and entertainment (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 16). These zones range from *legitimate taste* (held by the wealthiest "self-assured aesthetes") to *middle-brow taste* (held by intellectuals interested in the "minor arts" such as songcraft) to *popular taste* (common among working-class society). Ultimately, Bourdieu finds that individual tastes are influenced by the designation of certain cultural products as being imbued with *cultural capital* (aesthetic value that signifies cultural literacy in an individual), which is differentially perceived and acquired based on a person's class distinction. In short, Bourdieu found that taste in cultural products are largely defined and influenced by class, suggesting that Western cultural hierarchy is inherently classed. Bourdieu particularly analyzes the working-class public's perspective on high culture, saying:

> Formal refinement – which, in literature or the theatre, leads to obscurity – is, in the eyes of the working-class public, one sign of what is sometimes felt to be a desire to keep the uninitiated at arm's length…It is part of the paraphernalia which always announces the sacred character, separate and separating, of high culture – the icy solemnity of great museums, the grandiose luxury of opera-houses and major theatres, the décor and decorum of concert-halls…Conversely, popular entertainment secures the spectator's participation in the show and collective participation in the festivity which it occasions. (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 33-34)

This "formal refinement," requiring some degree of aesthetic literacy, limits the extent to which working-class individuals with little formal education or financial access to high-culture institutions will understand or connect with high art. Bourdieu emphasizes that these individuals

feel that this intentional obscurity serves to keep high culture accessible only to those who are initiated (read: wealthy and educated), thus keeping them from attaining any cultural capital in the form of high cultural literacy. Popular entertainment, on the other hand, which encompasses the lower side of the hierarchy, is characterized by Bourdieu as having active participation from the audience as opposed to the "icy solemnity" of cultural institutions, which is explored at length by Levine in his historical study of cultural hierarchy in America.

Not only is popular entertainment historically and socially recognized by active audience participation, contrasting it from the quiet contemplation of "high" art – popular culture is also demarcated by the mass standardization, production, and commodification by what Adorno calls *the culture industry*. Adorno characterizes modern art, music, and film by its "sameness," saying that the production of art on a large-scale is inherently a business that renders the art "trash…infected with untruth" (Adorno 1947). Adorno's essay is comprised of somewhat cynical musings unsupported by empirical evidence, though his construction of "the culture industry" influenced many cultural theorists in thinking about how popular culture fits within our understandings of cultural hierarchy. Van den Haak, a sociologist studying contrasting logics of cultural hierarchy, situates Adorno's "leftist" theory next to more "conservative" criticisms of popular culture:

> The products of [popular] culture and its audiences were criticised from different sides. Most critics followed the modern logic of authenticity and innovation: leftist thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno condemned commercial culture's standardisation and homogenisation, which were required in order to reach the 'average' consumer. This was criticised by those who wanted to defend 'true' art with a high aesthetic value. On the other hand, conservatives followed a classic logic of cultural hierarchy: they used strong moral arguments to oppose popular culture. They protested against the obscenities of uncivilised, 'vulgar' or 'brutal culture', which were considered a danger to society. Hence, conservative élites and more progressive cultural élites used the same rationales to both distinguish themselves vis-à-vis each other and to condemn the cultural preferences of the lower and middle classes. (Van den Haak 2018)

These diverging logics from leftist and conservative cultural theorists indicate the inherent biases that render the distinctions between "high" and "low" culture empirically unsupported and ontologically false, betraying Western cultural hierarchy as a social construction. Popular culture's commodification as a means to "reach the average consumer" is denigrated by cultural elites for its seeming opposition to their conceptions of "true art with high aesthetic value." Again, the biased cynicism embedded within these theories requires a second look at the significance of popular culture for those who engage with it, prefer it, and even identify with it.

Levine's historical mapping of the unfolding of cultural hierarchy within America definitely lends itself to the project of challenging these cultural elites and their denigration of popular culture as "low" culture. Levine illustrates the processes that reinforced the social construction of Western cultural hierarchy – the ones that Adorno and his contemporaries are embedded deeply within – particularly characterizing this process in relation to America's cultural fragmentation by class (à la Bourdieu) coupled with a growing ethos valuing social order over disorder. Echoing Bourdieu's comment that popular entertainment is marked by active audience participation as well as Van den Haak's reference to conservative cultural elites that found popular culture "uncivilized," Levine maps the gradual discouragement of audience participation in both "high" cultural institutions and "low" cultural entertainment spaces, as evidenced by this historical vignette:

> Just a week before Christmas 1914, Boston concertgoers were introduced to Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, whose concepts of harmony and melody were largely foreign to them. The critic Olin Downes, who characterized the music as 'not only intricate…but also, for the most part, very ugly,' felt that Karl Muck conducted it out of a sense not of admiration but of duty…Yet the audience accepted it all without a murmur…This was the way it was rapidly becoming in the United States as a whole: culture and order, order and culture locked together in harmonious union. (Levine 1988, pp. 199-200)

This example illustrates a culmination of the "discipling and training [of] audiences" through institutional policies and directives against audience members expressing excitement or displeasure during performances (*Ibid*., pp. 184). In this historical mapping, Levine defines cultural hierarchy by establishing a dichotomy between the order and disorder of spectators, further revealing the classed implications of cultural hierarchy, as this discipline was only acquired in high-culture institutions that elites had access to. There's also an element of racialized implications within this cultural hierarchy, as the opposition of "civilized, orderly high culture" and "uncivilized, disorderly low culture" speaks to the harmful historical designation of non-white groups as "uncivilized" or "primitive." The original terminology that made up the theory of cultural hierarchy included "highbrow" and "lowbrow" distinctions, which are terms directly derived from discourse coming out of scientific racism and phrenology, reminding us that these concepts are fundamentally born out of racism and anti-Blackness (Wilson 2007). Levine briefly touches on this legacy when he notes that the motivating factor leading cultural elites to discipline audiences was the historical shift of the U.S. becoming "an industrializing, urbanizing nation absorbing millions of immigrants from alien cultures" contributing to "the sense of anarchic change, of looming chaos…which seemed to imperil the very basis of the traditional order," influencing "arbiters of culture…[to construct] an avenue to cultural legitimacy" (*Ibid*., pp. 176).

In a critical review of Levine's work, Rubin brings in the racialization of cultural hierarchy while also bringing the history of cultural hierarchy to bear on contemporary scholarship about *cultural omnivorousness.* In Rubin's response to Levine's seminal text on

cultural hierarchy, she provides information about a choral director named Robert Lawson Shaw and how his setlists during concerts – which mixed both classical and popular tunes –presaged the development of an omnivorous public (Rubin 2014, pp. 12-14). This historical vignette from Rubin goes a bit deeper than Levine's analysis in illustrating how cultural hierarchy had the potential to be subverted by popular culture and vice versa. Rubin's nod to omnivorousness leads me to the most recent scholarship on Western cultural hierarchy, which argues that the American public has become more "culturally omnivorous," meaning that the connections between class distinction and cultural taste are changing as upper-class individuals in particular engage with a multiplicity of cultural products regardless of their place on the hierarchical spectrum (Peterson, et. al. 1996). Though this finding is empirically supported through survey data, Van den Haak usefully points out that omnivorousness is still "basically grounded in a static view of cultural hierarchy" (Van den Haak 2018). For historical work, it's necessary to continue to utilize the rubrics of cultural hierarchy because of their embeddedness within social relations in the past, though Van den Haak productively urges scholars to push even harder against the harmful assumptions of cultural hierarchy, indicating that there is still more work to be done in this field.

The legacy of cultural hierarchy is deeply embedded within the perceived tensions between popular music – manufactured "low" culture "trash" – and museums – historically accessible to the intellectual elite. Popular music museums, then, constitute sites for wrestling with the "low" culture associations historically appended to popular culture by using the "high" culture associations of the museum to elevate its value. Van den Haak's reservations about resting too heavily on the language of cultural hierarchy is key here, as it could be argued that the need to elevate and legitimize popular culture is directly constructed out of the collective

internalization of cultural hierarchical standards. Keeping this in mind, the logics, values, and cultural meanings within the social field of popular music museums may have transformative potential to upend the legacy of cultural hierarchy or at the very least rearticulate its assumptions about popular culture. I'll return to *social fields* and *cultural hierarchy* in the following chapters as a means of framing my ethnographic analysis.

III: Methodology

This project takes the form of an ethnographic and interview-based study. Interviews with museum professionals – directors, curators, and managers – supplemented my ethnographic observations at the museums themselves as well as on their websites and social media accounts. In this methodology section, I will introduce the eight museums featured in my research, explain and justify my choice of an ethnographic and interview-based method, and situate my own positionality as a researcher in relation to my work.

The eight museums I chose for my research were chosen based on the following criteria: 1) self-professed status as a music museum OR inclusion of two or more music history exhibits; 2) close proximity and convenience in regards to travel; and 3) particular focus on *popular* music rather than classical or folk music. Because I live in Pennsylvania and make frequent visits to Michigan, seven out of the eight museums I visited are located in the Midwest and Northeast with just one of them located in the South (the Virginia Musical Museum). Similarly, seven out of the eight are self-professed music museums while only one is a history museum more broadly (the Charles H. Wright Museum). Each museum specializes in a different genre or scene from American popular music, spanning Chicago electric blues, psychedelic rock, country folk, Minneapolis Sound, and others. Figure 1 (on page 27) depicts a table with information about all

eight museums, including founding years, genre/scene specialization, geographic location, nonprofit status, and number of annual visitors.

I should note that some museums I hoped to include in this study were ultimately left out due to the museum having been temporarily closed, travel plans falling through, or financial restrictions preventing me from traveling to further regions of the U.S. Popular music museums that I hoped to include in my research included the National Music Museum in Vermillion, South Dakota, the Motown Museum in Detroit, the MoPOP in Seattle, and Graceland and the Stax Museum in Memphis. The iconicity and significance of these establishments within the field of popular music museums should not be eclipsed by their exclusion from this study, so I mention them here to emphasize their relevance to my findings. Graceland, in particular, epitomizes the duality of popular music museums as entertaining attractions and educational institutions, in this case relating to the legacy of Elvis Presley in American popular music.[4] South Dakota's National Music Museum highlights the relationship between music and American national identity, exploring musical expressions not limited to popular music but extending to classical and folk.[5] The Motown Museum celebrates one of the most successful Black-led businesses in the United

[4] As their website declares, "there's something for everyone at Graceland" (*Graceland* 2023). Graceland was Elvis Presley's estate, currently operating in Memphis as a museum with Elvis memorabilia *and* a resort. Visitors can immerse themselves in Elvis' private life, observe exhibits with Elvis artifacts and historical information, and stay in The Guest House, one of the "top hotels in Memphis" (*Graceland* 2022). Graceland is more readily recognized as a vacation getaway than a museum with history lessons.

[5] The National Music Museum openly celebrates its variety, saying: "Spanning hundreds of years of culture, the NMM's 15,000+ instruments range from priceless Italian violins to celebrity guitars, from organs to orchestrion, from harps to harpsichords, from dombaks to didgeridoos, from Les Paul to Sgt. Pepper, from Stradivari to Elvis. With its extensive archives of instrument-related materials, and offering the only graduate degree in musical instruments in North America [currently on hiatus during NMM expansion], the NMM has been an epicenter for musical-instrument research" (*NMM* 2023). This additionally emphasizes the museum's utility for scholarly research, which more often than not concerns classical and folk music expressions rather than popular.

Name of Museum	Year Opened	Specialization	Location	Annual Visitors	Profit Status
C.F. Martin Guitar Factory and Museum	2005	History and legacy of Martin guitars	Nazareth, PA	25,000	Nonprofit
Charles H. Wright Museum	1997	African-American history	Detroit, MI	30,000	Nonprofit
Chess Studios	1997	Chicago electric blues	Chicago, IL	N/A	Nonprofit
MOMENT	2015	NYC music history and education	New York, NY (virtual)	N/A	Nonprofit
Museum at Bethel Woods	2008	Woodstock Festival	Bethel, NY	40,000	Nonprofit
Prince Immersive Experience	2022	Life and career of Prince	Chicago, IL	N/A	For-profit[6]
Rock & Roll Hall of Fame	1995	History of rock music and culture	Cleveland, OH	500,000	Nonprofit
Virginia Musical Museum	2015	Virginia music history and culture	Williamsburg, VA	2,000	Nonprofit

[6] It should be noted that the Prince Immersive Experience was the only museum studied that was not nonprofit and was instead semi-nonprofit. Its parent company – Superfly – is a nonprofit organization that creates immersive attractions, though the Experience itself is for profit with a percentage of proceeds going towards local schooling.

States – Berry Gordy's Motown Records – and is situated in the historic site of Motown's recording studio. Similarly to the other museums I mention here, these absent cases still speak to the themes of entertainment, historical education, place-making, and national heritage as I will point to in the chapters that follow.

Methodologically, it made the most sense to pursue this project ethnographically, as I was readily engaging with physical spaces. Ethnographic research in the context of cultural sociology and ethnomusicology often involves going into sites of cultural production and/or musical production as participant-observers. Erving Goffman spoke about this dimension of ethnography, saying:

> By participant observation, I mean a technique that wouldn't be the only technique a study would employ…It's one of getting data, it seems to me, by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation…You're artificially forcing yourself to be tuned into something that you then pick up as a witness – not as an interviewer, not as a listener, but as a witness to how they react to what gets done to and around them. (Goffman 1989, pp. 127-128)

Participant observation requires researchers to "[subject themselves] to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals" in order to become a "witness," gaining a deeper understanding of people in certain social situations. Goffman helpfully notes that this is just one technique that would appear in a study, likely alongside content analysis, interviews, or surveys, for example. Participant-observation is, afterall, fundamentally the *researcher's experience* and requires tempering of personal biases through methods that more readily amplify interlocutors' voices.

For this study, I participated in museums as a visitor, observing and interacting with exhibits either by reading plaques, using digital kiosks, or watching video displays. Observations

were twofold; I observed other visitors' actions and listened for reactions to museum displays as well as spatially analyzed the logics of exhibits for my field notes. While Goffman's philosophy on participant-observation particularly speaks to ethnographers going into spaces or social situations they've never encountered before, I have visited many museums and have embodied how to behave as a visitor like many other Americans. Participating was not especially difficult or artificial in this way, though I attempted to tamp down my external appearance as a scholarly researcher. I necessarily had to linger at exhibits longer than the average visitor and take more photos than the average visitor. Despite this, I was never approached or questioned because these behaviors still fall within the brackets of conventional visitor behavior. The more concerning aspect of ethnographic research is the extent to which personal biases inform engagement within the space and, ultimately, unfairly frame conclusions about social life. Interviews with museum professionals served as a means through which to temper my preconceptions and firsthand experiences of the museums I visited.

Museum policies often prevented me from taking photographs of exhibits, though a few museums permitted me to record my observations with photos and written notes. Ethnographic work consisted of taking notes of museum layout, types of exhibits, and engaging with interactive features. I also conducted ethnographic work outside of the museums by exploring museum websites, social media, and virtual tours. Virtual spaces are differently accessible and contingent on the museum experience, though they are ripe sites for viewing discursive language around the museums' missions as well as observing curatorial practices come alive in a virtual space. This is especially true of MOMENT (the Museum of Music and Entertainment in New York City), which is the only virtual museum that I studied.

I supplemented my ethnographic observations with in-depth, semi-structured virtual interviews with museum professionals employed at the eight museums I studied. These interviews provided a lens through which I began to construct a framework for how museum professionals reconcile the various tensions involved in this enterprise. Particularly, investigating the curatorial practices that make up the design and conceit of museums is the ideal entry point for understanding multiple facets of museum work, such as historical narrativizing, canon-setting, institutional power, and philosophies around representing intangible culture.

Interviews were semi-structured with my questions dealing largely with the daily work of the participants, the missions of the museum, their relationships to music and music history, and, of course, the specific curatorial practices that they primarily employ and subscribe to. Though I stayed close to my prepared questions, most of the interviews branched off into topics that arose during the discussion. Most of the interviews were conducted on Zoom, though two were held over the phone. Face-to-face interviews on Zoom made it significantly easier to build rapport with my interlocutors compared to the phone interviews that have comparatively less depth. Interviews tended not to exceed one hour, as I yielded to the busy schedules of my professional interviewees. One interlocutor was unable to schedule time to meet with me – a museum professional from the Chess Records Museum – though they were also the only interlocutor I met face-to-face while visiting the museum.

In order to provide quotations from my interlocutors for this paper, I transcribed our interviews using a methodological mix of manual transcription and automatic transcription with the software *Otter*. I obtained verbal consent from interlocutors to record our interviews, and assured them that the recordings would be deleted at the completion of this project.

Transcriptions allowed me to extract important quotes for analysis and in order to animate my ethnographic observations with the voices of museum professionals. All participants have been anonymized in order to protect their personal privacy. Museums will not be anonymized because this study requires in-depth analysis of all spatial and institutional aspects of my cases, thus rendering readers' identification of these institutions possible even if I use pseudonyms.

Ideally, I wanted to interview museum visitors as well as museum professionals in order to get a sense of visitors' perspectives, experiences, and opinions. However, organizing casual interviews with visitors raised the concern of disrupting visitors' experience of the museum and would give me a wide berth of data that is too large for the purposes of this study. Additionally, the number of visitors differentiated significantly from museum to museum, presenting logistical issues related to replicability across cases. These concerns and obstacles prevented me from gaining visitors' perspectives directly, though there were four alternative ways in which I indirectly gained their words: 1) museum professionals' stories about visitors; 2) online reviews or social media posts; 3) visitor feedback and comment books located in exhibits; and 4) casual interactions with visitors while in the museum.

Additionally, I should more squarely discuss my positionality as a researcher in regards to this project as a whole. My ethnographic engagement with the various museums I studied is in itself limited because I singularly walked through each space and individually observed the various exhibits on display, as I touched on above. My engagement with each museum is entirely unique and is predominantly representative of myself, though my interviews with others and my socially-informed way of navigating the space can contribute to an approximation of how a generalized visitor would make sense of these museums. This leads to my positionality as an

interviewer as well as how the conditions of the interviews themselves may have impacted how they were conducted. I have limited experience as an interviewer, though I refined my strategies through practice in this study. As a result, the earlier interviews are definitely less robust than the later ones because I had not yet shaken off the anxiety that accompanies spontaneous, unplanned questioning. Anticipating the responses of interviewees and using their responses to inform a new question is crucial to conveying competence as a researcher and developing rapport. More importantly, expressing genuine interest in and knowledge about museum professionals' work was the best entry point through which I could establish trust and rapport.

My personal biases surrounding popular music also impacted this study, as I noted in the preface. I'm a self-professed music history geek and a musician – it goes without saying that I am definitely eager to prove that popular music is culturally valuable, meaningful and deserving of being legitimized through heritage institutions. Sociological methods like those I employed in this study serve to mitigate personal biases and prevent predetermined conclusions. I subscribe particularly to the *inductive* method of research, developing observations, theories, and conclusions from the ground up (data collection) rather than the top down (beginning with a hypothesis to prove). Though I necessarily based my interview questions and ethnographic methods around particular themes and areas of interest, my final observations and resultant theories were far from being predetermined and rather organically emerged through fieldwork.

Because I'm readily engaging with processes of representing cultural meaning-making, it's crucial to acknowledge my intellectual understanding of *culture* and how my practical methods are effective in capturing it empirically. Kane's text advocating for using historical methods in projects engaging intellectually with culture is particularly important for its relevance

to the case of museums as historical narrators. Kane acknowledges *narratives* for their effectiveness at recognizing shifts in cultural meaning, as this method involves analyzing and synthesizing discursive firsthand accounts:

> The most effective way to uncover meaning in cultural models, to chart the transformation of meaning and symbols in conjunction with action, conditions, and events, and to witness the emergence of new cultural models is to study the 'active' component of culture structures, namely narrative. Narratives are stories that embody symbolic meaning and codes of understanding; through 'story-telling' meaning is publicly shared, contested, and reconstructed. Thus, through analysis of narratives the historian can access the causal power of culture, both as structure and as practice. (Kane 2000)

Cultural meaning can be difficult to study empirically, as culture is an aspect of social life that can be embodied, taken for granted, and difficult to articulate on the part of social actors. Analyzing firsthand accounts and "active" elements of cultural structures in society provides historical sociologists (in Kane's case) and museum professionals (in my case) with a window into the cultural meaning-making processes from the past. Historical sociologists can observe and analyze culture as both "structure and practice," meaning that the synthesis of firsthand narratives betrays how meaning is structured by cultural institutions, dominant groups, or significant events as well as practiced collectively, creating this dialectical relationship between structured cultural meaning and practiced cultural meaning. Discovering the nexus of this dialectical relationship – "the causal power of culture" – is core to historical sociological work on culture because it additionally provides scholars with an entry point for mapping historical shifts in meaning over time.

Chapter 1: "If You Are Here, You Were There!"

Nostalgia, Immersion, and Museums as Entertaining Attractions

While the primary mission of museums is to educate the public, there is an element of entertainment as well, as discussed by Greenhalgh in his essay on museums' dual function as entertaining attractions and educating institutions (Greenhalgh 1989). Greenhalgh constructs a theoretical dichotomy between *education* and *entertainment* by researching British and French exhibitions between 1851 and 1914, noting that these curatorial elements are still relevant today:

> Through the [1851-1914] period certain ideological structures make themselves apparent in the creation of the English sites [museums/exhibitions]. By far the most important of these is the dichotomy of education and entertainment. Resolutely and consistently, education and entertainment were understood to be not the same thing. The one was inextricably bound up with work, the other with pleasure…Commentators, more self-conscious than ever of the educational mission of exhibitions, were noticeably disturbed by evidence that the masses were taking hold of the occasions and transforming them into holidays…The public was well on its way to appropriating the medium for its enjoyment, not for intellectual betterment. Thus the audiences for international exhibitions in Britain after 1862 often did not attend for the reasons the organisers intended, and a rift opened up between producers and consumers as to what the role of the exhibition was. (Greenhalgh 1989, pp. 83-84)

As Greenhalgh explains, though museums were primarily considered as having "educational mission[s]," the British public increasingly saw museums as entertaining leisure activities rather than sites of "intellectual betterment." Greenhalgh, in another part of the essay, also touches on the role of entertainment as a self-conscious marketing tactic for increasing visitor numbers (*Ibid*., pp. 74). Museum curators knew and responded to (and presently know and respond to) the public's desire for pleasurable leisure activities as a means through which to make education appealing. Incorporating entertainment into museums has survived as a marketing strategy and has expanded museums' role as educational institutions to include spectacles, activities, and leisure facilities like restaurants, gift shops, and photo ops.

Music museums, in particular, are sometimes recognized more readily as attractions as opposed to educational institutions because of the subject matter – popular music – and the prevalence of interactive, entertaining exhibits. Think, for example, Memphis' Graceland or Tennessee's Dollywood – Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton themed attractions, respectively – as cases of an amusement park and a museum's offspring, characterized by resort-living, restaurants, and even roller coasters (at Dollywood) as well as sincere educational exhibits about the musical icons' positions in American music history (*Graceland* 2023; *Dollywood* 2023). Recognizing that music museums are as entertaining as they are educational illuminates the mechanisms through which *nostalgia* is produced and animated in the museum, such as curatorial practices like *immersion* and *interactive exhibits*. In this chapter, I will identify these three aspects of popular music museums as entertaining attractions and bring them to bear on their ultimate institutional goals within the broader context of museums' social field.

I: Nostalgia in Popular Music Museums

The social sciences historically lean away from discussions of emotions in the social world in order to keep up the guise of the discipline as undoubtedly scientific and "objective" (Turner 2005). However, it's important for sociological scholarship to emphasize the role that emotions play in individual social action in order to better understand the how and why of the social world. Though emotions can be a murky territory to untangle scientifically, emotions are part and parcel of social life as it has unfolded and continues to unfold. Over the course of my research, *nostalgia* has emerged as an emotional experience integral to the enterprise of popular music museums.

What does it mean to be "nostalgic?" Historically, nostalgia was defined as feeling acute pain over missing one's home, conceptualized in the late 17th century by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer as "a medical condition…to refer to the extreme homesickness that Swiss mercenaries experienced" (Wilson 1999; Fritzsche 2001). Over time, nostalgia has come to mean a feeling of bittersweet wistfulness that accompanies the act of remembering something fondly from one's past. Nostalgia combines a feeling of loss with feelings of happiness because the memories someone is nostalgic for usually refer to a time that is no longer accessible to them, though they are pleased to look back on them and remember the positive experience (Wilson 1999). Wilson marks nostalgia as particularly distinct from sentimentality in her article sociologically exploring the semantics of nostalgia:

> While [sentimentality] more likely connotes a fleeting feeling, the experience of nostalgia affects one's emotional state in a profound manner. Feeling nostalgia, expressing and experiencing nostalgia – this requires active reconstruction of the past – active selection of what to remember and how to remember it. While this activity occurs more subconsciously than consciously, it occurs nevertheless…And yet, does the 'nostalgiac' truly long to go back in time? Instead, I think it is more a longing to recapture a mood or spirit of a previous time. (*Ibid*., pp. 299)

Wilson's characterization of nostalgia as requiring an "active reconstruction of the past" is particularly important for my discussion of popular music museums. As I will discuss in this section, the popular music museums I investigated for this project used their power and resources as cultural institutions to develop educational as well as entertaining immersive sites for visitors to learn about and, to some extent, experience popular music history. Embedded within the whole enterprise of popular music museums, then, is a concerted effort to reconstruct the spirit of past popular music scenes through particular sensory experiences related to recorded sound, archival videos, or the display of material objects. These museums do not act as perfect time

machines for Wilson's "nostalgiacs" wanting to turn back time, but instead act as carefully curated representations of the *Zeitgeist* of a previous time in pop music's past that effectively produce nostalgia in visitors.

The museum professional I spoke with at the Museum at Bethel Woods, a museum specialized in the Woodstock Festival of 1969, noted the role of nostalgia at the museum as well as in the museum industry more broadly, saying:

> 3% of the population makes up 90% of museum visitors across the country. The largest percentage of that 3% are Baby Boomers who have expendable income and expendable time to be museum visitors. Somebody becomes interested in history through the process of nostalgia, which is they develop enough life experience to remember "the good old days" – that's often, you'll hear that. But they develop enough life experience where they are interested in seeing a museum whether that's the process of nostalgia, the process of memory, or the process of history. I have this thing I say which is…every experience you have you understand through the filter of your past experience. So the more experiences you have, the more able you are to filter the other things around you. This is for sure with history. That the engagement with history is often the filter of someone's past, so if you experienced Woodstock, your filter is uniquely able to understand everything in this museum. (Participant 4)

In this participant's professional opinion, the prevalence of museum visitors over the age of sixty contributes to the presence of nostalgia, which they conceptualize as emerging out of the development of "enough life experience to remember 'the good old days.'" Their model for the ideal museum visitor suggests that nostalgia is an emotional experience that is more likely to be experienced by older individuals, requiring the ingredient of time and other significant life events to be compared alongside. They argue that nostalgia helps museum visitors understand the exhibits and the overall effect of the Museum at Bethel Woods, acting as a "filter" to emotionally inform their engagement with history. The participant goes on later to characterize music museums as having a special connection to nostalgia, saying:

> It's very different in a music museum because you'll see trends with people not necessarily interested in the history, but they're interested in the music and you can

> become so interested in the music that you become interested in the history, but the music gives you context or the music gives you the entry point where we can begin sharing a learning objective. (Participant 4)

Interest in the music – in this case, rock and folk music from the 60s – provides "context" that can lead individuals to "become interested in the history." From this perspective, *history* can become the context for the *music*, allowing visitors to see how the festival was organized, who made up the population of festival-goers, and why certain ideologies and values were attached to the ethos of Woodstock. Whether or not museum visitors have been to Woodstock, the music central to the scene becomes an "entry point" for them to develop a sense of nostalgia and become interested in learning about Woodstock as an event imbued with cultural as well as historical significance.

The primary function of music museums, as museum professionals I spoke to emphasized, is to educate the public on important elements of American music history, whether it be the Woodstock Festival of 1969 or C.F. Martin's migration of his guitar company to Pennsylvania. What especially draws visitors to these museums is the promise of immersing them into the time, sound, and culture of the past musical scene in question. One of the exhibits that I will discuss in this section perfectly summarizes these ideas with a quote from Charlie Maloney, a notable Woodstock attendee: "If you are *here*, you were *there*." This begs the question, however, of whether or not the visitors to these museums actually experience feelings of nostalgia while present at the museum. In this section, I will use quotes from my participants, my ethnographic observations from visiting the museums and their websites, and theoretical explorations of nostalgia in order to illustrate how curators of popular music museums both use

pre-existing nostalgia and produce new experiences of nostalgia through certain curatorial practices.

Baker recognizes nostalgia as an "affective curatorial practice," discussing the role nostalgia plays in popular music museums:

> In the context of the museum, nostalgia serves to not only bring visitors through the doors but also ensure that these visitors will find personal connections with objects on display…It is recognized that many visitors are motivated by nostalgia because they have 'lived the music and loved it' and therefore consider themselves to be 'a vital part of this history' on display, a 'living-history extension' of the exhibitions which connect to, and 'validate,' their past. (Baker, et. al., 2019)

Baker emphasizes the dual impact that nostalgia has on museum visitors, both as an advertising mechanism for encouraging visitors to relive or experience a significant moment in popular culture's past *and* as a way of legitimizing the first-hand experiences of visitors as integral to our collective memory of that history. Nostalgia doubles as a potentially superficial marketing promise as well as an affect imbued with the power to give visitors agency as historical narrators vital to the memory work of the museum. Nostalgia operates in both of these ways at the museums I visited, especially the Museum at Bethel Woods, which I will focus on predominantly in this section.

Several of the museums in this study take advantage of the nostalgic impact of popular music as a means of marketing the museum to potential visitors. The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (Rock Hall hereafter), for example, advertises their "Legends of Rock" exhibit, which displays ephemera "[capturing] the most iconic moments in rock history" through an appeal to visitors' nostalgia and emotions (*Rock Hall* 2022):

> Get up close and personal with some of your favorite Inductees and the stories behind the music they created. Rock and roll is as much about the spectacle, the visual, as it as the sonic—we remember Bowie's character Ziggy Stardust as much as we do the lyrics to

> "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide," Michael Jackson's moonwalk as much as the bassline of "Billie Jean." (*Rock Hall* 2022)

This description draws on the communal aspect of nostalgia, emphasizing the collective memory of iconic moments from popular culture, like Ziggy Stardust and MJ's moonwalk. The particular phrasing of "we remember" suggests a collective feeling of nostalgia towards rock and roll that is amplified by this exhibit and the museum as a whole. The presence of nostalgia involved in museum visitors' experience of popular music museums challenges the expectation that museums are merely for educational purposes. Affective, or emotional, experiences like nostalgia, excitement, and a sense of community signify that popular music museums' curators and visitors are aware of the social dimensions of popular culture and popular music history. Emotions are a crucial element of the experience of popular music fans, such as the delighted hysteria of young American girls captured during the Beatles' performance on the Ed Sullivan Show or the collective sense of community among Woodstock Festival-goers. Advertisements for popular music exhibits both necessarily recognize the emotional and nostalgic impact of popular music on museum visitors while also capitalizing on those emotional experiences to support the primary mission of the museum as a cultural institution meant to educate the public and support contemporary musical scenes.

The Museum at Bethel Woods also capitalizes on visitors' feelings of nostalgia in their online descriptions of their main exhibit on the history of the Woodstock Festival:

> Some visit to relive the past and their journey to Woodstock. Others come to experience what it was like for the first time. As you step inside the exhibit you hear the echo of 450,000 chanting "no rain" and see the stories of those who were actually there. Through artifacts, films, music - and even a hippie bus - you will be inspired not only by what was the most prolific three-day festival in history, but by the ideals that still remain relevant today. (*Bethel Woods Center for the Arts* 2022)

Similarly to the description by the Rock Hall, The Museum at Bethel Woods directly highlights the presence of nostalgia in visitors' motivations for visiting the museum, saying that "some visit to relive the past." The cultural significance of Woodstock is particularly clear in this description, with the individual perspectives of museum visitors being emphasized over the historical significance. This is evidenced by the final sentence which puts special emphasis on "not only [Woodstock as] the most prolific three-day festival in history, but…the ideals that still remain relevant today" as a result of Woodstock. Woodstock's cultural impact on festival-goers and non-festival-goers alike highlights the nostalgic power of the event like the previous descriptions do, though Baker's discussion of nostalgia as amplifying museum visitors' roles as valid historical narrators comes into play more prominently here. Baker's characterization of museum visitors with nostalgia as a "living-history extension" of the exhibits is pointed to with these mentions of "stories of those who were actually there," the temporal aspect of the relevance of Woodstock, and in some of the interactive features of the museum's main exhibit.

One of these interactive features is the "Personal Stories" kiosk inside of the museum's Main Exhibit, which permits visitors to document their first-hand experiences of the Woodstock Festival of 1969. Visitors can record their anecdotes about Woodstock using the on-site microphone or they can type their comments on the screen. There are four prompts that visitors can choose from in order to properly categorize their anecdote: 1) anecdotes about attending Woodstock in 1969; 2) anecdotes about *almost* making it to Woodstock but ultimately not being able to attend; 3) comments about wishing they could go to Woodstock and why; and 4) general comments about the impact and importance of Woodstock. This exhibit allows visitors to engage in *self-curation*, which I am using as a term to refer to the inclusion and legitimization of

museum visitors' autobiographical first-hand accounts of a historical moment within the museum's exhibits. The Museum at Bethel Woods' encouragement of visitors to self-curate at the Personal Stories kiosk validates their experience as "living history" more readily than it contributes to the institutional mission of remembering and accurately documenting what happened at Woodstock. Self-curation is a more agentive and more productive means of recognizing the nostalgia and affective experiences of museum visitors that makes the museum marketable as an attraction in giving visitors the impression that they are collaborating with curators in processes of historical work.

The representative from the Museum at Bethel Woods commented on this impression, saying that though the Personal Stories exhibit was initially effective when it was set up in 2012 and compiled "over 4,000 stories," the entries have not been productively synthesized yet in any way that would render the exhibit as contributing to the museum's historical work. First of all, the Flash technology used in the exhibit has begun to fail, preventing some of its features like photography and audio-recording from being usable, and the museum has been unable to fix it due to the immensity of the expense. Second of all, a significant amount of the entries are "high school students talking about themselves," which do not contribute to personal anecdotes about Woodstock. Thirdly, the process of synthesizing all of the entries is currently being taken on by volunteers at Bethel Woods, who thoroughly peruse the anecdotes and "transcribe the stories about Woodstock" into "a long-form oral history" (Participant 4). This process is particularly cumbersome and time-consuming, so the exhibit's effect in capturing a self-curated oral history of Woodstock is currently unable to be examined, though in-process. Again, this lack of evidence

of self-curation's impact on historical work emphasizes that it, instead, enhances the visitor experience by having them leave feeling emotionally or intellectually validated.

Self-curation is built into the Museum at Bethel Woods in other ways, such as two outdoor unofficial exhibits. These include a commemorative display begun by Charlie "The Mayor" Maloney (a festival-goer) called "the Garden," honoring musicians, festival-goers, and other Woodstock affiliates who have since passed away. Under the shade of a tree next to the official sign designating the space as the site of Woodstock, rocks are piled up with people's names and dates written in crayons and chalk. The tree itself boasts carvings of even more names and dates commemorating anniversaries of weddings and deaths alike. This commemorative display serves to demonstrate the social dimensions of popular culture and history yet again, revealing the many friendships and romances that were made during and as a result of collective experiences of Woodstock.

To the left of this display is the final opportunity for self-curation at the Museum of Bethel Woods: a large billboard with paintings of white daisies, replete with drawings, commemorative addresses, signatures, and even short anecdotes nested inside of the petals. The billboard, entitled "Everyone Has a Woodstock Story," is sponsored by the New York Council on the Arts, and originally was intended to be a decorative mural until "people just started writing all over it," as the participant explained to me (Participant 4). Peace symbols punctuate many of the entries, such as one that echoes The Mayor's quote from the Garden: "We were here now, not then…2022." The distortion of time in this sentiment approximates the immersive effect the legitimizing site of the museum has on visitors, amplifying pre-existing nostalgia in those who

were at Woodstock and producing new nostalgia in those who were not at Woodstock, indicated by another entry that reads simply, “Wish I was at the show.”

Unlike the Personal Stories kiosk, these two displays are unofficial spaces of self-curation. Their proximity to the official Woodstock sign legitimizes them, though their location outside of the museum gives visitors free rein to engage with them as much as they’d like and in any ways they’d like, evidenced by the lack of monitoring leading to visitors writing all over the mural. These exhibits were freely interacted with and left untouched as long as the content remained appropriate and relevant to the memory of Woodstock – the participant recounted to me one instance in which he personally removed unrelated expletives from the mural, showing how the mural eventually became regularly monitored by Bethel Woods and officialized as an exhibit that was subject to institutional power. However, the agency of museum visitors is particularly salient in these examples, as the participant explained how the mural only became an interactive exhibit because *the visitors* wanted a space to commemorate their Woodstock stories and “to leave their mark,” ultimately contributing to the “learning objective” that Woodstock is culturally significant (Participant 4).

These moments of self-curation betray the extent to which museum visitors who had direct experiences of Woodstock feel a sense of nostalgia that is amplified by the space of the museum (even extending outside to the unofficial displays). Nostalgia is legitimized by the museum not only in its direct retelling of cultural events but also in allowing visitors to provide first-hand accounts and opinions with the Personal Stories kiosk, the Garden, and the Everyone Has a Woodstock Story billboard. Visitors are given agency within the institution of the museum to contribute to storytelling, history-making, and canon-setting alongside curators, though it’s

important to recognize that this agency is minimized by the institution's power which is ultimately used to govern the success of particular artistic, educational, as well as commercial missions. In the next section, I will detail another curatorial practice that similarly engages with visitors' emotions as a means of making educational goals more readily accessible, appealing, and entertaining.

II. Immersion as an Affective Curatorial Practice

Immersion is key to the effectiveness of several of the museums I visited. *Immersion* involves cultivating an environment that encapsulates, approximates, and imitates a particular place at a particular time for people to experience as a simulation. Returning to Woodstock, the museum professional at the Museum at Bethel Woods summarized immersion as it happens at the museum, talking about the outdoor Augmented Reality exhibit that they developed a few years ago and promoted especially during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> When you're on the field [where Woodstock happened], you get it. There's something about the field…There is a magic to being on the site…It feels like we're at the festival…There's something about the space that we're in right now that…you get a sensation in the landscape that is created by the landscape because *you know this is where Woodstock happened*, whatever you're feeling at that time, you feel *must be* what that person who was here in 1969 felt…There's a real tangible power of that in the historic landscape that people get. (Participant 4)

Immersing visitors into the politics and culture of a specific historical moment provides a crucial foundation for understanding the corresponding music scene in question. Immersion both relies on – "*you know* this is where Woodstock happened" – and produces – "*you get* a sensation in the landscape" – nostalgia in visitors and curators, both those who experienced the cultural moment in question and those who have not. Though this museum professional is specifically focusing on an outdoor Augmented Reality exhibit that utilizes the proximity to the historical site of

Woodstock rather than a completely curated exhibit within the museum building, the properties of immersion and nostalgia are still at play here in revealingly significant ways. Moving on from Woodstock, two other distinct methods of immersion are present in the Chess Records Studio museum and the Prince Immersive Experience in Chicago.

The Chess Records Studio on 2120 South Michigan Avenue in Chicago is home to Willie Dixon's Blues Heaven Foundation, a non-profit organization that raises money to support young up-and-coming musicians in Chicago, founded by Chess Records' blues bassist and songwriter Willie Dixon. Chess Records is no longer active today as a record label, halting production in the late 60s after being subsumed by another label and following the death of its founder, Leonard Chess. The building on Michigan Avenue is an official historical landmark in Chicago as of 1990, remembered as the birthplace of Chicago blues and rock and roll and home to countless iconic musicians, like Etta James, Chuck Berry, and Muddy Waters. It began to be curated as a museum in the late 1990s with emphasis particularly on renovating the space in the image of the 1960s, effectively creating the experience of visitors stepping into a time machine, returning to Wilson's idea of nostalgia being produced through "an active reconstruction of [the] mood or spirit of a previous time" (Wilson 1999).

The organization's director conducts occasional guided tours of the museum, which I attended as a part of this project. During the tour, visitors can listen to Little Walter on a vintage 1960s radio in Leonard Chess' office, walk up the staircase musicians used while bringing gear in and touch the handrail that Mick Jagger likely touched, and sit in the recording studio inches away from where Etta James sang "At Last" for the first time. Interspersed between rehearsed script on historical context and stories, the director loosens their grip on the immersive facade to

explain their process of finding the right sound-blocking curtains for the recording studio in order to match it to old photographs of the space. They tell our small, five-person tour group detailed anecdotes about restoring the space to its former glory in order to give visitors an accurate immersive experience.

While visitors to this museum likely do not have any nostalgic memories tied to Chess Records specifically aside from listening to the recordings that were made there, the immersive experience curated by the director and their team transform the space into a time machine by installing period-accurate furniture and by using "you" centered language during the tour. For example, while walking up the staircase to the recording studio, the director said, "If *you* were coming to Chess to record music, this is where *you* would carry *your* instruments and gear from *your* car to the studio." Another example of this language surfaced when my tour group first entered the museum. The director gestured to the front desk secretary, saying, "If *you* were coming for an audition to show Chess that *you've* got what it takes, *you* would wait in the front lobby until Minnie Riperton – who worked as a secretary here – would buzz *you* in and unlock the door." This "you" centered language worked to situate visitors, including myself, into the cultural and historical moment of Chess Records by pretending that we were musicians visiting to be auditioned for the label, effectively transforming our sense of space as well as time. Immersion effectively produced feelings of nostalgia in visitors who have no access to nostalgic memories for Chess Studios at all.

Immersion worked a bit differently at the Prince Immersive Experience in Chicago. While the team at Chess Studios worked to produce nostalgia in visitors, the Prince Immersive Experience team used pre-existing nostalgia in visitors to curate its space. As indicated by the

name, the Prince Immersive Experience is marketed as an interactive attraction where visitors are encouraged to "lose [themselves] on an interactive trip through the music and life of Prince" (*Prince the Experience* 2022). The Experience is particularly catered to Prince fans, though non-Prince fans could visit and learn about Prince through the many educational kiosks, exhibits, and displays. The informational aspect of the Experience is secondary to its primary purpose as a Prince amusement park, perfect for Instagram photo ops with your Purple Posse. The "About" section of their website supports this analysis, as it reads:

> Dearly Beloved, you are invited to journey through an **interactive, multisensory experience** celebrating the visionary Artist, Prince. Tour 10 **immersive spaces** and explore his life, creative evolution, and original sound as **you step inside** the iconic music video moments and boogie to an audiovisual dance party designed by Prince's lighting and production designer, Roy Bennett. Explore exclusive artifacts curated by The Prince Estate and **play music producer** with the original multitrack audio from one of Prince's greatest hits in his recording studio. This limited-time run is perfect for Prince fans and music lovers alike. Whether you've seen Prince live in concert 0 or 100 times, take this 60-minute trip into the creative realm of this electrifying Artist and leave entertained, educated, and inspired. (*Prince the Experience* 2022, emphasis mine)

The Prince Immersive Experience would be incredibly ineffective if there existed no community for which Prince's music is nostalgic. Prince's career is marked by his unique musicality – he was the face of the Minneapolis Sound genre – as well as his deft showmanship – unforgettable costumes (the Cloud Suit or the Purple Rain trench coat), movies accompanying his albums (*Purple Rain*, *Under the Cherry Moon*, etc.), and the popularity of his music videos ("When Doves Cry"). The culture of Prince's career and fandom is the ideal foundation for curating an immersion into a musician's life and career. Prince's iconicity and popularity touched the average American as well as super-fans, permitting Superfly and the Prince Estate (the Experience's organizers) to effectively create and make marketable a space that builds on and legitimizes nostalgia for a popular culture figure while also justifying the Experience as educational with its

inclusion of artifacts, like Prince's guitars, and exhibits detailing the chronology of his career. The museum professional I spoke with commented on balancing the design and focus of the Experience to account for both the casual fan and the super-fan by comparing it to Paisley Park, Prince's studio-turned-museum, saying:

> I think [the Experience] has to be a little bit more educational [than Paisley Park]...I think Paisley Park is for the like super fan whereas this is a little bit more broader…We want to you know, balance those things of having some information in there that's, that's a little bit more for a superfan like – we had I mean, (not even everyone caught it) but there's a concert poster in the Purple Rain room that has like a big Cineplex poster in there and that that had like 10 of [Prince's] favorite movies listed on there…Yeah, I think I think it's just taking both sides into account…In terms of deciding what are the rooms that are going to be in there like Purple Rain was just obvious because everyone knows that cover. Everyone remembers it. And so you got to do at least a few of those things to make sure that the casual fan has things they'll recognize and that they'll, you know, remember and connect to. (Participant 6)

As opposed to Paisley Park, the Prince Immersive Experience more readily expected to have casual Prince fans visit because of its location in Chicago versus Paisley Park's location in Chanhassen, Minnesota. This greatly influenced how the curators designed the Experience, as the participant explains in their attempts to strike a balance between catering to both casual fans – "everyone remembers [*Purple Rain*]" – and super-fans – the poster with Prince's favorite movies. The museum professional later clarifies that, though the Experience "has to be a little bit more educational" than Paisley Park, the Prince Experience is "a little bit more of an entertainment experience rather than just a museum experience" and is accomplished primarily through "immersive techniques" (Participant 6).

The Experience consists of a series of rooms that singularly encompass an aspect of Prince's work. These include a diorama-esque representation of the "When Doves Cry" music video, a carbon copy of Prince's Paisley Park recording studio where visitors can mix "Let's Go

Crazy" on Bose-sponsored mixing boards, and a *Purple Rain* room where visitors can sit on a replica of the iconic purple motorcycle from the film. Visitors are able to embed themselves in Prince's work quite literally, as opposed to the immersion into the cultural *production* at Chess Studios. Most of these immersive experiences, as mentioned above, are framed as photo ops, complicating the Experience's other function as an educational experience. However, the representative from the Experience pointed to the final room – a digital kiosk featuring an interactive quiz resulting in a "personalized" Prince playlist – as a perfect merging of entertainment and education, saying:

> I think one of the great things about this is the discovery, the discovery aspect of it, so that's why you know, for me, the last room – that was the experience that was really important. Even just…from my own experience for having built – taking two years of my life to build [The Experience] and like going super deep into Prince myself. One of the things that I had the most fun with was discovering so much music that I never heard before. Like, I was always a Prince fan, but now I consider myself a superfan and like, I went so deep and I now have this playlist of like 100 songs I discovered during this process. And I wanted people to have that same sense of discovery and be like, 'Oh my gosh, these songs are so incredible. I can't believe I didn't know this one and this one.' (Participant 6)

For the curators, the process of curating the Experience balanced entertainment with education as the museum professional expresses having "the most fun with discovering" new Prince material. This intentional melding of entertainment and education is summarized by the paraphrased visitors' sentiment, "Oh my gosh, these songs are so incredible. I can't believe I didn't know this one." Similarly to the Bethel Woods' representative expressing that nostalgia shapes visitors' education within the museum, this participant suggests that entertainment, more particularly, encourages visitors to conceptualize education as a fun act of discovery. This example especially emphasizes the interconnectivity of entertaining and educational curatorial practices in the museum, though, crucially, entertainment – in this case an interactive personality quiz – is the

means through which education – expanding one's knowledge of Prince's catalog – is made more appealing to visitors.

Beyond the discovery of individual Prince tracks, it's important to keep in mind that the Experience is *still* a music museum in spite of the photo ops and nostalgia at its center, educating visitors on Prince's influence on American popular music more broadly. Chronological timelines of Prince's life and career line the walls of the lobby before entering the Experience as well as within the Experience itself. In one of the first rooms is a series of digital kiosks where visitors can read a more detailed chronology of Prince's life and career, replete with photo documentation and quotes from friends, relatives, and collaborators. More informational exhibits line the walls deeper into the Experience, such as those about Prince's activism for artists in the music industry, featuring a video interview from the archives between him and a talk show host discussing the music industry's restriction of artistic freedom. Material objects like Prince's costumes and guitars also feature in between photo ops with short descriptions as accompanying context. These elements of the Experience ground the whole enterprise as a music museum intended to educate visitors on Prince's life, career, and cultural significance as well as entertain Prince fans and their friends.

Immersive techniques both engage with and produce nostalgia in visitors as a means of making institutional learning objectives more appealing. Immersion effectively reconstructs a sensation of a past time and place, sometimes permitting visitors to interactively engage with the space in entertaining ways – like the Prince personality quiz kiosk or leaving a message at Woodstock Personal Stories. However, the element of *interaction* leads to a discussion of a curatorial practice that is distinct from immersion: interactive exhibits.

III: Sound in the Museum and Interactive Exhibits

While immersion serves as a simulated sensory experience to helpfully familiarize visitors with the *Zeitgeist* of a particular music scene, interactive exhibits allow for more hands-on activities for visitors to engage with music history and, particularly, the *sounds* of music history. More than the previous sections, interactive exhibits feature a more apparent balance of education and entertainment, which leads nicely into the next chapter that focuses squarely on educational goals of museums. The interactive exhibits that I want to focus on before closing out this chapter are featured in the Virginia Musical Museum, the Rock Hall, the C.F. Martin Guitar Museum, and MOMENT.

The Virginia Musical Museum and Hall of Fame (Virginia Museum hereafter) is a roadside attraction in Williamsburg, Virginia – home to Colonial Williamsburg, itself an outdoor living museum – that doubles as a piano outlet as well as a music history museum. Though the museum focuses on Virginia-specific music scenes and musical icons, there are more general music history exhibits, as well, that feature antique pianos, early recording technology, and even novelty instruments like mechanical music players and animatronics. Many of the museums I visited had different methods for incorporating sound into their exhibits, but the Virginia Museum had by far the simplest yet still effective, as their representative explained to me:

> Well the people that want to do the tour on their own - we do group tours - but if they do them on their own, then they can just hit the touch iPad and they can play different instruments on the iPad. (Participant 2)

The Virginia Museum curators wanted visitors to be able to hear the various organs and player pianos on display without physically touching and potentially damaging these old, expensive instruments. Investing in a few iPads proved to be the easy solution to this problem for visitors

that embarked on solo tours of the museum. At the time of my visit, there were two iPads available for this purpose: one in the Mechanical Music exhibit to hear the automated violin, banjo, and music boxes and another in the Organ Collection exhibit. This feature permitted visitors to listen to these musical instruments that are less likely to be readily recognizable (antique organs and novelty instruments), reducing the mystique of these items on display by animating them with sound as intended. There were no iPads featured in the other exhibits, leaving the Museum and Hall of Fame silent all the way through. Most relevant to my study is the Hall of Fame exhibit, which was made up of personal artifacts from popular Virginian musicians – stage costumes and instruments – and lacked any kind of interactive sound feature. Comparing this alongside the participant's answer to what they hope visitors will walk away from the Virginia Museum with, the participant said succinctly:

> I want them to learn something about Virginia music history, obviously, and I want them to have a good time. (Participant 2)

The sincerity of this comment highlights the balance of entertainment and education embedded within the enterprise of music museums, though it also suggests that visitors will hopefully apply what they've learned once they've left. Though the museum itself is mostly a quiet space, it allows for more intentional reading of the various plaques so that visitors can potentially go home and listen to whoever's story stood out to them the most, whether it's Patsy Cline, Pearl Bailey, or The Five Keys, echoing the Prince Experience representative's comment about discovery. The participant told me that the Virginia Museum is in the process of raising money for an expansion to "add another big room and an elevator;" this may lead to the acquisition of more iPads in exhibits like the Hall of Fame because of their effectiveness in animating the exhibits (Participant 2).

Several of the other museums I visited had a version of the Virginia Museum's iPad, though these interactive features were more useful in animating popular culture scenes rather than the sound of singular instruments. Prime examples of these are the Wright Museum's immersive Detroit record store and the Bethel Woods' Museum's headphone kiosks for visitors to listen to Motown groups and Woodstock artists respectively. The Rock Hall and C.F. Martin Museum's interactive sound exhibits are a bit different, allowing visitors to engage with music in a more hands-on way rather than listening to recordings.

While the Rock Hall does feature some headphone kiosks, they also boast the more notable interactive exhibit "The Garage," where visitors can pick up real electric guitars and basses, learn to play, and step into the shoes of rock and roll musicians. There's also an in-house band where visitors can sing along to their favorite hits. The Rock Hall website summarizes the functionality of this exhibit, saying:

> Pick up an instrument, crank up the volume and make your own music in the museum. Designed to evoke the birthplace of rock bands for decades, The Garage is where you can make music inspired by the greats. (*Rock Hall* 2022)

The exhibit description goes on to highlight the main attractions in the garage, such as learning to play with guided video prompts on "**real** instruments," jamming with the in-house band, relaxing in the lounge, and "creating your own band logos" (*Rock Hall* 2022). The Garage acts as an interactive, collaborative, *and* immersive experience with the potential to inspire visitors to become musicians and start their own bands. Effectively, the Garage is a designated space to celebrate and animate the history of rock and roll on the part of visitors, providing them with the resources to enact their agency in the museum and engage with the reality of music-making

rather than imagine it passively. The representative from the Rock Hall highlighted the active collaboration as central to the learning objectives of the Rock Hall:

> We have a lot of exhibits that have their own soundtrack. And because there's a lot of spaces where multiple artists are represented at once, it'll just be like a playlist that shuffles through. There's also throughout the building listening stations with headphones if you want to do more of a deep dive. But we actually kind of like – while we don't want too much sound bleed or too much competing – soundtracks overlapping – we purposefully did not want to do like a headset audio tour for for the Rock Hall because we want people to be engaged. We want them to sing along to their favorite songs. You know, we want them to not be in a silo but experiencing it with their family or with their friends or their partners that they're with. So we're kind of celebrating the loudness and the occasional chaos of having music playing in the museum, but I'm keeping it to specified areas if that makes sense. (Participant 7)

More so than any of the other museums I visited, the Rock Hall is decidedly *loud*, as the participant says here. The curators of the Rock Hall were collectively hesitant to install headset audio tours and increase the amount of personal listening stations because they wanted "people to be engaged," singing along to their favorite songs "with their family or with their friends or their partners." Again, this resulted in curatorial practices that encourage collaborative interaction, particularly evidenced by The Garage, the interactive epicenter at the Rock Hall. This not only acts as pure entertainment, but it serves to celebrate the "loudness and the occasional chaos" not only of the museum itself but of rock and roll history more broadly. In effect, the controlled interactive chaos of the Garage exhibit animates the rock and roll history on display, inspires future musicians, and perfectly merges the dual goals of entertainment and education.

Hands-on music-making arose in two other museums, albeit differently from the Rock Hall's Garage. Moving to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, the C.F. Martin Guitar Museum and Factory (Martin Guitar Museum hereafter) specializes in the history of Martin Guitar, one of the most

prolific and well-recognized acoustic guitar companies in the nation. The Martin Guitar Museum triples as 1) a museum detailing the history of the company and the popularity of Martins in popular music; 2) the factory where Martin Guitars are manufactured and in which visitors can go for a factory tour; and 3) a Martin retailer where visitors can try out and purchase a Martin Guitar and/or have repairs done on their current guitars. The features and functions of these three branches of the location feed into each other, most readily apparent with the interactive Picking Parlor, a space where visitors can play different Martin guitar models currently in market rotation. When asked if the Picking Parlor contributes to the museum in any way, the representative from the Martin Museum said:

> No, the Picking Parlor – the original purpose of that was to have some of our higher end models, mostly higher end standard series models, on display for people to play when they visit the factory. So it's really an extension of the lobby because in the lobby we have lower price models that people can play up on the walls. And that was the original purpose but it switched recently. We do use – we have a Buy-From-Factory program, and we use the Picking Parlor now as a display space for those guitars that we have on hand that you can buy at the Factory. (Participant 1)

The participant explicitly states that this interactive aspect of the Martin Museum is in fact *not* an extension of the museum but rather more relevant to the profit-driven projects of the factory and the company itself. However, inside the space of the museum proper, there is a relatively new model of a stage befit with a stool, stage lights, and Martin guitars for visitors to play. The available guitars to play are newer models – the SC-13E Special and the FSC-Certified OME Cherry – referring back to the participants' mention of the Buy-From-Factory program, where visitors can buy guitars on hand at the factory. This mock stage can be thought of, then, as an extension of the Picking Parlor – which is located both in the outside lobby and in an enclosed space in the gift shop – though situated squarely within the museum itself. In effect, this permits

guitar-playing (or adventurous) visitors to animate the silent, older Martin Guitars on display within the museum by juxtaposing them with the sounds of new models. Even though the representative explicitly says that there is no purposeful connection between the Picking Parlor and the Museum, the opportunities to play Martin Guitars in the same space as the historical exhibits has the effect of reminding visitors that these guitars are imbued with a long and significant history. Ultimately, then, this may influence visitors to buy a guitar, more readily contributing to the profit-driven goals of the company than the educational goals of the museum.

The Museum of Music and Entertainment in New York City (MOMENT hereafter) similarly encourages interactive music-making though follows a community-based, educational approach rather than a profit-driven approach. MOMENT is a "living museum" specializing in New York City music history, primarily operating through 1) virtual exhibits on their website, 2) educational programs in schools, and 3) interactive events meant to bring New Yorkers together and simultaneously celebrate and teach the city's rich music history. In the context of their in-person educational programs, the representative from MOMENT discussed the importance of incorporating interactive features in the lessons, saying:

> We go into after school programs and summer programs specifically right now mostly with underserved schools here in the Lower East Side. But we bring them a little bit of NYC history, each class I bring a teaching artist to show their instrument and somehow connect their instrument to some of the history, little bit of science of sound and some of this technology, so it's a really broad – just try to keep it light enough for them to enjoy. We talk about obviously dance and communities and show them samples of that from the history. And that's a super important part cause most of these kids have never heard of any of this stuff – they probably may never hear much about any of this stuff and most of them have never really held an instrument in their hands, believe it or not you know. They've never seen a live musician actually play an instrument– it's just the way the culture is now, I mean everything is phone and technology lately…In just the next school over they're getting whatever, they do a lot more, it's not like it's everywhere, but there are especially at underserved schools they don't get that. (Participant 3)

In this case, interactive lessons incorporating "teaching artist[s]" and listening samples solves issues of accessibility. The students that MOMENT primarily teaches are from "underserved schools" without the resources to teach music history or have music programs at all. The participant goes on later to provide an example of a specific lesson plan that they teach young students, saying that they teach them about hip-hop in the Bronx by bringing a small turntable and records for students to play with and see how the process of sampling works. This led the participant to consider how to bring this to a physical museum space:

> Exhibits in the museum again has to be a live performance space, has to…have to be instruments you can touch, has to be a sense of…touch this thing, play this thing…Ideally I mean so for me what my vision of it is out front you have curated buskers every hour that you're open…and then in the evening you have performances that are curated that are somehow tied to the history or maybe they're just new performers…clearly [incorporate] some exhibit material in terms of you know items and – okay so this is another big thing about the exhibit aspect of this is that in this day and age – where you can find virtually anything you want at any moment any place on your phone – it's kind of like the value of the museum has changed in the same way the value of music has changed…it's hard to get a kid to say hey you want to go to this building to go look at this thing in a glass case? (Participant 3)

The MOMENT representative emphatically emphasized that interactive "live performance space[s]" are crucial to music history exhibits. Touching and playing physical instruments and/or listening to live or recorded music that is "somehow tied to the history" is central to educating people effectively about popular music history – otherwise, it's a mere matter of "go[ing] to this building to go look at this thing in a glass case." This participant, then, argues that the *entertainment* side of the music museum enterprise is inextricably tied to its *educational* goals. Most poignantly, they state that "the value of the museum has changed in the same way the value of music has changed" as a result of the ubiquity of SmartPhones as personal repositories of history and music. This historical shift in access to knowledge and music necessitates a change in

how music museums – and possibly museums more broadly – are curated, emphasizing the inclusion of experiences and information that is only possible within the walls of the museum.

Hands-on interactive exhibits like listening stations, the Garage, the Picking Parlor, and live music demonstrations revitalize music history lessons with collaborative music-making and informed listening. Akin to immersive techniques, interactive exhibits foster unique visitor experiences that contribute to the museums' project of producing nostalgia – not only for the music in question but for the museum itself. In making the education of music history an entertaining enterprise, pop music museums necessarily are transformed into attractions that *attract* visitors to return again and again, contributing ultimately to the posterity of popular music history.

IV: Popular Entertainment in the Museum as Subversive Elevation

This chapter focused on the entertaining aspects of popular music museums as a complimentary element in their collective missions to educate the public on music history as well as to legitimize popular music history as culturally significant. These examples I laid out all encapsulate how nostalgia is used as a marketing mechanism to bring visitors to the museum, legitimized with self-curation exhibits – giving visitors the impression they're contributing to historical narrativizing – and produced through immersive and interactive curatorial practices – serving as entry points for visitors to filter their understanding of popular music history more productively. Understanding how integral nostalgia is to the learning objectives and institutional goals of popular music museums necessitates bringing back into frame the legacy of *cultural hierarchy*, which I will discuss briefly to conclude this section.

Though Greenhalgh (cited at this chapter's beginning) notes that entertainment and education are usually in tension with each other, my findings so far suggest that entertainment has emerged as a *necessary* element of institutions like popular music museums to support educational goals. These tensions still exist, however, particularly in how popular music is not typically viewed as something worthy of scholarly inquiry or analysis. Museums are historically sites of bringing "high, elite" culture to the masses for "intellectual betterment" (Greenhalgh 1989; Levine 1990). Are popular music museums implicitly arguing for a cultural elevation of popular music? Alternatively, are popular music museums intentionally subverting the legacy of museums as repositories of high culture in order to completely challenge the dichotomy of "high" versus "low" culture?

It is difficult to ascertain whether or not these extracted conclusions from my analysis are intentional on behalf of popular music museum curators, though *intention* is only half of the story. Instead, I *can* measure how popular music museums are doing something decidedly different from other museums in the broader occupational field. While Greenhalgh argues that *entertainment* in museums has become commonplace, popular music museums attempt to *center* entertainment in a way that animates the reality of popular music history. In bringing popular music culture and history to the site of the museum, popular music museums have a clear positive impact on Americans' collective memory of popular music history. Effectively, popular music museums *legitimize* the emotions of popular music fans by bringing pop culture to the halls of the stately museum and honoring the many dimensions of popular sound, whether it's Motown, rock and roll, or country. More poignantly, perhaps, nostalgia's relevance to this study reveals how popular music history has a particular resonance with individuals that explains the

emergence of museums of pop music. The historical judgment of popular music as “low culture” is rendered laughable and misguided as these museums become dedicated spaces for wholeheartedly celebrating pop music’s unifying power.

Chapter 2: "Sharing a Learning Objective"

Popular Music Museums as Educational Institutions

Whether the educational material in question involves science, art, or music history, museums can almost certainly be classified as *institutions* with declared missions, rules, and responsibilities related to *education*. Nearly all of the museums I visited for this project are or are involved with *nonprofit organizations* with federal, state, or local funding supporting their missions to educate the public (*Prince Immersive Experience* 2023). The museum professional at the Virginia Musical Museum summarized what nonprofit status means for museums, saying:

> You have to get [nonprofit status] from the state – it means that…we don't have to pay taxes on items that we purchase for the museum and we don't have to collect taxes so it's a nonprofit and it's named right because most museums are not profitable without what we get –grants, we're working on grants – and we have a lot of people donate to the museum…The whole museum is about education, that's what our nonprofit is signed for is education – to educate the public about the history of music in Virginia. (Participant 2)

In order to get funding from the state, museum professionals need to declare their institutional purpose which, across the board at the museums I studied, is "to educate the public about the history of music" in some specific regard. This participant rightfully states that "most museums are not profitable" and require external funding and visitor donations to run, a manifestation of how museums are considered to be socially and culturally valuable because governmental agents and the general public alike support museums monetarily.

Bringing this back to the Bourdieusian concept of social fields, museums' primary goal – their field-specific symbolic capital – is that of educating the public. Simply put, the collective practices and values of museum professionals purposefully contribute to the institutional goal of education. As I discussed in Chapter 1, music museums operate a bit differently compared to

other types of museums because of contending more readily with popular entertainment, sound, and nostalgia. This specific aspect of music museums as an enterprise has ripple effects on their ultimate goals of educating the public on music history by making the history more accessible – with interactive exhibits and immersive features – and honoring the noise central to music history. However, the tensions between entertainment and education bely concerns about the extent to which music museums are reliable historical narrators. The historical marginalization of popular culture studies in academia and elite cultural institutions is partially culpable for this; what can possibly be intellectually gleaned from the world of popular entertainment?

The emergence of popular music museums in the 1990s arose out of different social and cultural circumstances than are alive today. As I discussed in Chapter 1, popular music museums served as legitimizing spaces for pop culture *nostalgia* more so than they served as educational sites. An increasing collective commitment to inclusive histories, however, – including and centering marginalized voices and perspectives – has changed the ways in which museum professionals of pop music museums curate their spaces, write exhibit scripts and plaques, and choose areas of focus (Vergo 1989; Reilly 2018). In this chapter, I will start by defining and exploring *curation*, which is the practical means through which curators create educational exhibits. This will lead to discussions of three primary curatorial techniques for education that arose in my fieldwork and interviews: *collecting and displaying artifacts*, processes of *historicity* – simply, history-telling, and use of *space*. Focusing on each of these concepts will yield insights about their effectiveness at educating museum visitors on popular music history.

I: Curators as Collectors: Displaying Objects in the Museum

In this section, I will discuss the use of displayed material objects as a curatorial practice in popular music museums by setting up a crucial distinction: displayed objects for *worship* versus displayed objects for *educational purposes*. Interestingly, the concept of worship – referring to an expression of reverence – is key to understanding the role of objects in museums, especially popular music museums. Reynolds discusses the relationship between worship and museums implicitly in his etymological grounding of *curation*:

> The term 'curator' derives from the Latin word for guardian, and originally had an ecclesiastical meaning, referring to a low-level priest 'responsible for the care of souls.' From the late seventeenth century, it started to refer to the custodian of a library, museum, or archive – any kind of collection maintained by a cultural-heritage institution. As the private amassing of cultural artifacts has become more and more widespread, it could be said that rather a lot of us have become curators of a sort, albeit with no professional training or sense of obligation to the public and a completely idiosyncratic policy in terms of 'acquisitions.' Still, quite a few famous museums began as the private collections of aristocrats and antiquarians, while many private collectors approach their area of obsession with a systematic thoroughness. (Reynolds 2011)

Etymologically, *curation* refers to guardianship, originally that of priests "responsible for the care of souls" but eventually extending to professionals in GLAM professions (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). This idea of priest-curators calls to mind *reliquaries* – containers that hold and preserve holy relics – about which Hahn states "[work] hard to 'represent' the relic as powerful, holy and sacred, part of the holy institution of the Church…as part of the process of creating meaning" (Hahn 2010). One of the purposes of museums as well as reliquaries is to create meaning by framing material objects in service of an abstraction, whether it be a historical lesson or faith, respectively. It is the process of meaning-making through displayed and/or preserved objects that is more beneficial to my discussion in this section rather than the process of collecting itself, though I begin with this excerpt from Reynolds to emphasize the centrality of material objects in the legacy of museum work, as

curators have been historically defined by their maintenance of objects – "any kind of collection maintained by a cultural-heritage institution" – above all else.

Historical artifacts from popular music history are usually the instruments, stage costumes, and personal belongings of iconic rockstars and divas, imbued with undeniable "soul" as they evoke the celebrity and genius of beloved popular musicians. Reynolds' invocation of "soul" as the original property being guarded by priest-curators can be likened to the star worship common of popular music fandoms. Material objects relevant to pop music history may not necessarily be sacred in the religious sense of the term though they are culturally meaningful to fans. Displayed objects of rock and roll worship that excite and delight museum visitors may provide a helpful entry point into a more intellectual reckoning with music historical material, as the Bethel Woods representative stated in Chapter 1. The Rock Hall, in keeping with its monolithic status as *the* rock and roll history institution, effectively does this, tempering rock-fan-visitors' star worship with educational framings around objects, as their representative explained to me:

> It's an interesting philosophy of collecting as it is now versus when the museum first opened because I think at that time, they were like, we got this sixth floor building to fill. We'll take whatever you can give us. And now we can be a little more deliberate about what we choose, you know, we can tell a story with three great pieces and, and a graphic and a song, as opposed to necessarily not necessarily a case full of like 25 things. We're also different from some other institutions in that we have a lot of things on loan. Because a lot of the artists we're celebrating are still, you know, in the prime of their career, they're still using their instruments or just not ready to give their stuff permanently yet, although some loans do end up being converted to permanent donations, which is amazing. But it's a win-win. Because they know the pieces will be cared for while they're in our care. And the fans, their fans will get to see them and enjoy them and connect with them. (Participant 7)

Because the Rock Hall representative has worked at the museum for about 20 years, they have witnessed institutional shifts in collecting philosophies and techniques. The Rock Hall used to

"take whatever" anyone could give them because of the abundance of space, though they are now "a little more deliberate about what [they] choose" in order to "tell a story" more effectively. The participant went on later to discuss the increased artifact storage the Rock Hall has amassed, such as an on-site vault, off-site storage spaces, traveling exhibits, and an off-site archives for two-dimensional artifacts (Participant 7). Clearly, the Rock Hall has become a monolithic repository of rock and roll ephemera, influencing famous musicians to lend their instruments and belongings to the space, knowing that "the pieces will be cared for." Again, this echoes Reynolds' conceptualization of curation as the act of "caring for souls," especially since fans then visit the Rock Hall to "enjoy" and "connect with" items that their favorite musicians have touched.

The Rock Hall's large collection of objects imbued with rock iconicity allows them to more resourcefully curate exhibits in ways that effectively connect with visitors, not only emotionally – as objects of worship – but intellectually – as educational tools. Their temporary exhibit, "It's Been Said All Along: Voices of Rage, Hope, and Empowerment," highlights the artistic innovations and activist work of Black musicians in popular music, spanning from Aretha Franklin in soul music, Chuck D in hip-hop, and Bob Marley in reggae. The exhibit encourages visitors to contextualize the music of these artists within the broader framework of systemic racism (rage), civil rights activism (hope), and Black-led resistance (empowerment), though it does so primarily through the display of objects.[7] Upon approaching, visitors see a black stage with seven clothed mannequins standing in a row representing Mavis Staples, Tom Morello,

[7] It should be noted that the "It's Been Said All Along" exhibit was also made into a virtual exhibit – https://www.rockhall.com/its-been-said-all-along – on the Rock Hall's website. In this section, I will be focusing on the physical exhibit because the impact of the displayed objects is crucial to my discussion, though the virtual exhibit is also significant for its easy accessibility.

N.W.A., Maurice White, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown. Short descriptions identify each costume piece, though arguably none of them need an introduction for visiting rock fans – frankly, such as myself, who relied simply on my pre-existing popular music knowledge. What does it mean for rock-fan-visitors to enter this exhibit with reverence for James Brown or Aretha Franklin *and* to be asked to frame their work with rage, hope, and empowerment in mind? In short, the accepted iconicity and immediate recognition of these objects can provide opportunities for star worship, though the exhibit framing encourages visitors to go further in pursuit of institutional goals to narrate music history and educate the public. Most impactful during my encounter with this exhibit was the spatial centering of Bob Marley's green, yellow, and red slouch hat, symbolizing his Rastafarian faith. A symbol of religious worship in and of itself, Marley's celebrity, faith, and activism have transformed this hat into something beyond its material properties, influencing visitors to look upon it not only with reverence but as a conduit for understanding interwoven cultural meanings.

To emphasize the didactic effectiveness of the Rock Hall's use of displayed objects, I want to turn to the Virginia Musical Museum, which similarly displayed iconic popular music ephemera. However, the Virginia Museum did not contextualize displayed objects around any kind of abstract theme or concept, instead using them as visual accompaniments to written biographies. This was particularly true of the Virginia Music Hall of Fame portion of the museum, which was made up of written biographies about and photos of Virginia-born popular musicians interspersed with their musical instruments, stage costumes, and written song lyrics. The common denominator shared between those represented in the Virginia Hall of Fame, as their representative explained to me, is that they are "noteworthy [and have] some recognition"

and, of course, were born in Virginia (Participant 2). While the Rock Hall has abstract historical concepts to frame their exhibits, such as civil rights or the origins of rock music, the Virginia Hall of Fame simply frames the exhibit as representative of Virginian musicians. Ultimately, while this framing is somewhat educational, the objects are mostly displayed for icon worship, such as Patsy Cline's purple jumpsuit, Pearl Bailey's necklace, and Ella Fitzgerald's scarf. As the participant suggested, visitors should be quick to recognize the names or iconic ephemera of these Virginian musicians, though there's no greater learning objective posed by the curators, limiting the educational potential of these displayed objects. More pointedly, perhaps, the Virginia Museum has no *historical* analytic for visitors to frame their engagement with displayed objects, while the Rock Hall provides accessible historical frameworks.

While the Rock Hall and the Virginia Museum both relied on the iconicity of their displayed objects, the former more effectively framed their exhibits around an abstract historical concept for visitors as educational guidance. Other museums questioned the use of displayed objects as educational, *especially* if they were imbued with celebrity or iconicity, such as the representative from the living museum MOMENT, who asked:

> How long are you gonna look at it for? What do you actually take away from it really? (Participant 3)

Cultural artifacts imbued with history and celebrity could potentially be educational, as the MOMENT representative spoke about in chapter 1 in regards to teaching students about hip-hop sampling with an actual turntable (Participant 3). Artifacts just for the sake of having something to look at, however, may have little to no educational value in the context of pop music exhibits. The museum professional representing the Charles H. Wright Museum echoes the MOMENT representative with this sentiment, talking about the curation of the Detroit Jazz exhibit:

> We actually had on our optic list [for the Detroit Jazz exhibit] at one point a soundstage, from the Blue Bird [Inn] in which was a location that many jazz musicians play that they have a soundstage that can disassemble and reassemble into spaces. So we had thought about borrowing that...We just made the decision not to include [the soundstage]. There was like a lot of moving pieces that kind of made the budget really top heavy. And so those are just things that kind of had to happen as the process goes on…The other thing that was preventative about the soundstage was like how visitors interact with it. They couldn't go on it. So what are they learning from it? You know, so we're like, so sometimes we have these conversations or frankly talk about you know, for how much it costs, what does it give the visitor experience? And if it really doesn't give that much, so we decided to pull that…And so I don't know we went through all these kinds of conversations and just decided that the the video projection on the large wall will be kind of the interaction that we will have in the space and we would just forego the three dimensional objects because we kept running into issues around like, what does this give…[and] how do people interact with this? Can they interact with this? Not really? Okay. (Participant 5)

Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum (The Wright hereafter) specializes in African-American history and culture, educating visitors about the development of Detroit from the slave trade to today as well as exhibiting the various aspects of Black culture in Detroit. The Detroit Jazz exhibit that the representative is talking about above is a new temporary exhibit in one of the ancillary galleries that is a companion piece to the Bank of America-sponsored traveling exhibit Jazz Greats, contributing a more Detroit-specific focus to the all-encompassing Jazz Greats exhibit.

Strikingly, the Detroit Jazz exhibit was "just an empty room," as one of the entries in the on-site guestbook somewhat reductively put it. While the floor was unencumbered, the walls of the gallery were filled with informational plaques about historically-significant jazz venues in Detroit and influential Detroit jazz musicians as well as a "video projection" of abstracted fluidly-moving shapes and a city skyline. Despite no physical ephemera, the exhibit was a highly sensory experience with jazz music playing over the speakers while a documentary about Detroit jazz plays on a screen. The Wright's representative emphasized the uselessness of physical

ephemera in impacting visitor experience – "how do people interact with this?" – and its ineffectiveness in contributing to the primary institutional mission – "feeling positive about African-American history" (Participant 5). The institutional goal of the exhibit and the Wright Museum more broadly regards an intangible history – African-American history and culture. While materiality is a part of this history – such as the soundstage that the participant tried to acquire – it is not necessary for telling the story effectively. Though displayed objects are a curatorial norm, the Wright Museum challenged their usefulness as educational fodder and relied instead on written plaques, video displays, and sound recordings. Objects of *worship* or for *education* were thus not a part of the Wright Museum's visualization of popular music because their institutional goals were more achievable without them.

I have chosen to end this section by focusing on the Martin Guitar Museum in order to juxtapose it against the Wright Museum. While every other museum I visited is centered around intangible history and culture – music history – the Martin Museum is doing something different by narrativizing the history of a musical instrument rather than a music scene or a genre. Though the company itself is historically significant, Martin Guitar history is not subject to popular worship in the same way rock and roll is, Woodstock is, or Prince is. The objects on display at the Martin Museum are thus purely educational in service of teaching visitors about the historical trajectory of the guitar company. The prevalence of early Martin prototypes, failed exploits like Martin mandolins, and famously-owned Martin products on display contributes directly to the primary mission of Martin Guitar, as their representative explained to me:

> One of [the main takeaways we hope visitors walk away with] is how significant Martin has been in what we know the guitar to be now. I mean so many of the design elements in acoustic guitars, not just looking at Martin but looking at other manufacturers across the industry, are standards because of Martin, whether it's the Dreadnought, 14-fret OM necks, and then also how Martin has been intertwined with pop culture throughout the

> history of the company. And pretty much current events too, so I mean if you look at the 1960s – Joan Baez played her 0-45 at the March on Washington. I mean, so many of these significant events, Martin Guitar has been a part of, especially in the history of music. (Participant 1)

The visual aspects of the display guitars – "the design elements" – are crucial to understanding the trajectory of Martin's success as a company. Informational plaques accompanying the displays helpfully point visitors to the changes in Martin's design over time. For example, one of the most successful and profitable Martin guitar models is the Dreadnought. Alongside a glass display with several Dreadnoughts representing different designs, the plaque reads:

> With ukulele sales falling as fast as the stock market, Martin responded to the pleas of country and blues musicians for a larger, full-volume, big bass, steel-string guitar that could be heard over radio station microphones…When the first attempt was not embraced, Martin redesigned the Dreadnought more like its popular OM models. The new Dreadnought had many OM characteristics: shortened body, new 'belly' bridge, long teardrop-shaped pick guard, scalloped X-bracing, narrower neck and 14 frets clear of the guitar body. It was also more pear-shaped than its tight waisted cousins. The Dreadnought came to define the steel-string, flat-top guitar. Martin stopped preaching about tonal balance and gave guitar players what they wanted – lots of volume and plenty of bass. (Martin Guitar Museum 2023)

In spite of the heavy use of industry jargon, the interactions between the informational plaque and the guitars on display create a reasonably accessible entry point into understanding the design changes of Martin guitars. As visitors progress through the exhibit, words like "full-volume" and "steel-string" are repeatedly defined and contextualized, thus creating an exhibit-specific vocabulary. From the above description, visitors can clearly discern that Dreadnought guitars were designed to be louder, requiring Martin to rethink prioritizing "tonal balance" in pursuit of what their customers wanted. Ultimately, the company designed an incredibly popular model that visitors may even immediately recognize – though not worship –

when they see it on display. In short, the written description provides useful information to frame visitors' understandings of displayed artifacts.[8]

In this section, I distinguished the use of displayed objects in popular music museums as either objects of *worship* or objects for *educational purposes.* While other museums I visited also had artifacts on display, the museums I focused on in this section – the Rock Hall, the Virginia Museum, the Wright Museum, and the Martin Museum – represented the three orientations that pop music museums can have to displayed objects. The Rock Hall blended iconic objects with educational goals by adequately framing material displays with abstract concepts like civil rights, for example. The Virginia Museum had weak educational frameworks, reducing their displayed objects to opportunities for worshiping popular Virginian musicians or simply as visual accompaniments to biographical information. Finally, the Wright and Martin Museums were purely educational with the former having no displayed objects and the latter centering displayed objects. In setting up this dichotomy of *worship* and *education*, I demonstrated that displayed objects in popular music exhibits require the proper framing to be educationally useful or else they are simply something for visitors to look at and worship. Music history museums that center around musical instruments, like the Martin Museum, are less likely to rely on star worship in their educational missions, while institutions like the Rock Hall need to justify the objects they

[8] As I mentioned in the previous chapter in regards to Martin's Picking Parlor, it's crucial to consider that the Martin Museum has more profit-driven motivations than many of the other museums featured in this study – aside from perhaps the Bethel Woods Museum, which is physically and institutionally attached to a for-profit concert venue. The Martin Museum influences visitors to think of Martin Guitars as a company imbued with deeply significant history that renders them as an important guitar company historically and contemporarily dedicated to production quality and customer satisfaction. The introductory panel to the Martin Museum frames the exhibit, and suggests the ultimate conclusion visitors should come to: "Martin Guitars have bridged generations, helped define American musical culture and yet stayed close to their 1830s roots. Their simplicity, craftsmanship and superb tone are timeless. They are truly America's guitar." (Martin Guitar Museum 2023) I don't have the space in this study to dive deeper into the role of profit-driven motivations, though this bears noting.

have on display with useful educational frames. Museums can be thought of simply as repositories of objects for historical preservation, though gaining nonprofit status transforms them into educational institutions that necessarily reconsider how to use artifacts more effectively for educational purposes. In the next section, I will focus on the less-recognized facet of curation that more readily calls into question the educational usefulness of displayed artifacts: *historicity*, or *historical analysis*.

II: Curators as Historians: Historical Analysis in the Museum

Uncovering the element of historical analysis in curation is relevant to a society with an increasing value for historical retellings that center historically-marginalized voices and perspectives (Gibson 2022; Love 2023). In order to expand the definition of *curation* that Reynolds proposes, it is necessary to refer back to Trouillot, who wrote extensively about a rearticulation of history not only as "what happened" but "what is said to have happened," emphasizing the role of biased narration in our collective memory of history. Museums generally operate as sites of historical narration with curators operating as historical narrators, as many of the museum professionals I spoke with corroborated. However, some of the museum professionals I spoke with challenged the extent to which the work they do can be thought of as historical work due to the restrictions that come with working under an institution. In this section, I will be using Trouillot's framework of *historicity* to discuss the extent to which pop music museum curators use their institutional powers to act as historical narrators, thus unpacking another element of curatorial practices in popular music museums. This discussion will involve yet another dichotomy: curators who are *connected to the historical material* versus those who are not. Personal connections to historical material will yield a fruitful discussion of

the role of *personal biases* in history-telling and the extent to which they impact unbiased historical analysis.

Historical work is far from *objective* – a term used to define unbiased, sometimes scientific study of factual material – and is instead a more creative process than commonly thought. Historians often work to narrativize the messiness of history as well as challenge commonly accepted historical fact, occupying themselves with deep research using trained analytical methods. Though museums wrestle with historical education as their primary institutional goal, do curators undertake the same level of historical work as historians in order to teach the most relevant and all-encompassing historical material possible to the public? The representative from the Bethel Woods museum raised a crucial distinction between their work as a curator versus their work as a historian, indicating that these responsibilities are actually in direct tension rather than in harmony:

> When I was a young curator, I was very idealistic…thinking that we should be – everything should be about authenticity…We should be doing history from the bottom up. And like that, I moved into the profession with the theoretical standpoints of authenticity, and that it should be about the people and [I] hated the decisions being made above me…Today my experience is I understand why those decisions are made. [It] doesn't serve anybody by telling the truth. If it served us to tell the truth, we [would] have a different political structure than we have right now. And I'm not saying we don't tell the truth at all. I'm saying history is interesting. I love doing history…And so then I think if you, as a historian, then you'd look at that and you say, well, then was Woodstock 69 what we say it was or was that different too? And you just aren't asking the right questions, the historical material. But again, so as a historian, we can look at that and we can do an investigation that's very interesting into the historical material. As a curator, you got to figure out how to make that palatable to a general audience that really just wants to see Hendrix playing the Star Spangled Banner and as a museum director, you have to make that institutionally successful to where you can justify your budget. (Participant 4)

This participant explicitly states that the occupational orientations of curators and historians are in tension because of the situatedness of curators within public-facing institutions. Historians can

more readily and freely investigate historical material while curators need to make history "palatable to a general audience." As an "idealistic" historian, they carried "theoretical standpoints of authenticity" – a dedication to history-telling – to their curatorial practices, but eventually discovered "it doesn't serve anybody by telling the truth." Simply, they realized that their work as a curator required actually *curating* their exhibits to visitors' tastes and expectations rather than incorporating potentially challenging historical analyses into Woodstock exhibits. Though the Bethel Woods Museum is institutionally dedicated to educating visitors about the cultural significance of Woodstock, the participant suggests there is a lack of complete truth in their exhibits in order to curate a distinctly "Woodstock experience" of peace, love, and music in the way most visitors desire or expect. Therefore, while curation can necessarily involve educational history-telling, curation can also involve a deliberate framing of historical fact to satiate general palates and corroborate public conceptions of historical events. In short, curatorial work and historical work are not immediately compatible because the educational goals of museums require easily accessible, digestible, potentially watered-down historical information to accommodate the majority of visitors.

The Bethel Woods representative mostly focuses on how *visitors*' *expectations* and *institutional limitations* frame curators' narrativization of history, though it's important to consider that curators *also* have feelings and opinions about history that are biased, greatly impacting how they retell history to visitors. In the case of pop music museums, personal biases can come through with aesthetic taste impacting their curatorial judgment (i.e. disliking the genre being exhibited) or with lived firsthand experiences of music scenes impacting their historical understanding. Most of the curators I spoke with had some kind of background in or relationship

to music – either disclosing themselves as musicians or as music history super-fans – with the exception of Bethel's representative and the Wright Museum's representative, both of whom have backgrounds in history more generally. The Bethel representative's explicit dislike of and self-professed disinterest in Woodstock allowed them to compile a more distanced historical analysis of the event, though they expressed it wouldn't "serve anybody" – particularly, the goals of the institution – by bringing this analysis into the exhibit for public consumption. Similarly, the museum professional from the Wright commented on their positionality as someone with little musical background and no interest in jazz in regards to their work on the Detroit Jazz exhibit. However, the Wright representative's more distanced perspective contributed more productively to their institution's goals, as they explain:

> Just doing the general research is really how I organized the exhibition and learned about the history, but I have no personal relationship really to music or jazz. I don't really particularly like jazz. I listened to a lot of it while I was doing the exhibit, just to kind of get in the spirit of it…One of our staff members…is really rooted in the jazz community. [They have] a wonderful singing voice. And so just as another part of [their] life, [they sing] in the jazz community and so [they were] actually a big help as well. But I found because [they were] so closely related to the people that [they were] talking about, [they] had a really hard time with…editing down stories because I think a lot of it all feels important, all of it feels really vital. But we have found that visitors will only read a certain percentage of text panels and so there's really no point in having 200, 300 words and people are going to read 25. And so [they] had a really hard time making those decisions. And so sometimes I feel like you really don't need to have a big background in the topic you're researching and sometimes it's helpful, because it's easier to separate, you know, the things that sometimes you have to edit out to make it – to make an exhibit feel engaging and inviting. (Participant 5)

This participant observed divergent curatorial ethoses between themselves as someone without personal interest in the exhibit versus another staff member that was personally involved in the Detroit jazz community. Because they "don't really particularly like jazz," this representative was able to engage less emotionally with the subject material and think more critically about

how general audiences would perceive the exhibit. They assert that "it's helpful" rather than a hindrance to have little personal stake in the topic being curated because then curators can narrow down exhibit materials and make it more "engaging and inviting." Similarly to the representative from Bethel Woods, this participant's lack of personal interest in their area of research makes it easier to historically analyze.

Crucially however, while the Bethel Woods professional was institutionally restricted to keep their historical analysis to themselves in favor of public perception of Woodstock, the Wright professional's (seemingly) unbiased historical analyses were institutionally preferred to the firsthand accounts of a Detroit jazz community member. This is an important yet knotty distinction that brings Bourdieu's social field theory back into the frame. Whose voices, experiences, and perspectives are valued at the expense of others' in popular music museums? Are they sites *for* pop music fans and musicians *by* pop music fans and musicians to retell pop history? Or are they sites for deft, distanced historians to distill pop music history into accessible, curated lessons? The extent to which *emotional connections* impact history-telling differentially influences how visitors ultimately receive exhibits in popular music museums. In the rest of this section, I will discuss the two sides of historical curation that emerged in this study: *exclusionary narratives* and *inclusive retellings*.

As the Wright representative says, curation involves both emphasizing some details and omitting others in order to craft the past into a linear historical narrative. Editing out details can make an exhibit more streamlined though it can also force curators to sacrifice important historical details, making historical narratives inherently limited and *exclusionary*. The representative from MOMENT bemoaned this process, saying:

> The whole process for me has been realizing how much you have to leave out. So every time we do an event [and] talk about anything, it's like, it's all reductive. It's basically editing, editing, and cutting stuff out. And that's always hard but that's kind of why it makes sense that you, if you can support these kind of more localized people who really care deeply about these things and have the knowledge to be those repositories and places for people to send them to when they want to learn more but have them feel that this is a safe umbrella for them to represent what they're doing in some ways. So that's what I'm hoping I mean I don't know how – I still have to see how many – a lot of it has to do with my caution about wanting to approach people without having enough to show them that we can offer them. You know I need to show our history, our back story, and our funding and be able to say well this is what we can do for you. (Participant 3)

Speaking particularly in the context of MOMENT's centralizing of New York immigrant communities in their retelling of music history, this participant hopes that bringing in community voices can mitigate the extent to which there are historical absences in their exhibits. In centering historically-marginalized voices, this participant hopes to render more accurate, less watered down stories of NYC's music history. Prior to settling on this succinct observation about curation, the participant spoke at length about the varied histories within New York City music, touching on the Fania Records salsa scene, the CBGB's punk scene, the underground disco party scene, the acid jazz movement of the 90s, and much more. The representative remarked repeatedly that this endless variety is "the messy history that makes it so interesting and harder to cover," requiring curators to develop "a container to say, well where do you begin and end? And generally that falls to be…the hitmakers or the genres that were huge" (Participant 3). Again, narrativizing history requires a clear framing that is not necessarily "authentic" to *how history happened* but is instead an artificial formatting apparatus to make history more palatable, accessible, and digestible, as the participants from the Bethel Woods and Wright Museums discussed. In short, the narratives that popular music museums – or any museum, really – relay

to visitors are inherently *exclusionary*, meaning that details need to be omitted in order to clean up the messiness of history and craft a linear narrative.

Understanding that historical narratives are inherently exclusionary is core to understanding curation of historical exhibits in popular music museums. Simply, it is impossible to provide a moment-by-moment retelling of history, so curators need to work with the resources, information, and space that they have at their disposal to make streamlined narratives. Importantly, these historical narratives can be strongly biased based on who the narrators are (Trouillot 1995). The authority of historical narrators can influence the public to take their retelling of the past unchallenged, perpetuating the proliferation of false, inaccurate, or incomplete historical narratives. When it comes to popular music canons, this is widely recognized to be the case; popular music history has largely been retold through the white lens, the male lens, the straight lens, marginalizing or co-opting the musical innovations of Black women, queer people, and more in favor of a narrative for cis-white-het men by cis-white-het men (Love 2023).

The Rock Hall's monolithic status in popular music historical work has situated them as the nexus of this problem, particularly as it relates to their Hall of Fame. It's crucial to note that the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame is a separate, yet related, entity from the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame *Museum*. While the museum houses rockstar ephemera, archival documents, and historical exhibits, the Hall of Fame is an internationally recognized gallery of honored and respected influential figures in music history (particularly American, though not exclusively) (Love 2023; *Rock Hall* 2023). A board of music industry executives, journalists, and the like make up the Nominating Committee – the group that decides on the musical acts that will be nominated for

induction into the Hall of Fame. In recent years, the Hall of Fame has been derided by musicians and fans for its "sexist [and racist] gatekeeping," as grunge musician Courtney Love wrote in her scathing *Guardian* article from this March. Women musicians, Black musicians, and queer musicians have been largely marginalized in the Hall of Fame, which has thus denied rock and roll history of its true beginnings with pioneers like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a Black queer woman who was eventually inducted in 2018 (Love 2023; Wald 2007; Participant 7). The representative from the Rock Hall discussed these historical exclusions and commented on how the Museum and Hall of Fame have finally come together for the first time to make reparations, starting with a shared mission statement:

> 'Born from the collision of rhythm and blues, country, and gospel, rock and roll is a spirit that is inclusive and ever changing. Rock & Roll Hall of Fame celebrates the sound of youth culture, and honors the artists whose music connects us all.' And this [mission statement] is so exciting to me…I think it's so great that we're aligning on something that – particularly the word inclusive. I think that's super special because not only are we defining a broader and more inclusive definition of rock and roll as an art form, but truly I believe that museums should be for everyone. So we want to celebrate inclusivity in our exhibits and in the diversity of the artists that we're portraying and celebrating. (Participant 7)

As the participant states, this new institutional dedication to inclusivity involves accessibility – "museums should be for everyone" – in the space of the museum itself as well as diversity in historical retellings of rock and roll's past. The participant went on to describe an in-development exhibit called the Pioneers Gallery, which will "paint a better picture of the early 1950s era of rock and roll" (Participant 7). Crucially, the Pioneers Gallery will be exhibited in the space that was previously an Elvis Presley-exclusive exhibit. Rather than centering Elvis as the most important figure in rock and roll, the Rock Hall is purposefully narrativizing the origins of rock and roll to include historically-marginalized pioneers (such as Chuck Berry, Wanda

Jackson, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe) in alignment with newfound institutional values for diversity and inclusion. This massive overhaul of a central exhibit can be taken as a metaphor for historical reparations. In decentering Elvis, the exhibit will instead center previously-peripheral figures, thus recognizing the history as even messier and more complicated than before. Crucially, socially inclusive retellings of history are no less exclusive than non-socially inclusive renderings of history because, ultimately, all historical narratives are *exclusive* in favor of linearity for public consumption.

Connecting this section to the overarching theme of *education*, it's important to ask why curators necessarily construct historical narratives for visitors to popular music museums. One of Baker's findings in her research team's study of popular music museums is that visitors can be conceptualized as "amateur experts," or "fans or enthusiasts who possess vernacular knowledge that may conflict with the narratives being presented within exhibitions" (Baker 2019, pp. 105). Popular culture is a field in which social actors compile personal emotions, experiences, and perspectives about cultural products, events, or figures. Simply, historical or intellectual understandings about popular culture are complicated by *taste*, the everyday aesthetic preferences of people like museum visitors. This suggests that popular music museum visitors may already know – or think they already know – more than the curators have to offer them. Personal passions and tastes complicate education, as in the Wright representative's coworker or the MOMENT representative's endless knowledge of NYC music history. However, in order for museums to be accessible to the general public, exhibits need to contain streamlined, basic narratives as a way of framing educational content so that all visitors can understand. As nearly all of the professionals I spoke with suggested, this inevitably leads to incomplete or simplistic

renderings of history, though perhaps museums are simply not yet equipped for full-fledged historical work, as the Bethel Woods professional stated. Building further on the example of the Rock Hall's Pioneers Gallery being renovated, I will focus in the following section on the element of *space* in museums as yet another factor that can impact museums' educational goals.

III: Spatial Analysis: Museums as Space and Place

It would be remiss to omit any kind of spatial analysis of these museums, as they are undoubtedly spaces imbued with social meaning (Gieryn 2000). In this section, I will focus on three distinct aspects of space as they emerged in this study: *exhibit layouts*, *architecture*, and *place-making*. Each of these aspects differently relates to museum goals of educating visitors, which I will discuss to close out this chapter.

Curation necessarily involves the manipulation of space just as much as curation is limited by spatial conditions. Curators' treatment of space in museums contributes to larger educational goals, as visitors will navigate the museum space through curated guidance. In fact, *education* is etymologically linked to *guidance, leading,* and *directing*, actions involving forward movement, introducing a conceptual linkage between education and space. Museum visitors, then, are spatially guided through the museum in such a way that informs their educational journey, and curators are aware of this as they design exhibits. Returning briefly to the Rock Hall, the representative made a passing comment about visitors' spatial engagement with the museum:

> But speaking of the museum as it is currently, almost the entire ground floor – which is the largest exhibit space in the museum in the Ahmet Ertegun gallery – is the Legends of Rock space. So that includes some of the you know, the big tentpole names like your Beatles, your Rolling Stones. But there's also Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. There's also the Roots Gallery, which is kind of the first thing you see if you go into the museum and follow the flow that one is supposed to. Not everybody does that. But the Roots gallery

> discusses those genres that came together to form rock and roll, so r&b and blues and country, folk and gospel. (Participant 7)

Signs throughout the Rock Hall Museum gently indicate which exhibit visitors should go to next, though "not everybody does that." The layout of the museum is roughly chronological, starting with an exhibit that showcases the roots of rock music, though visitors may be more allured by "the big tentpole names" in the Legends of Rock space, zipping quickly through the Roots Gallery to get to the icons they came for. Philip Wright discusses this element of museum visitor experiences, particularly in the context of art museums, saying:

> If it is agreed that this sharing of knowledge should be the primary concern of museums…several specific design and display imperatives come into focus. For their objective will no longer be merely the exposure of [knowledge]...but a range of displays with subjects to tackle and stories to tell, in a manner that is both attractive and comprehensible to a range of audiences…It would be unwise to assume that most visitors know where they want to go or what they want to see. The curator and the museum's governing body might therefore begin by agreeing what the overriding philosophical and museological principles of the institution's internal organisation are to be, and which are the most important experiences and services it will offer its visitors, *and then publicise such information.* (Wright 1989, pp. 135-136)

Visitors' navigation through the museums is a vital factor to consider when designing exhibits, as Wright discusses expertly here. Similarly to constructing historical narratives, exhibit layouts need to be easily accessible, "attractive, and comprehensible to a range of audiences." In spite of this, visitors may freely dissuade signage if not on a guided tour because it's impossible to predict where all visitors will go or "what they want to see." Keeping rogue visitors in mind, museum curators persist in designing accessible and comprehensive layouts, such as the Rock Hall, which is currently working on remodeling and expanding the museum to make it more physically accessible (Participant 7).

Exhibit layouts are integral to the educational effectiveness of popular music museums. Each museum I visited had a distinct layout with exhibits laid out in a somewhat linear chronological fashion or separated by theme, such as the Martin Museum's displays categorized chronologically by company leadership or the Virginia Museum's room by room thematic organization. Navigating these layouts as a visitor was fairly intuitive, as nearly every museum I visited had arrows with directions or signs marking exhibit themes. Themes helped frame exhibits for visitors, such as the Rock Hall's division of artifacts into relevant music scenes – Supremes' stage costumes in the Motown section or Misfits stage costumes in the NYC punk section. With the exception of the Prince Immersive Experience and the Chess Records Studio, most museums encouraged visitors to freely turn back to previous exhibits in order to ensure they didn't miss anything. The Prince Experience had attendants in each room that encouraged visitors to move on if it began to get crowded, while the Chess Studio could only be experienced as a guided tour.

Layouts were greatly limited by what the architectural structures of the rooms afforded them. For example, at the Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit, the circular shape of the main building guides the visitors smoothly through each description of the Black Detroit musicians featured along the walls of the Detroit Performs exhibit. The Detroit Performs exhibit highlights the majorly influential Detroit-based musicians across several different genres and scenes including techno, classical, jazz, hip-hop, and more. Each musician and their accompanying description is held on equal footing with those around them, and this can only be effectively done with the circular design of the building itself. The architectural magnificence of museums like

the Wright and even the Rock Hall speaks to the role of external funding as crucial to the development of institutional prestige, and vice versa.

This contrasts greatly with the unremarkable architecture of the Virginia Musical Museum, which is made up of regular square rooms that lead to some musical acts being relegated unceremoniously to far corners of the room. Interestingly, one Virginian artist was given an entire room to himself: Wayne Newton. The Wayne Newton exhibit was located in the last room of the museum, marked strikingly by Newton's Roadster car parked in the middle of the room. Newton is hardly the most famous musician to come out of Virginia, though the limited space in the Virginia Museum forced his exhibit to be unintentionally emphasized as both the only Virginian musician on display to have a whole exhibit dedicated to him and the last thing visitors see before they leave. Again, the building is not any particular architectural marvel, contributing to the curators having to make the best of the space, though the participant suggested that they're currently raising money to do renovations and an expansion (Participant 2). Curatorial techniques, thus, are greatly limited by space, leading to unintentional curatorial decisions that impact educational engagement with the museum as a whole.

While all of the museums I visited – with the exception of MOMENT – necessarily contended with layout designs and architectural limitations, only three had a relationship to the *historic sites* they were narrativizing: the Bethel Woods Museum, Chess Records Studios, and the Rock Hall. It is crucial to note that, while the previous examples dealt with *space*, historic sites are distinctive as *places*. While space is more general, *place* emphasizes specificity and the social and cultural contexts that give space meaning as a particular place (Gieryn 2000). The museums I will discuss to close out this section build on the existing meanings related to the

historic sites they are situated on/within, which is a different reckoning with space than the other museums that are sites of their own, bringing in preexisting emotional and educational bearings. In this final section, I will briefly discuss Bethel and Chess' relationships to their respective historical sites as they relate to museum goals of education. This requires returning to my discussion of *immersion* from the previous chapter in order to establish an overlap between immersion as entertaining and immersion as educational.

Bethel, New York, is home to Yasgur Farm, the land on which Woodstock 1969 was held. The Museum was built in the proximity of this historic site and purposefully incorporates this fact into their museum experience. I want to return to a previously-cited quotation from the Bethel Museum representative that I used in the context of *immersion* in order to bring it to bear on the role of historic sites in museum's educational goals:

> When you're on the field [where Woodstock happened], you get it. There's something about the field…There is a magic to being on the site…It feels like we're at the festival…There's something about the space that we're in right now that…you get a sensation in the landscape that is created by the landscape because you know this is where Woodstock happened, whatever you're feeling at that time, you feel *must be* what that person who was here in 1969 felt…There's a real tangible power of that in the historic landscape that people get. (Participant 4)

As the participant rather poignantly states, "there is a *magic* to being on the site" where Woodstock happened. To demystify this a bit, this "magic" can rather be thought of as a generated approximation of "what that person who was here in 1969 felt." In utilizing the historic space of Woodstock in the Bethel Woods Museum experience, the curators purposefully want to reproduce in visitors the *feeling* of experiencing Woodstock. As I've discussed, affective, emotional aspects of museum experiences are typically relegated to entertainment goals, though emotions can inevitably become a part of the educational experience if they are core to

intellectual comprehension. To understand Woodstock, as the museum experiences suggests, visitors need to feel what festival-goers felt, so the museum necessarily attempts to reconstruct the conditions that will generate these emotions.

This framework is present within the Chess Records Studio museum, as well, as I alluded to in the previous chapter. The Blues Heaven Foundation that manages the historical site of Chess Records Studio has intentionally renovated the space in the image of its heydays. Not only does this create a life-size diorama of an influential music studio, but it also invites visitors to approximate the sensation of being an early electric blues recording artist, navigating the same spatial conditions that Muddy Waters or Mick Jagger once did. Reanimating a historic site is not only an entertaining *immersive* technique to travel in time and space but also an educational experience that permits visitors to more readily understand the social life of historical figures or events.

The preservation of historical sites from music history's past in and of itself is an important point to consider in the role of popular music museums as educational institutions. In his article on the relationship between heritage and place-making, Darvill discusses several historical places from popular music's history that have been memorialized by cultural institutions for educational purposes for the public. He discusses the place-making in Memphis, Tennessee, as part of a collective pop culture heritage surrounding rock and roll music and, in particular, Elvis Presley (Darvill 2014). The existence and high visitation of recognized historic spaces from rock and roll's past betrays the deep, long-lasting cultural significance of rock and roll – and popular music more broadly – for American audiences. Darvill concludes his study by

returning back to the properties of popular music as crucial for understanding the staying power of historic sites in teaching future generations about their cultural heritage, saying:

> For many people, popular music has a lot to answer for as the ultimate ephemeral, disposable, transitory, cultural phenomenon, and that is how it is sometimes used. But it is also something that people cling to for years…For many it is the soundtrack of a life made real at key life-changing events…It is the ultimate intangible heritage with a global reach made tangible at a local level and brought to life through events, places and artefacts with lasting characteristics. (*Ibid*., pp. 472-473)

Simply, popular culture is core to everyday social life for many people. Though popular music often requires defending as legitimate cultural heritage – as many of the museums here embark on, the work of making music tangible undertaken by the development of museums and preserved historic sites demonstrates mass efforts to ensure the memory of popular music in future generations. Ultimately, this is an educational task rather than an entertaining enterprise. Using space, whether it be the construction of cultural institutions or heritage sites, persists as an effective means of making music history accessible and tangible, thus creating new memories that legitimize popular cultural heritage.

IV: Popular Music History Education Challenges Cultural Hierarchy

In this chapter, I focused on the educational goals of popular music museums as they arose in curatorial techniques like displaying artifacts, narrativizing history, and utilizing space and place. Sometimes these techniques overlap with the entertaining aspects of popular music museums, though these methods – which are also typical of other types of history museums – ultimately serve as educational tools for teaching visitors about popular music history. Educational missions are core to most museums, though they are especially complicated in popular music museums by the legacy of popular culture as "disposable," "low," or culturally insignificant. In educating visitors about popular music history and connecting music to political,

historical, and cultural contexts, popular music is ultimately recognized as having educational value *and* as being valuable shared cultural heritage. To close this chapter, I will connect popular music history education to the legacy of *cultural hierarchy* by briefly bringing in the culturally subversive elements of popular music itself, particularly rock and roll.

One of the reasons why popular music museums are denigrated by musicians as antithetical to musical culture is because of the inherent subversiveness and rebelliousness accompanying much of pop music genres, beginning most notably with early rock and roll. Rock and roll was demonized in the 1950s and 60s by many Americans who felt the music was corrupting the youth with its often blatant sexuality as well as its association with Black musical expressions. The primarily racist and anti-Black perceptions of rock music during this time was compatible with equally prejudiced conceptualizations of the music as simply "low culture," aesthetically different from "higher" musical cultural forms like big band jazz and European classical music. A passage from Martinez's historical analysis of 1950s rock and roll using critical race theory draws out these elements of rock and roll in relation to Chuck Berry, one of the earliest originators of rock:

> In [the song] "Roll Over Beethoven," Chuck Berry is writing not of love and romance at all – the themes of his day. He is writing from the standpoint of someone who has decided to write a letter to the disc jockey…asking the DJ to play an R&B and perhaps even a rock and roll song. In this song, there is a notably defiant stance both from the perspective of taking the initiative to contact the local DJ, but also the defiance stems from something altogether revolutionary. Chuck Berry deliberately places classical music in his lyrical sites as the song claims the new R&B record will completely overturn the frames of music history that have passed before it…In other words, Chuck Berry subverts the norms of high and low culture and all the trappings of elitism in a song. (Martinez 2015, pp. 204)

Rock and roll was subversive in a number of ways, as Martinez points out in this passage and the article more broadly. This popular music brought to the mainstream an unapologetic emphasis on

sexuality, newfound (though not altogether unrestricted) artistic agency for Black musicians, and a decidedly antagonistic positioning towards "high culture" in the form of classical music. This granular example – a rock and roll hit song that called for classical music to move aside for rock – can be taken as a poignant metaphor for the project of popular music museums: asserting the cultural value and significance of popular music for people who had (and have) no access to or no interest in the stuff of "high" culture. This is not to suggest that the cultural value of classical composers like Beethoven should be denigrated to make room for rock and roll musicians like Chuck Berry, but instead to challenge the notion that there should be a hierarchy at all. Like the circular exhibition walls of the Wright Museum's Detroit Performs exhibit, music history's figures – in classical, folk, and popular scenes – should be on equal footing, especially as they are displayed in educational institutions that legitimize cultural value. Perhaps this is the educational goal of popular music museums as a social field, then: to teach visitors to reconsider the socially-embedded value judgments of cultural hierarchy by entering a space that treats popular music as something equally worthy of serious attention, preservation, and education like "high" cultural products.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Popular Music Museums as Legitimizing Sites for Memory

In this ethnographic and interview-based study, a balanced dichotomy between education and entertainment emerged as the primary interacting mechanisms of popular music museums. Though museums are historically considered to be sites of education, curators increasingly incorporated entertaining features in their exhibits – as well as facilities like museum cafés and gift shops – in order to draw in more visitors (Greenhalgh 1989). This relationship shifts slightly in the context of popular music museums because the primary educational content is already potentially entertaining for visitors. Additionally, education about popular music history is seemingly lightweight and inconsequential, contributing to the misconception that any intellectual pursuits involving popular music are trivial matters of entertainment. In an educational and cultural heritage institution that centers "low cultural" popular entertainment rather than bringing it in as a marketing strategy, how is the museum's original purpose, inner workings, and impact subverted or radically changed?

This study tackled both of these two major misconceptions – 1) popular music is the domain of "low" entertainment and 2) museums are educational spaces about "high" cultural products – and attempted to turn them on their heads. First, popular music's entrance into museums inherently recognizes it as a meaningful and valued cultural domain, rendering its designation as "low" or "high" irrelevant. Second, the burgeoning industry of popular music museums challenges museums' perceived association with "high" culture as well as what education in museums necessarily looks like. Education can involve immersive techniques, interactive exhibits, and listening to musical examples, or it may involve fewer displayed objects

and more written plaques. Most importantly, learning about music history involves a more direct engagement with visitors and curators' personal taste, experiences, and memories. What, then, is being learned by pop music museum visitors who already perceive themselves as "amateur experts" (Baker 2019)?

With cultural hierarchy debunked and the role of education subverted, popular music museums as a whole may be more aptly perceived as *sites that legitimize memory, nostalgia,* and *popular culture* more broadly. This framework more accurately captures the work of popular music museums, taking into consideration what the intended blending of entertainment and education of music history is meant to accomplish. Building on Baker's analysis of popular music museums as cultural heritage institutions, it appears that popular music museum curators, as opposed to only *educating* visitors, are instead legitimizing pre-existing emotions about and memories of popular music history. For visitors, the delight of popular music museums is seeing the musicians you know and love – and possibly even saw in concert – honored and commemorated within a cultural institution, especially one that's historically dedicated to "high" culture. Both museums and popular music are subverted in this interacting relationship – constructing a space that validates popular culture and questions its designation as "low," unworthy of intellectual engagement, and as being made up of fleeting, passing crazes of the general American public.

How can my resulting theoretical framework that considers popular music museums as sites of memory and taste legitimization rather than merely sites of historical education be used or challenged with further research? It's important to note that, in the words of the theorist Stafford Beer**,** "the purpose of a system," or in this case, an institution, "is what it does" rather

than what it purports to do (Beer 2002). Though popular music museums are self-professed as spaces of education, it's crucial to pay special attention to what exactly it is that they are doing and how they actually operate. How do visitors engage with popular music museums and what do they get out of them? Do all visitors necessarily learn something about music history? Do all visitors necessarily have a good, entertaining time? Do all visitors necessarily reminisce about their popular music memories? All of these questions require further research that focuses more critically on visitor perspectives in order to more adequately pinpoint the purpose popular music museums serve for visitors. Though it appears that the curatorial practices of museum professionals at pop music museums are meant to reproduce and legitimize memories/emotions, researchers should bring this to bear on actual visitors' perspectives.

Additionally, as Van den Haak expertly states (cited in the introduction), sociologists still need to contend with the danger of reproducing the language and misconceptions embedded within cultural hierarchy discourse. In this study, I merely scratched the surface of subverting cultural hierarchy's hold on our collective meaning-making processes. I argue that popular music museums *legitimize* popular culture as intellectually and culturally valuable through its specific embeddedness within the social field of museums. However, *legitimization* suggests that popular music's cultural value needs to fulfill the standards or rules of "high" culture in order to be considered equally culturally valid. Further research should tackle this concern, perhaps engaging more critically with the project of popular music museums as a way to challenge its co-optation of "high" culture in order to prove popular culture's significance.

Another point that future researchers can address is the ways in which this framework may extend to other cultural heritage institutions. For example, museums like the National

Comedy Museum in Jamestown, NY, or the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY, are sites that honor as well as educate visitors about comedy and baseball, respectively (*Baseball Hall* 2023; *Comedy Center* 2023). Can my theoretical framework of popular music museums as sites of memory and taste legitimization be applied to all popular *culture* museums across the board? Further research should investigate other popular culture museums to see how they may differ from popular music museums' project and cultural impact.

How can popular music museum curators take these findings and apply them to their curatorial practices? There are many potential practical applications of my study to popular music museum work. For example, the eight museums I studied can each be taken as individual cases of pop music museums representing different relationships to history, curatorial techniques, contemporary music scenes, community engagement, and more. This survey sample of a range of popular music museums can be used to evaluatively compare and contrast the effectiveness of their methods. For example, the virtual museum MOMENT – a small-scale, community-oriented non profit – can be juxtaposed with the Rock Hall – the monolithic repository rock and roll history attraction. MOMENT's hesitation to open up a physical museum speaks to several different institutional limitations and ethical dilemmas that are posed when bringing community work to a more public-facing institution. Additionally, thinking of pop music museums as spaces of memory/taste/emotion legitimization rather than educational institutions may differently frame how curators create their exhibits. Museums that favor education over memory may use certain curatorial practices (written plaques and interactive exhibits, i.e.) more than others (immersive techniques and self-curation, i.e.).

More than anything else, this study demonstrates the cultural significance of American popular music as a site of meaning-making and nostalgia for the general public. Popular music provides a space for identity construction, community building, creative expression, political messages, escapism, hope, and more. Its general accessibility that reaches people from varying classes, races, genders, sexualities, and abilities speaks to popular music's potential to mean something different from individual to individual. The world of "high" cultural products, on the other hand, has been historically gate-kept by the classed elite, with limited accessibility across class lines in particular (Bourdieu 1984). Popular music museums provide a physical site for collective celebration of popular music's past as well as an immersive space for educating visitors without specific memories of the popular music scenes in question. Again, popular music museums' simultaneous production and reproduction of nostalgia is key to its memory and taste legitimization for all visitors.

Finally, it's possible to connect this study to the burgeoning body of work on *cultural omnivorousness*. The museum field is no longer limited to the stuff of "high culture," expanding to the world of "low" popular culture by honoring music, sports, comedy, and more. In effect, the museum field reflects the image of a cultural omnivore, acknowledging the cultural value of classical music as well as rock and roll. What better place to look to than museums as places for reflecting what parts of our collective cultural history we care to remember? Our culture *is* omnivorous, made up of the sounds of cellos, electric guitars, synths, banjos, and pianos, each with their own complicated histories, meanings, and values for museums to remind us of.

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