

EDITORIAL

Iain A. Taylor

I've been thinking about the materiality of things for some time now.

It has been around eight months, almost to the day, since I sat down to write the editorial for the last Special Issue of *Riffs*, published in February 2023, which focused on the broad topic of popular music materialities. Following an incredible response to the original call-for-papers that was put out in early 2022, it was decided that rather than seek to choose between the wealth of exciting and innovative responses that we received, we would instead spread the topic across two Special Issues, the second of which you are currently reading.

Many of the ideas and curiosities which prompted the call for papers on the subject of musical materialities stemmed from a postdoc project (running from 2019-20) on the plural and ever-shifting materialities of media, which I led on as part of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research while working at Birmingham City University. That train of thought – stretching back over four years at this point – will soon culminate in an edited collection on *Media Materialities*, co-edited with Oliver Carter, due to be published via Intellect Books at the end of this year.

It is also noteworthy, I think, that as I sat down to write this editorial, it dawned on me all of a sudden that it is almost one decade, to the day, since I started my PhD on the 1st of October, 2013. At the heart of that PhD project was an intellectual curiosity – developed over a decade as a performer and recording artist – about music fans' ever-changing relationship with the formats through which they consume music. From the booming resurgence of interest in vinyl LPs to the re-emergence of cassette tapes, I found myself fascinated by the fans that were once again so keen to acquire physical formats, particularly when framed against the backdrop of digital ephemerality and abundance which has defined the trajectory of recorded music over the past twenty-five years or so.

So, if you'll indulge me, as I write, I find myself attempting, tentatively, to trace a range of temporal and material threads, and to tie them up in a loose, clumsy knot within this editorial.



In thinking through the previous Special issue on Musical Materialities, I drew heavily upon the distinction, made by anthropologist Tim Ingold, between objects and *things*—specifically, that ‘the thing about things, if you will, is that far from standing before us as a fait accompli, complete in itself, each is a ‘going on’—or better, a place where several goings on become entwined’ (Ingold 2010: 96). And so, for this editorial, I’m inclined to observe another *thing about things*. They endure; moving through time, through physical spaces, across social and cultural shifts, before eventually arriving at the exact point at which we encounter them, ‘bearing meanings which the distance of their travel and the manner of their acquisition have inscribed upon them’ (Straw 2002: 165).

In my own work, been thinking about the relationship between time and the materiality of things. I’ve also been thinking about the materiality of things over extended periods of time, which is kind of (but not quite) the same thing.

One of the biggest challenges when writing about the materiality of cultural artefacts and objects is exemplified by their endurance in the way that Straw illustrates in the above quote. Any observations that we, as scholars, can make about the positionality, meaning, or purpose of things remains fixed in the moment of writing, or the act of publication. Those things, those objects of study, remain in motion. They acquire new physical marks and meanings, arrive in new cultural contexts. They resist acts of description and typification.

The authors whose work gives both form and format to this second Special Issue have, no doubt, been wrestling with some of these material-temporal challenges as well. Between originally submitting abstracts in response to the call-for-papers that we circulated at the beginning of 2022, the objects, artefacts, and/or *things* upon which they focus have moved, have shifted, have been reshaped. They have continued their trajectory through measurable time and evolving cultural context. They have arrived at this culminative point of publication bearing new meanings, inscribed upon them by the distance of their temporal travel.

We open with Marisol Pérez Pelayo’s reflection upon the enduring materiality of Mesoamerican instruments. Focusing on such instruments’ contextualisation in the music, practices and stage performances of Mexican metal act Cemican, Pelayo offers a vital reminder of the ways in which the materiality of instruments, kinships and bonding can inform ethnographies of global popular music. Keeping with the materiality of musical instruments, Joshua O. Brew and Eric Sunu Doe’s article explores the materiality of instruments used in Ghanaian palmwine music and the complex entanglements of musical practice, the materialities of instruments, and questions of ecological sustainability.

Next, Kayla Rush concludes this issue’s reflections upon the instrument-object and its material meanings, delving into the complex socio-cultural associations that electric guitar learners draw between the instrument object, genre, identity and self. Paul Nataraj shifts our focus to the possibilities of object as instrument and beyond, asking ‘Where can a record take us?’ before answering with reference to the ‘nomadic materiality’ of a very specific (and personal) copy of Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet*. Sticking with the broad topic of records, and stemming into the broader material category of pop music memorabilia, I offer a short interview with Richard March – bass player for seminal electro-punk pioneers Pop Will Eat Itself and proprietor of RPM Analogue Audio LTD – to discuss the book project from which the cover images of this issue were captured by *Riffs*’ in-house photographer, Ian Davies.

Finally, the remaining two papers of the issue return our explorations of musical materialities to corporeal questions of the bodies through which musicking happens, what they do,

and how that doing is captured, mediated and understood. First, Seán ó Dálaigh ruminates on the conceptual connections between cacophony and *shitness* in our experiences of music, framed in part by a detailed exploration of Fetokaki's (2017) piece *SVIOLONCELLO*. Lastly, Andrew Ty proposes a model for an inclusive, cross-disciplinary, and generational approach to the study of the body in motion within the pop-music video format, tracing links between on-screen performance, the audience, and the mediation of corporeal meaning.

I have no doubt that negotiating this passage of material meaning over time has been a challenging one, and unreservedly thank the authors for persevering in the production of the varied, nuanced, but also conceptually concurrent pieces which make up this issue. Their reflections upon the materialities of musical things; their goings on; their entwinements and entanglements; their ever-shifting material meanings – all come together at precisely this moment in time to constitute this special issue. This *thing* about *things*.

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References

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