

**EVERYTHING I HAVE
IS YOURS**

EILEEN SIMPSON AND BEN WHITE
(OPEN MUSIC ARCHIVE)

This text responds to *Everything I Have Is Yours* (2019) by Eileen Simpson and Ben White (Open Music Archive), an artists' film that takes as a starting point records produced during the first decade of the UK pop charts – 1952 to 1962 – and experimentally repurposes them in an on-going exploration of the limits of sampling and the possibilities of live collaboration.

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THE SENTIMENT
IS IN THE TITLE

Writer and broadcaster Paul Morley grew up in Stockport, and wrote for the *NME* from 1977 to 1983. He was a founder member of Art of Noise and the showrunner of the ZTT Record label, featuring Frankie Goes to Hollywood. He has written books about suicide, Joy Division, the Bakerloo line, the history of pop and the North of England. He collaborated with Grace Jones on her memoir *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, and wrote a best selling biography of David Bowie in 2016, *The Age of Bowie*. His biography of Tony Wilson will be published in 2020.

I have some questions I want to ask Eileen Simpson and Ben White, two Manchester-born artists working with music who engage with network practices and information technology. Both were working individually in 2005 on similar projects connected with a search for meaning and new expertise through sampling found sounds and footage, and both began to experience copyright problems with the material they wanted to use. The arrival of YouTube and a proliferation of new broadcast networks had made a torrent of raw material increasingly available, but any investigative, creative use, however niche, personal or disguised, was limited by increasingly vigilant and restrictive legal frameworks. Some material, they noted with interest, had slipped through the cracks — if it was written by anyone who had died more than seventy years ago, or recorded more than fifty years ago, which tends to be from the rough-and-ready, strangely enchanting beginnings of the modern recording industry. The copyright of a composition and the product it appeared on was originally arranged around an estimated lifetime, so that eventually it would run out, and creative works, as a whole or in parts, could be released into the public domain. What happens then? Could music that breaks free ever make a noise again, or just become part of a ‘lost list’ — an orderly, mute record of records that don’t exist any more?

Simpson and White then began working together and formed Open Music Archive, combining with a variety of collaborators to develop new ways of taking and retaking unrestricted material from the past and radically reorganising its essence. “Not,” they say, “to be obsessed with the past or with history, but to consider the future of this stuff.”

Everything I Have Is Yours is their latest exercise in randomly yet purposefully taking creative work that has become ‘derelict’, outside the commercial concerns of any company or owner, and re-imagining it under a new set of conditions from a completely new, unsentimental point of view. The project is also a document that contains traces of a unique local history, in this case Manchester pop music, from a point where it all began, in and around the very early pop charts, listened to by music fans born during or just after the Second World War who became the first set of modern teenagers. The first UK pop charts based on record sales rather than sheet music were compiled by the *New Musical Express* pop magazine. Copying the exciting looking chart system of American *Billboard*, its enthusiastic editor Percy Dickins rang around twenty record shops for a list of their best-selling songs. Initially, it was an awkwardly shaped, non-decimal Top 12, but the addictive idea of a Number One song, a chart of favourites creating glorious hits and shadowy misses, changed more than just music and the industry.

Before the pop charts, and the accelerated routine of new sounds and constant, competitive changes in style and tempo, there was a lack of

independent space for teenagers to occupy, to find themselves, and for better or worse begin to take control of their own destinies and locate their own events, opportunities and places of worship. The charts as a system of estimation and self-serving commercial bias were discriminatory in all sorts of ways, but left room for glitches, and the introduction of surprises, oddities and even actual signs of disruption. Around the exhilarating idea of the universally agreed-upon hit song and the unquestionable, fascinating existence of a definitive chart topper, secret and spectacular teenage life uncoiled.

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The song 'Everything I Have Is Yours' was written by Burton Lane, who is credited with discovering Judy Garland, and lyricist Harold Adamson, who wrote the theme song for *I Love Lucy*. It was first sung in the 1933 film *Dancing Lady*, and then pre-rock and roll superstar Eddie Fisher's version reached Number 8 in the brand-new UK charts in November, 1952. It perhaps needed just a copy or two in each of the twenty shops surveyed to rise so high.

"This is a song of the 1950s even though it was written twenty years before. It comes from cinema, where hits of the day often came from before the charts made things official, and it is itself repurposed in different films, and by being sung by the likes of Billie Holiday in 1952 and Shirley Bassey in 1962. It was a way of passing knowledge, experience and history from one generation to another, a tradition we continue.

It's typical of the songs we deal with, which tend to be folk, jazz, blues, light opera, romantic ballads, pop before pop was really pop, because parts of them are out of copyright. If it's freely available, we'll use it—even if it is not necessarily a great piece of music, there is always a sound, an echo, a breath we can use. We've found there is a real uncharted, outsider weirdness to the period. Up to a point, between the 1930s and the early 1960s, this song keeps reappearing in popular culture. It travels by film, on radio, on record, by cover version. As one of many sources in this piece, it has a new life and reappears again, not as a faithful cover version but as part of an artwork. It can still exist as a story that is passed forward.”

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Simpson and White take this coming into being of teenage space, this special birth of pop, to be between 1952 and 1962, from the rudimentary beginning of an official best-selling charts to just before the time the charts were dominated by the Beatles *et al.* Coincidentally or not, as the Beatles began, keenly mopping up influences from kinetic Northern music hall and pre-chart music to early American rock'n'roll, pop was sonically and structurally revolutionised by the electronic divisions and multiplications of multi-track tape recording, its progressively more sophisticated delights aggressively co-opted by increasingly formalised commercial interests. These interests would lead to a campaign to rewrite the laws of copyright, so that modern pop, with all its carefully

cultivated modern value, would take a lot longer to enter the public domain, unlike that unfixed, unclassifiable, primitively recorded stuff from before pop, and before teenagers, not seen as being sexy or culturally compelling enough for the music industry to care about.

Eileen and Ben reconfigure this prehistoric 1952-62 period by following it through to what they perceive to be a logical, local and stylistic conclusion. They invite some of those original teenagers, sixty, seventy years later, to express in their own private, serene code what pop music meant to them — those that saw and heard the changes from innocent, near word of mouth beginnings to complex algorithmically-driven network aftermath, from characterful local record shops to despotic apps, from screaming to streaming.

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“Our work is not intended to be nostalgic. In fact, precisely the opposite. It’s a constant worry that it might be taken that way, just more fetishising of vinyl, but we don’t approach the past with a sense of yearning for a supposed better time. Nostalgia can be a kind of poison, an emotionalising of history, which we are definitely seeing in our politics at the moment, a fearful return to some illusional golden age that never was. We are not interested in preserving the past and simply recreating it, but in attempting to recuperate the potential of its collective energy inside a radically different setting. A lot of the music we work with

was originally made with an energy and exuberance that has got lost over time, and we want to inherit that and extend its range, not lock it inside its settled place in time.”

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It's the remnants, and the echoes, resonating through time, like a folk song bouncing through generations, its purpose changing, of a story that contains fascinated enthusiasm for the togetherness of music that led to all sorts of Manchester groups, scenes, clubs, movements, fashions, characters, designers, studios, audiences, producers, novelties, fanzines, collaborations and labels . . . music came from the outside world and was reprocessed by inventive, inquisitive Manchester minds . . . from Freddie and the Dreamers to the Fall . . . Spinning Wheel to Rotters . . . Herman's Hermits to Happy Mondays . . . the Hollies to New Order. . . so eccentrically internationally successful as a music city it led to accumulating and static layers of nostalgia and sentimentality; the Hacienda becoming Manchester's Yellow Submarine, Oasis a cosy, permanently homesick rock and roll preservation society, pop music's equivalent of post-industrial decline, an abandonment of innovation.

With Open Music Archive's work, this play, this 'everything', there is a genuine sign of where the fluid, transcendental, myth-making, non-conformist essence of Manchester music has reached — it's made it into the future, extending an indexed, identifiable past, but without being swallowed up by it and doomed to repeat its

attractive but emptied poses, riffs and rhymes. The grip that the charts once had on the mainstream has collapsed, the original concept of the trend-chasing teenager Insta-distorted. But there is a way that the central rituals, private memories and mysterious reasoning of the past can be renovated and revitalised as something new and spiritually useful. *Everything I Have Is Yours* is a signpost, a blueprint, a proposal of how past music, dated sound, outmoded processes, dismantled ideas, faded energies can be re-issued and re-generated in a contemporary context without it being maudlin, or dry and academic.

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Are your methods influenced by crate digging, the hip-hop approach to sampling, to bending the past into new time, rearranging the truth and releasing original new power from old sounds?

“We borrow that tactic, but we dig up material that is less culturally desirable than the usual sort of sixties funk and jazz. We have to go behind a self-imposed curtain to find our samples. We’re also appropriating tactics from conceptual art where you set up rigorous constraints and rules and then work within them as a kind of thought experiment. One of those frameworks is legal, which means we cannot source what say J. Dilla would have done, we work outside the control of the style industry inside this dry, rigid copyright grid that limits our sampling options. We share the scheming spirit of hip-hop and its own relationship with found sound, its methods of chopping up loops and samples,

with the challenging practices of conceptual art — drawing a line and then following it wherever it goes, pushing a swing until it stops. It's crate digging in parallel with avant-garde music — we are aware of both these trajectories, the cerebral and the visceral, and we think one re-invigorates the other. It's like the writer Kodwo Eshun said — hip-hop rescued the avant-garde from itself.”

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Inside this patiently, legally, technologically constructed set of moments and movements exists the curious, dissident pop-era Manchester spirit of listeners, fans, musicians, entrepreneurs, dreamers, collectors, interpreters and investigators. It is a kind of drifting landscape, that contains the fantasy and reality of Manchester, the tones and notes of recorded music, the concentration of the musician, the love of the listener, the melancholy and decaying ageing process, combined with the vintage idea of the charts, all those battles, beats and snapshots of time and place, which over time has turned into the idea of the playlist, the determined ordering and sharing of memories and moments, of the pop song as an infinitely transferable piece of paradise. The erratically co-ordinated early market research of the 1950s Top Ten becomes the vertiginous, mega-monitoring 21st century millions of songs; the sorting, sharing and rating of music that spills beyond reason. *Everything I Have Is Yours* marks the end of an era or two, as a tender, enchanting blues, a municipal memorial, a fractured remembrance of a certain way of sensing the world, of taking unprecedented control of ever-shifting reality and finding new

ways of knowing that would not have happened without the cherished grooves of two-sided records. *“Often record labels don’t even know what they own because it’s from before the 1960s, before the pop they keep re-packaging. When we look at 1920s material it’s often from a small label which will have been bought up by a bigger label and then by an even bigger label and so on, and they don’t know it’s in their catalogue and don’t have a copy of it. But they own the rights and are happy to protect them once they find out. It’s really complicated to work out who owns the rights of some records — some parts are out of copyright, other parts aren’t. It’s a complex bundle of rights. So we’re trying to free the sound that we can use from this bundle of rights and ownerships. Voice, melody and lyrics as a package maybe we can’t use, certain instrumental sounds we can, and we are developing new technologies with which to do this. We take the recorded moment, the sonic event in the studio, the sound of the room of the studio and the microphone and the amp, the space before and after the sound, the decay of the sound, aiming to create saturated sound that’s dripping with the moment that it was created.”*

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Here is a new direction, different sorts of imaginative patterns, undiscovered territory, new thresholds, on the cusp of something nameable, that creates an illusion of an impossible genre. A prismatic post-genre genre influenced by both the glitch techniques and calculations of laptop cut-and-paste and the systems, schedules and strategies of a music that is somewhere between or around the unforgiving

edges of total serialism and the more explicitly romantic minimalist response. It is hip-hop ghosted by Morton Feldman. *Musique concrète* dreamt by Doris Day. Alvin Lucier interrupted by Madlib. Lee Scratch Perry times Sol Lewitt. The Beverley Sisters watched by Jean-Luc Godard. Delia Derbyshire orbiting Flying Lotus. Vini Reilly slow dancing with Slauson Malone. None of that, at least outside of my own forged-in-Manchester pop critic imagination, because this event exists outside of music, even as it revels in it, music as a technological revelation and a magical communication, as an endlessly malleable artistic material.

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“It seems to us that once the bits of sound, the songs themselves we’ve worked with for projects, and have been released into the public domain they should remain public domain . . . we’re building on something that exists because it is free with the intention of keeping it free. The work we do is about the distribution and circulation of things more than it is about authorship. It’s not about us doing a mashup and re-authoring something in quite a straightforward way, sound for sound’s sake. It’s more about exploring what happens when these sounds from this period begin to circulate, mutate and change in relation to a different musical and social history once they become free.”

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This version of *Everything I Have Is Yours*, not so much a cover version of the original as an

uncovering, a modification, is made of music but is not necessarily simply a piece of music: it is about music, a series of images about its value, meaning and mystery, about how it is owned and unowned, known and unknown, lost and found. Forever and near ever.

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“The beginnings of the charts for us feels like an embryonic form of today’s big data analysis, the algorithms of Spotify. You play something and it is instantly analysed, and it suggests another song it calculates you will like, and another song, and this can go on forever. Music becomes this constant stream of data which produces more data and so on.

If anyone is still interested in the charts like the old days, Shazam claim to be able to predict the Number One a month or so ahead, because they calculate what people are currently liking and they can anticipate the immediate popular result of that. Shazam has this precog way of knowing what will happen; taste predicts taste, the ultimate synthetic refinement of what the charts were always doing but without the unexpected interruptions, the left field shifts in fashion driven by underground urges. Streaming sites, the new technology of music distribution, is the latest stage of the charts, but more explicitly about auditing behaviour, curating attention and creating formula. Our work recently has worked with music, but it’s got wider social and political applications — how people’s likes and wants and

desires and opinions are created and controlled by this relentless flow of data.”

This combining of selective hip-hop appropriation with classically avant-garde repurposing and reframing of objects and objectives is an actual sign of a change in music that resists the nefarious pull of the vinyl age, even as it rummages around inside it, looking for traces, for tantalising shifts in emphasis, for wonder, for what remains of the most distant, dusty recorded songs, the assertion of the dead — whether fashions, energy or musicians — into the sphere of the living.

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“We were keen to work with people from around Manchester who were musically active between 1952 and 1962, so that it’s got a kind of specific context because our projects are always site specific, whether that’s with a particular archive, particular people or a particular history of something. We wanted to work with people who were active as musicians in that period, whether that was amateur musicians, enthusiasts, or pros or semi-pros. We’ve got a whole range of people in the film from people who, say, played in bands at school but didn’t really become professional musicians, and don’t play any more; someone that released a record in the early sixties, still collects guitars but doesn’t play much any more; original members of pop groups like The Dollies. And then people like Bruce Mitchell, a well-connected professional drummer who did lots of things, still does, and is well known for

Durutti Column. He was playing jazz in the 1950s, drumming in Moss Side clubs in the 1960s, with Alberto y Los Trios Paranoias in the 1970s. Working with us, improvising around loops, working out pulse, he took the abstraction in his stride. Others weren't so sure what we were doing. For some it was the first time they had ever contributed to the composition of something like this, but they loved the experience."

It is played by a new kind of ensemble, a variation on the idea of a group, on the traditional form of a band, something that cannot really be repeated. It's the reforming of a group that never existed in the first place, one that has no name.¹ Taking the form of a secretive portrait of the creative process shifting between ghostly fly-on-the-wall and circular installation it is made up by combining a variety of discarded out-of-copyright sources and public domain samples, and these captured takes, notes, rhythms, hints and signals then inspire musicians and singers with their own local stories, personal taste and various levels of proficiency to create their own responses, their own free-flowing sonic genome, finding treasure and themselves between jamming and dreaming.

"I think a lot of people we asked turned up expecting to sit down and tell us their anecdotes of the fifties, that it would be a talking head film, that we were making a documentary simply reminiscing about

that period, because this what people expect – that’s the usual sort of thing. But of course no one speaks in the film. Their answers, their anecdotes, are musical. The anecdotes are there, but they’re not spoken. They’re sort of in the performance, in how they react to the situation and the process.”

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Everything I Have Is Yours is about the transformation of experience, presented as a discreet kind of abstract, non-verbal documentary which seeks to explore the fiction that can be found behind reality and the reality that exists behind fiction.

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“We’re not making an album or a track. There are fragmented elements that get assembled into something that resembles a track that might be in the process of being recorded in the studio or rehearsed into something, so it’s hovering between different states, not least between song and sound. It will have an arc, yes, the sound builds and drops, hints at the existence of the idea of song. There are moments where it collects into something more obviously musical, so you could walk into the room at a certain point and think, oh, there’s a band playing. You might walk in at another time and see Bruce trying something out on the drums because he’s reacting to the loop the first time that it’s played to him through his headphones, and something forms from that, and then it falls apart again, and becomes something else. It’s not a band. It’s someone

working something out. Someone thinking. What is happening here? What happens next?"

Eileen and Ben/Open Music Archive, pursuing pure research into sound within a tradition that goes back to the experimental laboratories and obscured histories of Milton Babbitt and Karlheinz Stockhausen, are not the composers, conductors, leaders, producers, engineers, impresarios, writers, consultants, musicologists, directors, negotiators, moderators, code crackers, beat hunters, curators, editors, community builders, project leaders or auteurs, depending on an army of assistants to complete their work, but something else, an occupation, an assignment, an enlightened form of artistic modelling yet to be named that links human instinct with algorithmic intelligence, remembrance with technology.²

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"I think the last thing we wanted is any sense of it being like, putting the band back together. But it becomes something you didn't see coming as you were working on the piece itself, discovering what it is by doing it. Roy, one of the guitarists, he described it as like putting a family together. We were meeting every week. Making something. Learning new things. Finding out about each other. And when it was over he's like: 'What am I going to do now? It's all finished!' I suppose it's one of the problems of a project where you engage people like this to work collectively for a short while, to get used to a new scene, to become involved in a new activity. What happens when it's all finished?"

Endnotes

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1 · The collection of strangers performing *Everything* in no particular time and space, as imaginary avant-beat combo, as obscure temporary supergroup, could be called The Thoughts.

2 · The role of Eileen and Ben as post-modern fixers, aesthetic planners, knowledge seekers and copyright wranglers, as reserved, undercover combination of record producers, conceptual artists, artistic researchers, data collectors and diligent archivists could be defined as ‘interagents’. If there was some sort of record of their work—released on an imaginary new format more suited to the reality-rearranging 21st century than quaint vinyl—it would be called *Something Always Remains*.

EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS

A Film by
Eileen Simpson & Ben White
(Open Music Archive)

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Chas Baker – vocals
Norman Beaker – guitar
Max Beesley – drums
Roger Browne – piano
Stewart Butler – baritone sax
Tony Chess – drums and djembe
Maureen Donahue – vocals
Mike Farmer – tenor sax
Peter Fox – guitar and vocals
Bo Lee – bass guitar
Jill MacDonald – vocals
Jean Martin – vocals
Paul Medina – double bass and trombone
Bruce Mitchell – drums
Richard Piggott – guitar
Roy Rigby – guitar

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