

Replicating Authenticity

Of increasing interest to material culture scholars is the afterlife of objects, particularly what becomes of them as they decay and how such deterioration is responded to, whether through disposal, conservation, or restoration (Woodward, 2015, 2021; Holmes, 2020). As O'Hagan (forthcoming) argues, decay is not inherently negative; it may be seen as damage to be erased or corrected, but it can also be embraced, even celebrated, depending on the object's context and cultural value.

Gallagher's Stratocaster has, over time, been subject to both of these attitudes. During his lifetime, the guitar's condition frequently provoked fascination and confusion in the music press, with journalists using descriptors like "old," "beat-up," "moth-eaten," "sandblasted," "battered," and "the world's worst looking" to describe it (O'Hagan, 2022). In 1979, Fender even presented him with a 25th Anniversary Stratocaster, assuming that he could not afford a replacement (*Ghost Blues*, 2010). While Gallagher occasionally used the gift in studio settings, he remained loyal to his original Stratocaster, explaining that he saw no reason to replace something that was not broken and whose wear and modifications were integral to his sound (ibid).

Since Gallagher's death, however, this loyalty has been reimagined and romanticised. What was once seen as neglect or eccentricity is now interpreted as a symbol of authenticity—part of the mythology of Gallagher as the "people's guitarist" (O'Hagan, 2022). As Cinque and Redmond (2019) note, objects associated with deceased artists often gain heightened symbolic value, offering a tangible link to the past and serving as vessels of memory. Gallagher's Stratocaster, in this context, becomes suffused with what Benjamin (1935) described as "aura" or what Cinque and Redmond (2019) term "magical contagion": the sense that something of the artist's presence still clings to the object, creating a powerful psychological and affective bridge between past and present.

The growing cultural value of Gallagher's Stratocaster was formalised in 1997 when his brother Dónal was approached by Fender to collaborate on a Rory Gallagher Tribute Stratocaster. Initially released as a limited edition of 40 in 2000, the model's popularity led to the production of a Custom Artist version in 2004, eventually renamed the Rory Gallagher Signature Stratocaster in 2020. Currently retailing for around \$4,000, the replica aims to mimic the visual decay of the original: patches of worn Sunburst paint, exposed wood, and chipped lacquer all carefully reproduced. Yet, the very staging of wear raises questions of authenticity.

Despite the technical accuracy of the replica, its artificiality is difficult to overlook. The original guitar's character was shaped not by design but through years of embodied interaction—sweat, movement, improvisation, and friction. As Korsmeyer (2019) argues, aged objects possess a sensuous aesthetic dimension that replicas cannot fully capture, especially in terms of touch and smell.



Replica of Gallagher's 1961 Fender Stratocaster, Cork City Library

Lauren Alex O'Hagan

This was something Lauren experienced firsthand when encountering a replica of Gallagher's Stratocaster on display in Cork City Library. She felt uncomfortable to see a *performance* of wear, a manmade attempt to replicate something that had emerged organically through Gallagher's embodied use over time.

Nonetheless, research suggests that replicas can still enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of artefacts, providing valuable insights into their cultural and historical significance (e.g. Hampp and Schwan, 2014; Schwan and Dutz, 2020). Furthermore, for fans, owning a replica offers a tangible connection to Gallagher—an opportunity to inhabit not just the feel and aura of the original instrument, but, by extension, the presence of the man who played it (cf. Ryan and Peterson, 2001; Uimonen, 2017).

The Campaign to Save Gallagher's Stratocaster

According to Holmes (2020), the desire to preserve objects is not solely about their material qualities but also about their capacity to sustain material affinities to the past—the emotionally charged connections between objects, people, and places that anchor personal and collective identities. Preservation, in this sense, is an act of relational continuity: what we choose to keep reflects who we are, where we have come from, and what we wish to remember.

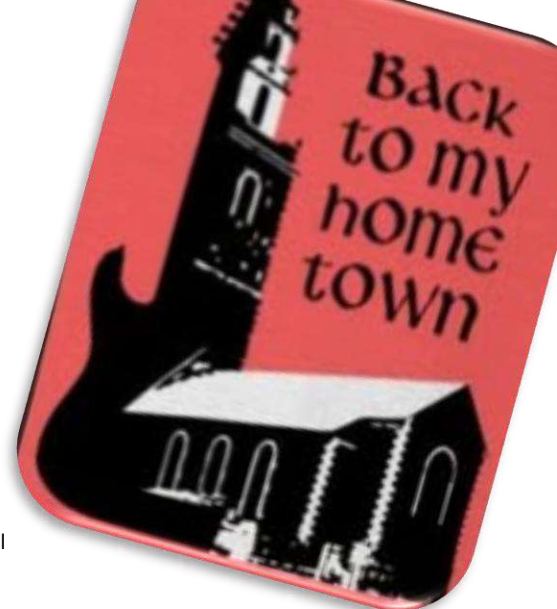
Music artefacts, in particular, play a vital role in shaping cultural memory and national identity (Biddle and Knights, 2007). When musicians emerge from smaller nations or from countries with complex and often painful political pasts, the artefacts associated with them can take on heightened significance (Way, 2015; Dlaske, 2017). For fans in these contexts, celebrating such musicians becomes a way of asserting cultural visibility on a global stage—of challenging dominant narratives, expressing pride, and affirming that their nation, too, has made lasting contributions to international music culture (O'Hagan, 2021).

Yet, as Bennett and Rogers (2015) remind us, the material relevance of popular music objects extends beyond their historical associations. These artefacts continue to circulate in the present, creating new meanings and affective bonds that grow in intensity after an artist's death. According to Cinque and Redmond (2019), engagement with the past through music artefacts is not a static act of nostalgia but a dynamic resurrection of memory that revitalises identity across generations. This is especially crucial for younger fans with no living memory of the musician's active years: for them, artefacts function as “mediated” or “received” understandings of cultural history, granting access to a heritage they did not witness firsthand but nonetheless claim as their own (Bennett, 2022).

These notions were clearly illustrated when the news broke last July that Gallagher's Stratocaster was up for sale. It sent shockwaves across the fan community. As Lauren wrote in her diary upon hearing the news:

“My legs buckle, and a wave of nausea sweeps over me. I feel myself hyperventilating. I sit down at the top of the stairs, trying to steady my breathing, which has become shallow and erratic. It might sound like an overreaction, but I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling this way [...] The rest of the day passes in a haze. A whirlwind of emotions grips me. Hurt. Anger. Betrayal. Disappointment. Overwhelming sadness. Each time I see a photo of Rory holding his Strat, I start to cry [...] We have to, indeed must do something to safeguard the Stratocaster. We owe it to Rory.”

Seán Parnell



A grassroots campaign—spearheaded by Sheena Crowley—emerged with remarkable speed and energy, determined to prevent the guitar from falling into the hands of a wealthy private collector and to secure its return to Ireland for public display. Over the next four months, Lauren and other fans supported Sheena as she appeared on national radio and television, organised a benefit concert at Cork City Hall, produced promotional merchandise, and met with political figures.

Central to our campaign message was that Gallagher's guitar was no ordinary guitar. As one caller put it on *Liveline* (2024), it was a “modern-day Book of Kells or Ardagh Chalice” that symbolised “Ireland's first rock star” (RTÉ, 2020) and the transcendent power of his music to unite divided communities during the Troubles—a 30-year period of violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. The campaign's momentum grew when renowned American blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa publicly backed the call to keep the guitar in Ireland, declaring that it belonged to the people.

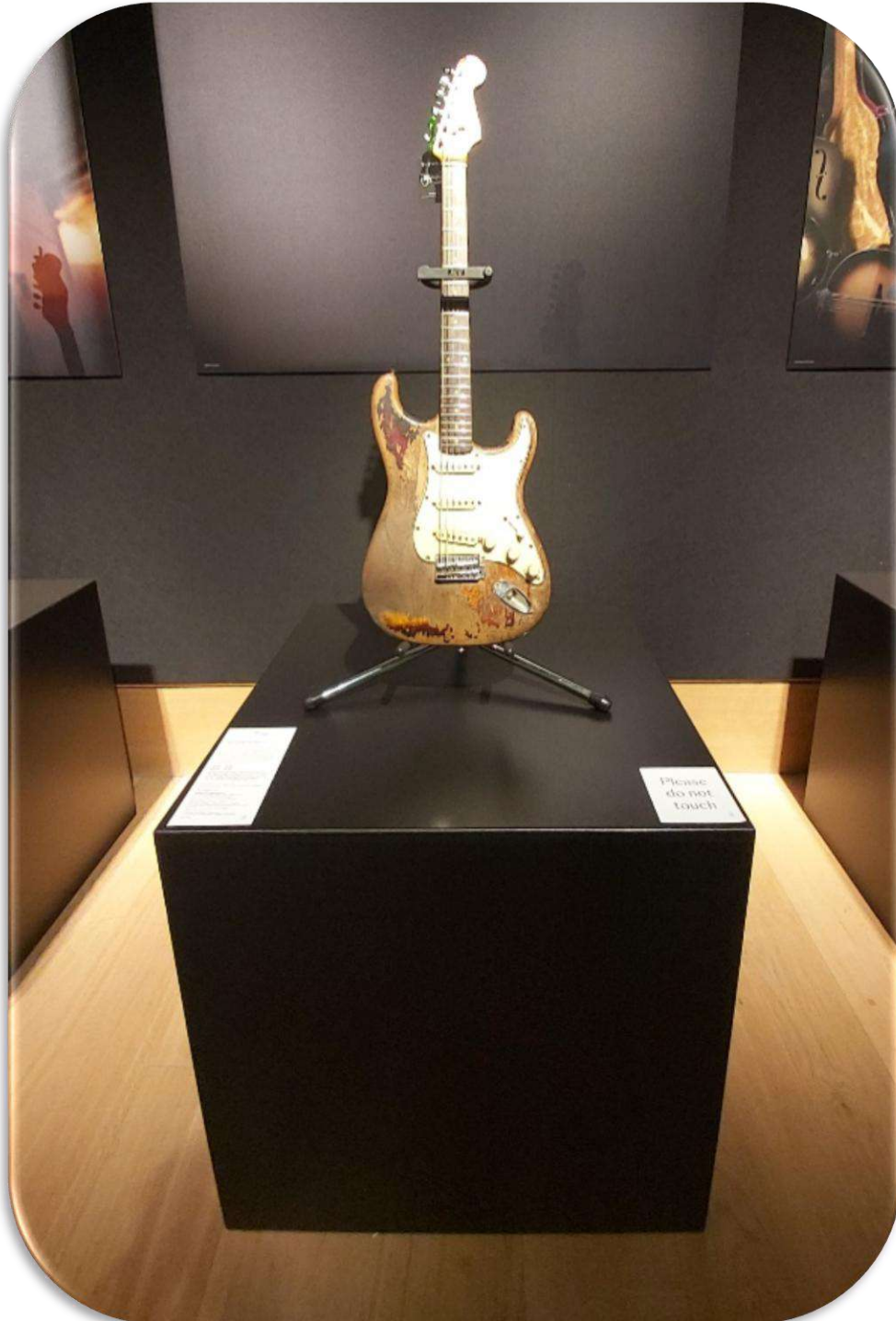
One week before the auction, Gallagher's Stratocaster and other instruments were placed on public display at Bonhams. Fans queued patiently to see it, sharing stories—often with tears in their eyes—about when they first saw Gallagher perform with the guitar and what it meant to them. The atmosphere was one of reverence. For those of us present, it felt like the guitar was laying in state, much like a deceased monarch.

However, the emotional intensity was even more profound at the private event we were privileged to attend two days prior to the sale, which carried the solemnity of a wake. Surrounded by Gallagher's family, friends, and fellow musicians, who fondly recalled stories of him and his Stratocaster, we celebrated his life and music, though a bittersweet sense of finality lingered beneath the clear love and warmth. It was an overwhelming visualisation of what Strong and Whiting (2018) call “heritage-as-praxis”—a living, participatory form of heritage that extends the guitar from a deeply personal artefact for Gallagher to an “aura-laden object” (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015), with its wear and tear serving as both a symbol of his absent presence and a powerful emblem of Ireland's rich musical legacy.

Auction Day

“Now we come to one of the most recognisable Fender Stratocasters of them all, played by Rory in every one of his live performances and lighting up every single one of his studio albums. Was there ever an instrument so closely associated with a player, more celebrated as a cultural icon and more imbued with the blood, sweat, tears, and blue jeans of a pure musician? Ladies and gentlemen, we proudly present Lot 62, the Rory Gallagher 1961 Sunburst Stratocaster....”

(Harvey Cammell, Bonhams’ auctioneer, 16 October 2024)





Steve

"The atmosphere in the room that day was electric. It was such a fantastic display that Bonhams put together. The big screen playing clips of Rory through big speakers was almost like he was doing a gig just for you. It was a bit like coming out of a gig when all was finished! A great deal of preparation went into the sale event. It was on a billboard in New York and featured in advertisements through magazines and the media. There was concern that the Stratocaster would end up with a private collector and never be seen again. When the big Strat lot came around, it was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. You could hear a pin drop!"



Lauren

"And so it begins. The bidding opens decisively at £450,000 and climbs rapidly—500, 550, 600, 650, 700... Then, unexpectedly, it stalls. I'm taken aback. Harvey Cammell gives it every chance—repeating, coaxing, waiting. Still, no further offers come. He pauses again, hopeful. But nothing. The atmosphere turns oddly flat. After all the anticipation, the silence feels heavy, deflating. I'd expected a frenzy, a fight. This was the guitar, Rory's lifeblood. Surely bids would soar far higher?"

But after nearly two minutes of stillness, the hammer falls. £700,000. A strange mix of disbelief and sorrow floods in. That's it? My gut reaction is one of anger and heartbreak. How could something so precious, so bound up with Rory's very being, not ignite a bidding war? All that tension, all that emotional weight—only to land at the lower end of expectations.

But less than an hour later, everything became clear, and the best possible news in such a painful situation came to light..."





Press release

Rory Gallagher's Iconic Guitar is Coming Home

From [Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media](#)

Published on 17 October 2024

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Fender Stratocaster secured for National Museum of Ireland with support from Live Nation Gaiety Ltd

Following the sale today at auction in London of Rory Gallagher's Fender Stratocaster, Catherine Martin, Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, expressed her appreciation of the special effort made to ensure the guitar will return to Ireland on a permanent basis and be on exhibition for music enthusiasts and the general public in acknowledgement of a pioneering musician and iconic performer.

The guitar has been purchased by Live Nation Gaiety Ltd with a view to donation to the National Museum of Ireland under Section 1003 of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997. This follows prior contacts and discussions between the Department, the NMI and the purchaser, ahead of the significant auction of the legendary guitarist's instruments and items today. The purchase agreement ensures the famous Strat will now be preserved in the ownership of the state, and made available to view for the public and Rory Gallagher's fans around the world.

Aftermath

Lauren

"The Strat is coming home to Ireland."

Tears stream down my face as I type those words on Facebook and Instagram. I can barely believe it. Gratitude pours out of me in wave after wave: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

The Rory Gallagher online community erupts. I've never seen such a collective surge of emotion. For fans around the world, it feels like something sacred has been restored. The outpouring is overwhelming, electric. In a moment of loss, this homecoming feels like a triumph. This truly marks a new era for Rory and his legacy."

Steve

"It is such a fantastic result that the guitar is going back to Ireland. I think most fans will agree it has gone home, where it belongs."

Dónal Gallagher (RTÉ, 2024)

"It was a high-wire act on a guitar string! I'm lost for words, to be honest. Particularly when I got the news that Live Nation had not only bought it but had donated it to the State. It's cherries on top, more than one. I'm thrilled to bits and I'll sleep tonight."



In acknowledgement of her tremendous efforts to save Gallagher's Stratocaster, Sheena Crowley was named Cork Person of the Month in January 2025. Manus O'Callaghan (2025), Founder and Director of the Awards, noted that "the guitar would have been lost to the country, perhaps forever" without her tireless work.

"This award serves as a token of thanks from all Cork people for the tremendous service she has provided in ensuring that Rory's Strat, the ultimate Cork cultural artefact, stays in the hands of the people."

Thanks to the overwhelming success of her GoFundMe campaign, Sheena was also able to secure several more of Gallagher's personal instruments, including his 1963 Epiphone Coronet, 1983 Tokai Talbo, 1961 Musima, 1959 Burns, and 1970s Vibro-Champ amp. Plans are now underway to exhibit these items at Cork Public Museum.

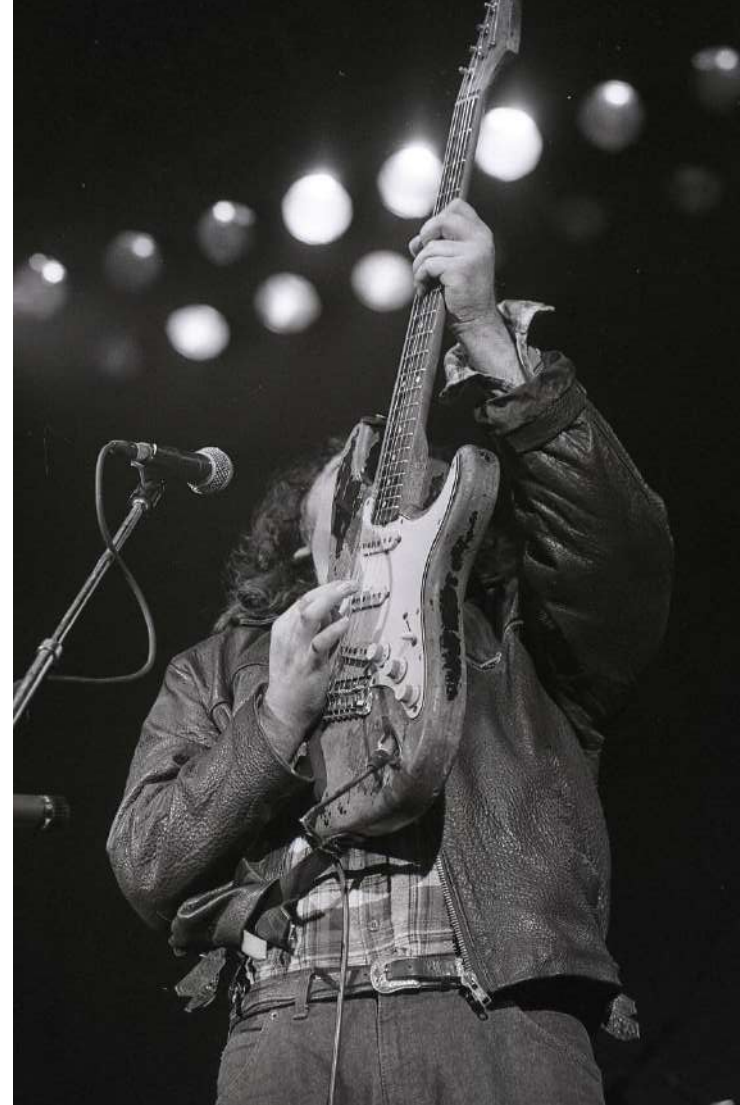


Conclusion

Holmes and Ehgartner (2020) stress that the loss of symbolic objects we never even owned can create a deep sense of emptiness, as they are intricately tied to our memories, identities, and personal narratives. In the case of Gallagher's Stratocaster, this emptiness was even more pronounced due to the instrument's physical embodiment of his artistry. While many guitars possess an "aura of uniqueness" (Uimonen, 2017) through their association with famous musicians, Gallagher's guitar was physically and affectively shaped by him. Through years of use, it conformed to his bodily contours, bearing traces of sweat, blood, and even the imprint of his jeans, offering a rare material insight into the embodied relationship between musician and instrument.

The guitar was Gallagher's most treasured possession, and as a man who devoted his life to his craft and always prioritised his audience, this deep connection was key to fans' urgency to save what he loved most. Furthermore, the potential loss of the guitar to foreign ownership or obscurity threatened its position within Ireland's collective memory—one that Gallagher, as a pioneering force in Irish rock and blues, truly deserved.

Now, as the Stratocaster embarks on a new journey at the National Museum of Ireland, its significance grows ever more profound. What began as a £100 guitar from Crowley's Music Store in 1963 has transformed into a £700,000 cultural artefact, symbolising Gallagher's enduring artistic legacy. Imprinted with his physical presence, it now occupies a permanent place in the narrative of Ireland's musical history, reinforcing his status as a canonically recognised "great" artist and fostering emotional connections across past, present, and future (cf. Fairchild, 2019). We feel privileged to have encountered the instrument up close, an experience that brought us closer to Gallagher in a way that is unlikely to be repeated.



Postscript

Immortality

Your sweat
Your blood
Your DNA
All embedded in her wood
Weaving a tapestry of your life


From that day in Crowley's back in '63
A love affair began
Your faithful companion
Never to desert you
For better, for worse
For richer, for poorer
In sickness and in health
Until death do part

Your best friend
Your life
Your psychic make-up
A walking memory bank in your arms
So much a part of you
That it is hard to see where you end and she begins

Since you left, she has not been the same
An orphaned child
A widowed wife
A vagabond
Forever searching for her way back home

And as long as she keeps searching
So will I
As long as she is still breathing
So are you
And through my tears
I smile from ear to ear
For by her existence
You are rendered immortal

This poem about Gallagher's Stratocaster, written by Lauren, won 1st Prize at the 2022 Cobh International Readers' and Writers' Festival. More than three years later, in the wake of the auction, its words carry even greater weight. With the guitar now preserved in a public institution, its legacy is immortalised, and the poem's themes of enduring connection and memory take on a renewed significance.



Dr Lauren Alex O'Hagan is Research Fellow in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University and Affiliate Researcher in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Örebro University. She specialises in the study of visual and material culture across a range of historical periods, geographical settings and subjects. She is the co-author of *Rory Gallagher: The Later Years* (Wymer, 2024) and the driving force behind the critically acclaimed *Rewriting Rory* blog (www.rewritingrory.co.uk), which fosters a reappraisal of the final decade in Gallagher's career. Her previous work on Gallagher has examined the influence of crime fiction on his songwriting, depictions in the international music press throughout his career, constructions of Irishness in visual media and the online fan community, and sites of memorialisation and remembrance in the public space. Her most recent project explores the forms and functions of music keepsakes and their role in parasocial attachment and grief.

Steve Clarke is a professional musician with over 40 years of experience. As an accomplished lead guitarist and songwriter/recording artist in many bands with published tracks signed to EMI, Steve toured UK and Europe for many years. He later became a session musician/producer for many local bands in Manchester. Steve was a contributor to the Channel 4 documentary *Dandy in the Underworld* and the BBC's *Marc Bolan: The Final Word*. He has written for *Guitar and Bass* magazine and *Guitarist* magazine about his work as a guitar tech. He has vast array of personal clients and is a guitar consultant to Bonhams of London where he has been involved in the authentication of guitars belonging to Peter Green, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton and Rory Gallagher, among others. Steve's first book *Famous Frets* was published by Wymer in 2019. His second book *Famous Frets Fotos* was released by Wymer in August 2024. Visit www.famousfrets.com for more information.

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