Takin’ Care of Business: Rock, Pop and Jazz at the NLC/ En avant la musique ! Le rock, le pop et le jazz à la BNC

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When I began my tenure at the National Library of Canada (NLC) in 1988, I was particularly interested in gauging the strengths and weaknesses of the music collections. Based on that assessment, the Music Division could set strategic objectives regarding acquisitions in order to address perceived weaknesses, while availing ourselves of opportunities to exploit the collections’ strengths. A weakness identified at that time, which I felt would require long-term attention, was the small number of archives from outside the realm of so-called “classical” music.

The imbalance between classical- and popular-music archives at the NLC was probably a reasonable indicator of the state of knowledge about the NLC’s music collections in the music industry across Canada: while people in the classical realm may have known about the Library to varying degrees, most in the non-classical sector probably knew nothing at all about it.

This struck me as an issue that required special attention for several reasons:

1. The Library’s collections of music monographs, sheet music and sound...
recordings were comprehensive in their coverage of musical genres, so there was no institutional requirement for, or predisposition towards, favouring one kind of music over another.

2. Whether or not popular music appealed to anyone at the National Library, it was not our place to make value judgments about it.

3. Popular culture in all its manifestations has become the object of scholarly research, and is now entrenched in mainstream degree programs of numerous Canadian and foreign universities. Since the NLC is the only federal institution in the country charged with comprehensively collecting and preserving the evidence of musical activity in Canada, our obligation was clear.

4. When measuring by such yardsticks as the number of Canadians who prefer popular music to classical, or by the cultural and economic impacts of the popular-music industry in modern-day Canadian life versus those of the classical “industry” (if we can even call it that), it quickly became apparent that if an accurate history of musical activity in Canada in the second half of the 20th century were ever to be written, it would have to be based on documentation from multiple archives representing a broad cross-section of the music business.

Since passive collecting by the NLC prior to 1988 had not achieved such results, and since no other institution in the country was safeguarding popular-music archives at that time, I decided in 1989 to begin an outreach and
solicitation campaign in the popular-music sector. I wrote to about three dozen well-known musicians covering the entire popular-music spectrum, including jazz, rock, pop, country and folk music. I hoped that if the NLC were able to make even a few high-profile archival acquisitions from that field, others might hear about it via word of mouth or the media, and take the initiative to contact the Library.

My solicitation effort resulted in two major acquisitions: the NLC began acquiring the archives of the jazz pianist Oscar Peterson in 1991, and those of the rock guitarist and songwriter Randy Bachman in 1992. As hoped, these donations led to others, including the archives of the Grammy-award-winning songwriter Jim Vallance, the internationally renowned record producer Bruce Fairbairn, and the expatriate jazz writer Gene Lees. Those acquisitions were followed by still others, including the archives of the Rosnick-Mackinnon agency in Toronto, an award-winning producer of advertising jingles, and those of A & F Music in Vancouver, a prestigious talent and booking agency representing Sarah McLachlan, Joni Mitchell, Anne Murray, Bryan Adams, and other major artists. The NLC is currently in contact with more musicians who are at various stages in the process of organizing their materials for donation. So, the anticipated spin-off dividends of two high-profile archival acquisitions from the popular-music sector were realized.

Ten years later, certain sectors of the popular-music realm are not yet
represented at the NLC. We have not acquired major archives from the folk- or country-music worlds yet, though we are hopeful that this situation will change before long. Jazz is still underrepresented at the NLC, but we are trying to rectify that, too. We have just begun another solicitation of popular-music archives in collaboration with the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). In 1995, the NLC entered into a cooperative arrangement with the CMC, whereby the Library will safeguard the paper documents and sound recordings in musicians’ archives, while the Museum will preserve their artifacts (such as musical instruments and gold records). Both institutions are interested in acquiring sufficient archival materials in the next five years or so to permit the creation of one or more major exhibitions devoted to Canadian popular music. Remembering the beginnings of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s, we feel there will be numerous 50th anniversaries in the first decade of the new century, at least one of which could provide us with a golden opportunity to celebrate Canadian achievements in this domain.

Currently, the NLC is preparing a major exhibition to celebrate Oscar Peterson’s 75th birthday in the year 2000. It will be the first-ever exhibition produced by the NLC to focus on a non-classical musician. We hope to create an exhibition with sufficient audio-visual and interactive elements to attract broader and perhaps younger segments of the population than the NLC may have reached with previous exhibitions.

Meanwhile, there has been no weakening in our interest or resolve to

la BNC. L’établissement n’a pas encore acquis d’archives importantes de musique folk ou country, quoique nous espérons que cette situation changera sous peu. De même, le jazz est toujours sous-représenté, mais nous tentons de rectifier cela également. Nous venons tout juste d’amorcer une autre campagne de sollicitation d’archives de musique populaire en collaboration avec le Musée canadien des civilisations (MCC), avec qui la BNC a conclu une entente de collaboration en 1995 en vertu de laquelle la Bibliothèque conservera les archives sur papier et les enregistrements sonores des musiciens, tandis que le Musée conservera leurs artefacts (tels les instruments de musiques et les disques d’or). Les deux établissements désirent acquérir suffisamment de documents d’archives au cours des cinq prochaines années pour être en mesure de monter au moins une exposition principale portant sur la musique populaire canadienne. Pour célébrer les débuts du rock and roll dans les années 1950, de nombreux cinquantenaires seront sans doute organisés au cours de la première décennie du prochain siècle, dont au moins un pourrait constituer pour nous l’occasion idéale de célébrer les réalisations canadiennes dans ce domaine.

À l’heure actuelle, la BNC prépare une importante exposition pour fêter le 75e anniversaire de naissance d’Oscar Peterson en l’an 2000. Il s’agira de la toute première exposition produite par la BNC qui sera axée sur un musicien non rattaché au domaine de la musique classique. Nous souhaitions monter une exposition comportant suffisamment d’éléments audiovisuels et interactifs pour attirer un auditoire plus vaste et peut-être plus jeune que les visiteurs des expositions antérieures de la BNC.

Entre-temps, notre intérêt ou notre détermination quant à l’acquisition d’archives
continue acquiring archives from the classical-music domain. We continue to receive up to 50 archival accessions per year, many from classical musicians. Without this special initiative to acquire and preserve popular-music archives, however, Canada would be in danger of losing the evidence of yet another generation’s accomplishments in that field. Already the archives of musicians from the first half of the 20th century, including those of “La Bolduc,” Hank Snow, Ti-Jean Carignan, the Dumbells, and the Happy Gang, among others, have all been irretrievably lost or dispersed. In other countries, the archives of such figures would be well preserved. We hope this initiative by the NLC Music Division will safeguard the archives of many of Canada’s most renowned popular musicians, thus ensuring that a body of primary documentation will be available for future broadcasters, film-makers, historians and researchers.

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