



## World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004  
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

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**Code Number:** 169-E  
**Meeting:** 135. Latin America and the Caribbean  
**Simultaneous Interpretation:** Yes

Popular Music Collections in Academia: How They Improve the Quality of Life

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#### Abstract:

The principal mission of any academic library is to support the programme of its parent institution. Understandably therefore the collection-building activities of these libraries are guided by institutional programmatic offerings. Wiegand (1979), confirms acceptance of this obligation when he states that academic libraries have mainly been engaged in “pursuing collection-building activities which support academia’s curricular needs” (p.200). In this defining paper on the development of popular culture collections in academic libraries, Wiegand opines that “for decades now, the academic community has been content to allow a narrow definition of culture to dictate the substance of its curricula” *ibid*. Thus, in terms of collection-building undertakings in academic libraries, popular culture has been marginal.

Until very recently, popular culture was not considered an “appropriate” area for academic discourse. Therefore, little import was given to the acquisition of popular culture materials by academic libraries. Changes in curricular offerings and a recognition that all of man’s creative expressions are important aspects of mankind have positively affected how popular culture materials are viewed by librarians, on behalf of their libraries.

In addition to this attitudinal shift towards popular culture, technological advances have improved and increased possibilities for contact with other societies. Technological developments have facilitated expanded opportunities for one society to know about as well as to enjoy the culture of others. In particular, such increased contact has enabled the cultures

of developing countries to become known and enjoyed outside of their locus of origin and practice.

Popular culture has been transformed from being a curiosity and an “exotic” experience to become a creative expression with international appeal, interest and value. Popular culture has moved from the fringes of society to become an important creative, economic and intellectual pursuit for many countries. In addition to popular culture’s intrinsic value, these developments have contributed to making such materials important sources of information in their own right.

While the rationale to correlate collection-building with course programming can be understood, Wiegand poses the following probing question in his paper: “But do these activities take them [the collection-building activities of academic libraries] far enough?” *ibid.*

One of the consequences of limiting collection-building to curricular offerings of the day is that it does not take into account future curricular or general information. For materials that will be important to future academic programming but which are only available for a short time, such a policy is particularly deleterious. Wiegand’s question and the impact of such policies become even more critical to developing countries where popular culture is of paramount importance.

Historically, culture has not been regarded as a priority at both the governmental or university level in most developing countries. Popular culture was often accorded an even lower status. As the production runs of most popular culture releases are of limited duration, in order for universities in developing countries to be able to support popular culture courses it is essential that these institutions acquire popular culture materials at the time of their release. If a narrow definition of culture is used as the basis for building collections in libraries of developing countries, a considerable portion of the culture of these countries will not form part of the resources that are available for current and prospective clients of these libraries. It is therefore imperative that libraries in developing countries extend their definition of culture if they are to be reflective and representative of the intellectual and creative output of their nationals.

Schurk (1980), provides another perspective on the relationship between popular culture and the collections of academic institutions when he asserts that

even though popular culture is no longer the voice in the wilderness it once was in the late sixties and early seventies there still is much skepticism in the library profession as to its validity and place in standard libraries (p.45).

Compounding the effects of Schurk’s observation is the fact that in many developing countries there are librarians who feel that there are more “important” topics that need to be collected as well as pressing services that need to be offered before efforts are made to acquire popular culture materials or resources spent in this regard.

The writings of both Wiegand and Schurk indicate the challenges associated with placing popular culture materials on an equal footing with other cultural expressions. Popular culture materials were often not seen as being valuable information resources. While changing, this mainly apathetic perception negatively affected the acquisition of popular culture materials by libraries, even in societies where such cultural expressions are a vital and vibrant part of their social fabric. One of the negative outcomes of such policies and perceptions is that the popular culture of many developing countries is often located in libraries outside of the country from whence such expressions originate or emanate.

The theoretical constructs used to determine whether a culture is “established” or “popular” are outside the purview of this paper. Suffice it is to say that most of the cultures of developing countries such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean are generally

defined as “popular”. If libraries in developing countries and regions such as ours are to be representational of the intellectual and creative activity and output of their nationals it is essential that they institute collection-building policies which include the acquisition of popular culture materials regardless of their format of release.

In developing countries, the predominant forms of cultural expressions are oral and aural. Thus, sound recordings are an important mechanism for the capture, storage, dissemination and re-enactment of the cultural traditions of such societies. The development and availability of collections of sound recordings are as important to developing countries as the development of print collections were to Europe subsequent to the invention of the Guttenburg Press in the fifteenth century.

Using insights gained from the development of an academic popular music collection in Barbados as its basis, this paper looks at how popular music collections have the potential to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the Caribbean.

#### THE POPULAR MUSIC COLLECTION OF THE LEARNING RESOURCE CENTRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES AT CAVE HILL, BARBADOS

The Learning Resource Centre (LRC) on the Cave Hill, Barbados Campus of The University of the West Indies (UWI) was established in 1979. Its collection-building mandate rests on a number of planks, the main ones being:

1. to provide non-print materials supportive of the Campus’ curriculum;
2. to support the research and outreach activities of the campus in respect of non-print information services; and
3. to develop a collection of Barbadian non-print materials of which sound is one format.

The third aspect of the collection-building policy of the LRC mirrors an institutional mandate that directs the UWI’s libraries to comprehensively acquire copies of all materials that are the intellectual and creative output of Caribbean nationals. Given this mandate and the importance that popular music has to the Caribbean, the development of a popular music collection on each of the campuses of the UWI is a proper response to the stated policy of the institution. While the libraries of the UWI have collections that are generally regional in focus, each campus concentrates on collecting the intellectual and creative work of its nationals. This emphasis is also applied to developing the popular culture holdings of each campus.

From 1979 to the present, the LRC has acquired, either through purchase or donation, a copy of any locatable sound carrier that has been produced in Barbados, regardless of format, content or scope. The LRC also acquires, through similar means, sound carriers of the work of Barbadians who are resident outside of the island as well as recordings of Barbadian artistes that have been produced outside of the island. The broad scope of the LRC’s acquisition policy enables the LRC to develop a collection that is representative of the totality of the Barbadian creative enterprise that is produced in a non-print format, including sound.

In addition to its Barbadian focus, recordings by non-Barbadian artistes are also acquired by the LRC. The work of internationally renown Caribbean artistes like Trinidadians **Sparrow** (Slinger Francisco) and **Kitchener** (the late Aldwyn Roberts) and **Arrow** (Adolphus Cassell), who hails from the island of Montserrat, are examples of non-Barbadian acquisitions. The work of the late **Bob Marley** from Jamaica, whose album *Exodus* and single *One Love* were voted by *Time Magazine* and the BBC (British Broadcasting

Corporation) as the best album and track of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are also found in the LRC's collection. The work of Caribbean artistes such as **Arrow**, **Kitchener**, **Marley** and **Sparrow** cannot be absent from any reputable collection of West Indian popular music.

An important aspect of the LRC's acquisition strategy is the ongoing purchase of pre-owned recordings by Barbadian artistes. As many of the early releases of Barbadian recordings are no longer commercially available, this is an important tactic. While such purchases have been mainly vinyl records from a Danish vendor, purchases of pre-owned recordings have also been made in Barbados and the UK. This aspect of the LRC's retroactive collection-building programme is a vital part of the development of a sound collection that is representative of the totality of Barbadian sound output.

Prior to the latter two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 45s, 78s and LP discs were the principal media used in recording the sound of Barbados. Thus, while compact discs and later technologies form the major part of the collection, it is important that the LRC's collection-building strategy include the acquisition of recordings on these earlier technologies. This is the only way that the LRC's quest to have a comprehensive collection of Barbadian sound may be achieved.

The LRC's growing collection of popular music currently stands at 677 sound tapes, 660 vinyl recordings and 1566 CDs. It is the largest research collection of sound carriers in the English-speaking Eastern Caribbean.

In addition to these sound carriers, the LRC also has about 35 video recordings of or about Caribbean music and or artistes. These videos provide enriching information about the sound of the Caribbean. They also provide information on performance and rendition styles, costuming and musicianship all of which are important facets of any serious study of Caribbean popular music.

Until the campus' curricular offerings were extended to include popular culture, the development of a sound recording collection at the LRC was part of the campus' general strategy to collect Barbadiana. With the introduction of popular culture courses on the campus, the collection has become a critical support resource for the popular music component of these courses. Materials in this collection are used extensively as classroom aids, to support research activities as well as for the general knowledge enrichment of students and staff on the campus.

## **IMPORTANCE OF POPULAR MUSIC TO THE CARIBBEAN**

Nurse (2001), in a seminal investigation into the music industries of the countries in the Caribbean remarks: "the cultural industries sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world-economy" (p.1). A newspaper report on a recent seminar hosted by the Corporate Affairs and Intellectual Property Office (CAIPO) of the Ministry of International Business in Barbados confirms the importance of popular culture enterprises to the economy of the island. This report states that "entertainment, the arts and their spin-off businesses such as royalties and the sale of equipment, bring in roughly Bds \$97 million<sup>1</sup> a year in revenue to the Barbados economy" (Daily Nation, Wednesday, July 21, 2004, p.4A). Of this amount, popular music accounts for approximately Bds \$11 million.

While popular culture is a creative activity, this report confirms the value of popular culture's contribution to the Barbadian economy through its expression as a measurable

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<sup>1</sup>Since 1975, the rate of exchange for the Barbadian dollar has been fixed at Bds\$1 = US.50¢

economic indicator. Although the example given comes from Barbados, popular culture activities are also economically important to other developing countries.

One of the advantages of having cultural industries as part of national economic endeavours is that culture does not require elaborate infrastructural inputs or capital investment to become an industry. The principal “raw material” of any cultural industry is the inherent talent of its “workers”. The innate creative ability of people is the major prerequisite of any cultural enterprise. Consequently, cultural industries based in indigenous cultural expressions become very attractive to countries that are hard currency-strapped. Cultural enterprises do not need large sums of foreign currency to purchase extra-territorially produced sophisticated machinery that are usually prerequisites for manufacturing and other economic pursuits.

Given that cultural industries are predominately human-intensive economic activities, these industries are of value in another economic regard. They have the ability to address the high un-employment levels that exist in many developing countries. The possibility of providing employment opportunities, especially among the youth further recommends the development of cultural industries. Employment opportunities in popular music do not only occur at the level of the front-line entertainers, but also in a slew of supporting services. These include artiste and other managerial areas, technical support services such as sound and lighting, costuming and a range of musical services such as arranging, producing and playing instruments. Popular music therefore provides employment in many spheres and at many levels. Gainful employment is not only financially beneficial but it also enhances self-respect and personal pride.

For Barbados there is another aspect of the cultural industry sector that is of importance. This is the development of spin-off businesses and services that have become an earner of foreign exchange for the island. These pursuits include the sale of support services for cultural industries to other islands in the region - examples of which are stage management, lighting, facility and venue management and services, technician services as well as equipment rental and sales. All of these economic activities make positive contributions to improving the quality of life at both the national and individual level. The development of popular culture collections in academic libraries is therefore not only important to national development but given the importance of cultural industries to developing countries it becomes a cardinal professional responsibility.

Music has always been an important part of Caribbean life. Music was as important to those who colonized the region as it was to those who were transported to the Caribbean in one form of bondage or another. Music remains an important part of Caribbean life. Any close scrutiny of Caribbean music today reveals identifiable vestiges of the predominant cultural groups that settled the region over the last 400 years. Rhythmic patterns from the regions and countries of Africa, Europe, India and others are interwoven in the musical texts of many countries of the Caribbean. Indeed, this fusion of rhythmic structures is what gives Caribbean music its distinctive sound.

Reflecting on the work of Manuel and other writers on the Caribbean music scene, Nurse opines that “in developing countries, the music industry has long been valued for its contribution to cultural identity and its impact on the social and political context” *ibid*. The popular music of the Caribbean gives the region an identity on the world stage that bears no relation to its size. Regretfully, national economic support for Caribbean cultural industries does not match the contribution that such endeavours make to national purses or the recognition that these cultural ambassadors bring to the region.

Popular music is undoubtedly the most important segment of the cultural industries of the Caribbean. Bilby quoted by Nurse states:

The story of Caribbean music is a remarkable one. For this relatively small geographical region, ravaged by centuries of European colonial domination and long looked upon as a region of “colonial backwaters”, “deracinated” people, and societies that had supposedly produced nothing indigenous of any value, has over and over brought forth unique and vibrant musical creations to which the entire world can dance. (Nurse, p.1-2)

Unquestionably, the Caribbean’s cultural output and achievements bear no relation to its size or population statistics. One only has to think of the impact of the late **Bob Marley’s** music and his consequential international influence to appreciate the stature and impact of one Caribbean artiste. **Marley’s** enduring international iconic status, though outstanding, is not singular. **Sparrow, Kitchener** and **Arrow** who have and continue to serve the region well as cultural ambassadors, have been joined by relative newcomers to the entertainment field such as Jamaicans **Shaggy** (Orville Richard Burrell) and **Beres Hammond**, Vincentian **Kevin Little** and Barbadian **Red Plastic Bag** (Stedson Wiltshire) whose *Ragga Ragga* has been translated into no less than seven languages. *Ragga Ragga* is undoubtedly Barbados’ most popular song and the track that has garnered the highest royalties for any Barbadian artiste. Through the work of these and other artistes, the Caribbean has assumed an international prominence that transcends its size and population. Culture is perhaps the only activity that makes it possible for all countries to be on a level playing field regardless of size, natural resources or population. Caribbean nationals have leveraged popular culture to their advantage.

Popular culture is an important national activity in most developing countries and regions, including the Caribbean. Popular music contributes to the social, cultural, educational and economic well being of Caribbean peoples. As a result, popular culture has positively impacted on the quality of Caribbean life. It is therefore obligatory that Caribbean academic libraries include popular culture in their collection-building activities and strategies.

## **HOW POPULAR MUSIC COLLECTIONS CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE CARIBBEAN**

In addition to being an important element of the soundscape of the region, popular music is a critical factor in the development, heritage and history of the Caribbean. It is the cultural expression that resonates with the majority of the region’s population. Given its importance as a cultural expression of the region, there are several ways that popular music collections contribute to improving the quality of Caribbean life.

The existence of popular music collections is an important aspect of the heritage and patrimony that one generation leaves for others. Future generations need to have a keen and accurate sense of their past in order to ensure that their contribution to their country’s cultural and historical legacy is based on authenticity. Popular culture collections particularly those in academic libraries are one way of checking cultural accuracy and veracity.

Sound recording collections contribute to the validation of national identity, especially in countries where popular music is an important aspect of cultural and creative life. Without collections of popular music the records of a nation’s culture and heritage are considerably impoverished.

Collections of popular music enable future generations to connect with the past through sonic formats. Their absence denies them of such possibilities. Popular music collections provide opportunities to understand how the past interlocks with and contributes to the present. Such understandings positively enhance the quality of life at the corporate and individual level. Thus, the ability to study, reflect and appreciate the sound of previous generations is an important aspect of cultural understanding and national development.

Further, the absence of sound recording collections is unrepresentative of the totality of a nation's cultural expression. Consequently, the development of collections of popular music by Caribbean academic libraries is in keeping with the principal mandate and responsibility of libraries which is to garner, husband and make accessible the intellectual and creative output of their host communities.

Clarke (1973), in an early article on popular culture in libraries provides another perspective on the importance of popular culture. He states that the study of popular culture is one of the "newly-emerging disciplines, intended to broaden the base of higher education". He further states that the study of popular culture helps to "equalize opportunities" through "the study of the literature, art and music that was produced for mass consumption" (p. 215). The study of popular culture also serves as a democratizing force in education. For citizens in states that have recently gained their autonomy such as those in the Caribbean, the ability to study, understand and appreciate all aspects of national history, culture and society are important aspects of civil education.

The creation and ongoing development of Caribbean-oriented popular music collections in regional academic institutions helps to legitimize such cultural expressions. Through their existence such collections foster an enhanced sense of self-esteem, self-worth and self-actualization among the people from whom such expressions stem.

Popular music is often the medium through which particular groups or individuals, who otherwise may often feel a sense of alienation, are able to become part of a society's mainstream. Popular music serves as a leavening agent and becomes a vehicle through which community frustrations can be eased. Popular music therefore helps with the understanding of social tensions and creates a positive channel for social engagement. The development of popular music collections also has the potential of counteracting negative attitudes and perceptions towards the creators of these expressions, all of which help to improve the quality of national and individual life.

The ability of popular music collections to contribute to the economic life of the Caribbean cannot be gainsaid. The economic contribution that popular music makes to Barbados has been highlighted in a previous section of this paper. Popular music is a source of employment for many people who otherwise may not have been gainfully employed. Popular music and its associated services also become sources of foreign exchange earnings, often a challenge for many developing countries.

While the financial contribution that popular music makes to a country can be measured, it is extremely difficult to quantify the recognition that a successful artiste brings to their country. Neither Jamaica, Montserrat, Trinidad nor Barbados can quantify the mileage that they have gained through the creative works or performances, live or taped, of **Marley, Arrow, Sparrow** or **Red Plastic Bag**. Name recognition for a country via an internationally known popular artiste provides a level of advertisement that cannot be purchased or manufactured. Country recognition through a popular artiste also helps to support other economic activities such as tourism. Popular music is therefore an important economic activity not only in itself but also for other ventures.

The existence of popular music collections in academic libraries underscores as well as contributes to the national importance of this art form.

## CONCLUSION

The contribution that popular music makes, in several areas, to improve the quality of life has been highlighted by this paper. Popular music collections provide testimony to the contribution that this cultural, creative and economic activity qualitatively makes to national

and individual life. Through popular music Caribbean people are able to express their inherent creativity as well as their intellectual capabilities and capacities. The paper has also indicated that popular culture is a creative activity that serves as a vehicle through which many Caribbean people find employment - either as artistes or through the provision of services. Employment is a life improving pursuit.

This paper has also indicated that popular music is an important vehicle through which Caribbean people are able to assert their identity at the global level. The development of collections of regional popular music in Caribbean academic institutions is therefore but a reflection of a range of societal activities and achievements.

Developing popular music collections in Caribbean academic libraries is also an important and vital buttress to the development of Caribbean societies. Popular music collections in developing countries make a lasting and beneficial impact on the social and cultural fabric of their host community. The existence of such collections provides a positive influence not only for present and future generations but they also unequivocally contribute to the quality of life of the communities in which they exist.

When libraries in developing countries fail to initiate, develop and maintain collections of the popular music of their societies, such institutions could be said to be in breach of the social contract they have with their constituents. As practitioners responsible for the preservation of all intellectual pursuits, Caribbean academic librarians must be proactive in the creation, advancement and preservation of popular music collections in their institutions. Anything less is an abdication of our professional responsibilities.

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August 9, 2004