

# This Stuff Is What We 'Are': Collecting Popular Culture in Libraries

by Dennis East

**I**n advocating collecting and preserving popular culture materials, Ray Browne, one of the pioneers in the field, observes: "We are what we consume, what we use every day. Esthetics, terming this 'good' and that 'bad' is not the question here. This stuff is what we 'are.' We'd just better begin looking at it."<sup>1</sup> Browne's stuff of popular culture has begun to appear in public libraries, academic libraries, and museums. It includes collections of advertising art, business cards, dime novels, elementary and high school textbooks, greeting cards, pipes and cigarette lighters, sheet music, "Star Trek" scripts, stereoptican cards, trade catalogs, and books, ephemera, and graphic material relating to everything from the tooth fairy to work horses.<sup>2</sup>

The listings in the *Directory of Popular Culture Collections* illustrate the wide diversity of materials used in studying popular culture, but they may also cause confusion.<sup>3</sup> Some entries appear to relate more to literature, local history, or traditional historical topics. The confusion can be lessened by recognizing the interdisciplinary nature of popular culture. Ray Browne tells us that "popular culture is a chronicle of daily life."<sup>4</sup> To the founders of the Popular Culture Association, popular culture is "productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption" which reflect "the values, convictions, and patterns of thought and feeling generally dispersed through and approved by American society."<sup>5</sup> Even the compilers of the *Directory of Popular Culture Collections* acknowledge the difficulty of narrowly defining popular culture. Entries in the directory "focus on mainstream culture and ... center on a level of culture distinct and separate from the elite values espoused through high art."<sup>6</sup> Other definitions abound,<sup>7</sup> but no one definition has been universally accepted. The fundamental questions of understanding and defining

popular culture must ultimately be answered individually and institutionally. Accepting the fact that popular culture enthusiasts embrace almost any subject, phenomena, or activity is an essential first step.

Ray Browne sees limitless collecting possibilities for libraries. In his opinion, broadsides, chapbooks, comics, labor tracts, matchbook covers, nudist magazines, picture postcards, restaurant menus, recipe books, theatre handbills, valentines, wills, and yearbooks all have a place in the library.<sup>8</sup> Other popular culture scholars share Browne's view. Lee Cooper calls for collecting "everything from *Mad* magazine to bootleg discs."<sup>9</sup> Gordon Stevenson believes "nothing is too trivial, too banal, or too trite to be excluded" by the scholar of popular culture.<sup>10</sup> Michael Marsden, editor of the *Journal of Popular Film*, says, "Nothing (no

contemporary items." But he also calls for establishing regional repositories to collect comprehensively.<sup>15</sup> Wayne Wiegand endorses the same idea and also advocates the use of interlibrary loan for all types of material from these regional collection and distribution centers.<sup>16</sup> Until these ideas come to fruition, however, librarians still face the challenge of identifying, collecting, and making available the stuff of popular culture.

## Building a Popular Culture Collection

Librarians can follow a few basic maxims in creating, building, or enhancing popular culture collections.<sup>17</sup> As already discussed, defining popular culture is essential. Librarians and others should also recognize that the study of popular culture has "attained a new legitimacy in American universities."<sup>18</sup> The increasing number of popular culture scholars and courses, as well as the quantity, variety, and improved quality of research throughout the country, stand as testimony to that legitimacy.<sup>19</sup> Further, librarians should decide whether they agree with Gordon Stevenson's conclusion that popular culture is "a legitimate and important library resource."<sup>20</sup> The contention of Wayne Wiegand that librarians operate from a bias for the

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— Ray Browne

printed word and the conventional academic canon requires closer examination by those who collect popular culture materials.<sup>21</sup> And finally, as Gordon Stevenson observes, the librarian of popular culture will "need to find new guidelines and strategies" as alternatives to "traditional criteria" and "qualitative judgments."<sup>22</sup>

The next, and equally formidable, step is to link the collecting of popular culture materials to teaching and research needs in academic settings and to patron interests and wants in public libraries.<sup>23</sup> In an academic environment, whether collecting for research interests takes precedence over collecting for curriculum needs de-

thing) is without significance."<sup>11</sup> The results of these remarks can have far-reaching consequences for librarians.

Librarians know that not everything can be collected.<sup>12</sup> Virginia Mayo calls for a "connoisseurship of the future" and consortia of museums and universities to collect popular culture materials.<sup>13</sup> The compilers of the *Directory of Popular Culture Collections* seem to accept this reality and encourage comprehensive, focused collecting.<sup>14</sup> Lee Cooper identifies the need for regional resource centers to collect, catalog, and distribute popular culture materials and believes that "every institution can and should collect 'some' kind of distinctive

depends on the mission and character of the institution. The two needs are not mutually exclusive, and both should be considered when deciding whether or not to collect popular culture materials. In most instances, academic institutions have built collections of primary research materials for scholarly purposes, with the hope that, someday, the material will be used in the classroom. A carefully thought out collecting policy in popular culture, or any other field, should give equal consideration to both the research and the curricular value of the program.

In public libraries, Janet K. Schroeder recognizes that popular culture materials acquired in response to community wants also has value to popular culture researchers. Current and past best sellers, science fiction, westerns, detective and police fiction, historical novels, romance novels, and short stories found in public libraries are the stuff of popular culture.<sup>24</sup> Local and regional history and literature collections containing photographs, community and cultural programs, works of local authors, and many other types of material may be acquired by public libraries. These collections meet community needs and provide resources to students of popular culture.

#### A Collection Development Policy

Development of a concise, yet comprehensive, collection policy statement is a critical step in an academic library setting. A well-defined collecting policy serves many purposes: informing faculty and scholars about where they may find materials to support their teaching and research, reducing competition among institutions, attracting donors, and preventing donations of unwanted material. Such a policy also deters popular culture buffs, or even librarian collectors within the academic community, from acquiring and offering material that is outside the scope of the collecting policy.

In public libraries, developing a formal collecting policy statement may seem less feasible or desirable. Yet a public library that consciously chooses to serve a popular culture constituency should make its staff and users aware of the nature and scope of that collecting policy. An esoteric collecting policy — one that is not publicly stated and understood by colleagues, faculty, and the community — is a disservice to users and to the host institution.

A corollary to the collecting policy, applicable in any library setting, is deciding what to exclude. Though some popular culture enthusiasts endorse the concept of the library as a museum,<sup>25</sup> many libraries decide not to accept artifacts. Declining a collection of hubcaps, Batman glasses, basketball paraphernalia, fishing

lures, or any other material object becomes easier if the written collection development policy states that the library does not collect artifacts. If the library is also a museum, then the task of writing a collection development policy is more difficult, and housing and making available material objects is quite challenging.

In certain settings, an advisory body may prove useful in developing a collecting focus or policy. For a public library, a group of social studies teachers, school media specialists, and local librarians can play a positive role in helping to define that focus. In an academic library, faculty members, librarians, donors, and graduate students can advise and provide valuable information to link the collecting to the curriculum and research interests on campus. Though librarians are capable of doing this alone, an advisory group can play a constructive role in providing information about wants and needs at academic or public libraries and bring legitimacy to collecting popular culture materials, which may be viewed by some librarians, faculty, and members of the public as an inappropriate collecting area.<sup>26</sup>

Even with a realistic, understandable collecting policy in place, librarians may find that acquiring popular culture materials is challenging. Primary popular culture resources are plentiful, albeit ephemeral and often fragile or temporal in nature.<sup>27</sup> Approval plans, standing orders, firm orders, periodical subscriptions, and trade or exchange agreements can be effective tools in collection building for librarians, but less traditional methods of collecting are also required. Some of these include creating relationships with fan clubs and collectors; consulting the *Encyclopedia of Associations* for special subject areas and writing letters soliciting material; finding leads in special subject or professional directories and encyclopedias; visiting garage and estate sales, flea markets, and resale shops; becoming familiar with the used and antiquarian book trade and placing desiderata lists with specialized book dealers; following suggestions from donors or advisory group members; establishing relationships with alumni, community organizations, visiting scholars, and local faculty; requesting complimentary subscriptions to special subject serials to complete holdings; and, of course, publicizing collections and interests within the university and community.<sup>28</sup> Seek — you will find. These methods can be beneficial regardless of whether or not the library uses a focused approach to collect-

ing popular culture materials. An ability and willingness to connect diverse individuals — fans, buffs, collectors, donors, writers — to the popular culture collecting effort can be a tremendous help.<sup>29</sup>

#### Donors

The relationship established with donors can be particularly beneficial to an effort to collect popular culture materials. It is important to establish good, open donor relations from the outset. Collecting responsibly includes keeping collections intact in most cases, not splitting collections between two or more institutions, avoiding negative comments about competing institutions, and being careful not to make promises to donors that cannot be kept. Librarians and archivists should operate

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within their institution's capacity to serve donors as well as patrons. Advising donors of the need for completing a deed of gift and explaining the implications of the instrument, providing an inventory to the donor's collection, helping to locate someone to appraise the collection, and publicizing the acquisition through press releases and acquisition notices in scholarly journals are basics of donor relations. If librarians follow these procedures, they will be able to obtain leads to other prospective donors, use the donor's name when pursuing other collections, and invite donors to participate in advisory boards and other activities.

#### Cooperative Collecting

As noted previously, some popular culture scholars and enthusiasts have proposed regional depositories for popular culture materials and a coordinated national collecting strategy.<sup>30</sup> Gradually, some advocates for popular culture have come to recognize that not everything can be collected. Certainly no single museum or library can collect everything.<sup>31</sup> Cooperation and networking have now become watchwords in collecting popular culture materials, supplanting earlier calls to collect indiscriminately.

Janet K. Schroeder offers examples of cooperative efforts in collection development and resource sharing related to popular culture material in a public library setting. She suggests that when public libraries weed their holdings, they explore

the possibility of placing older novels and serials in an academic library; and that academic libraries purchase scholarly, critical works on popular culture to complement the holdings of public libraries. Further, she proposes that academic libraries borrow popular culture materials from public libraries for use in relevant courses, and that popular culture classes be held in public libraries. Schroeder believes that contact and cooperation between public and academic librarians can benefit both and aid in the collecting and use of popular culture materials.<sup>32</sup> Establishing such cooperative relationships may be difficult, time-consuming, and a strain on the resources of public libraries, but for those committed to collecting and making available popular culture material, such cooperation is essential.

Academic librarians working with popular culture materials also face the challenge to cooperate and share resources. The experience of the Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest illustrates how these challenges in collecting the stuff of popular culture can be met.<sup>33</sup> The Consortium, officially founded in August 1990 and composed of Bowling Green State University, Kent State University, Michigan State University, and The Ohio State University, is a regional networking effort with a special focus on subject areas

related to the popular arts and the mass media. In addition to a shared collecting focus in many related subject areas, the members recognized that their geographical proximity to one another offered practical and cost-effective ways for collaboration and resource sharing.

During the 1970s, librarians at Bowling Green State University, Michigan State University, and The Ohio State University began sharing information about holdings and collecting emphases and how to provide access and house certain non-traditional materials, and practicing a limited referral service of prospective donors to the appropriate collection.<sup>34</sup> In 1987, a joint working group met to document informal collection development understanding. The next year, the group benefited from a grant received by The Ohio State University and met to discuss current and future collecting plans. At that meeting it became clear that a formal working agreement or cooperative statement would help establish an identity and reputation for popular culture collections and each institution that could impress administrators and funding agencies. [See page 197.] What well might be the credo of the resulting Consortium — "the way you get cooperation is by cooperating" — came from a participant quoting the late librarian of The Ohio State University, Hugh Atkinson.

Gay Dannelly, collection development librarian at the same institution, provided a succinct rationale for the Consortium when she said, "cooperation is also a way to both concentrate and extend our resources — financial, service, space — all of those kinds of things. To let us manage to do more with what we've got."<sup>35</sup> In addition to dealing with collecting issues, the members of the Consortium seek cooperative efforts in areas of development, access, promotion, and preservation of specialized research collections.

Many articles in special collections and archival literature advocate cooperation, reduced competition, and resource sharing. The Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest seeks to fulfill this rhetoric of cooperation. For example, because there is an extensive collection of comic books and comic art at Michigan State University, other members do not spend time and resources building comic book collections. Prospective donors of graphic and cartoon art to Bowling Green State University are referred to the Cartoon, Graphic, and Photographic Arts Collection at The Ohio State University. Duplicate holdings of certain genres of popular culture materials such as dime novels are offered to other members of the Consortium.

The members have also collaborated

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on collection evaluation using a list of subject descriptors drawn from the Library of Congress Subject Headings and the Library of Congress Classification System to develop a common list of subject areas that closely parallels, but simplifies, the Research Libraries Group conspectus program and the North American Collections Inventory Project of the Association of Research Libraries. The result has been the production of more uniform collection depth descriptions for the members' holdings, which will benefit current and future researchers.<sup>36</sup>

The participants in the Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest have clearly taken steps beyond the rhetoric of cooperation. All of the members recognize the plethora of popular culture materials available for collecting; the reality of limited space and declining resources; the questioning of the legitimacy of popular culture collections; the problems in cataloging, preserving, and housing material in non-traditional physical formats; and the competition for popular culture materials from other institutions, collectors, and dealers. Such recognition and promised cooperation bode well for the future, not only for the members of the Consortium, but for other librarians who seek, to paraphrase Ray Browne, the stuff of what we are.

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# Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest

## *Prospectus*

### **Statement Of Purpose**

The Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest is a regional networking effort with a special focus on subject areas related to the popular arts and the mass media. While the founding libraries of the consortium share a collecting focus in many related subject areas, their geographic proximity offers practical and cost-effective opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing. Through inter-institutional cooperation, the consortium will develop joint projects to promote the common goals of member institutions and enhance local programs, priorities, and strengths. The following selections of this prospectus outline the history, background, rationale, proposed objectives, and funding implications of the consortium. These projects will include but not be limited to, collection development and evaluation, promotion, access, and preservation.

### **Objectives**

Many of the proposed consortium objectives are built on long-established cooperative practices, such as trade and exchange transactions and donor referrals, which have been carried out informally for many years. Others represent new collaborative initiatives that depend upon the organizational framework of the Consortium of Popular Culture Collections in the Midwest for their implementation. Together the participating libraries seek to strengthen and expand each of these important library functions through a variety of programming opportunities which include the following:

#### **Collection Development:**

The consortium will promote the regular exchange of institutional collection policies, accession lists, desiderata lists, serial lists, and newsletters, in addition to holding annual meetings to discuss acquisitions and collection development.

Consortium libraries will assist in serving the collection needs of other members with coordinated exchanges of duplicate or unwanted items.

Donors who wish to donate materials to one library will be referred when those items are appropriate to another which collects in that subject area.

The solicitation of grant funding for collection development in specific areas on a consortium-wide basis will be enhanced through joint proposals of member libraries.

#### **Access:**

1. The consortium will share finding aids for individual collections, and will consider developing joint subject-specialized guides to member holdings for better national and international access.
2. The consortium will develop cooperative microcomputer-based finding aids for greater user access to non-traditional primary materials.
3. The consortium will take a leading role in establishing guidelines for bibliographic access to popular culture collections through self-sponsored programs, as well as through participation at national library and archives conferences.
4. The consortium will promote discussion of the issues relating to cataloging popular culture materials with a special emphasis on improved access by subject and physical format.
5. The consortium will promote enhanced on-line bibliographic description of holdings for better access to unique items and to expedite their processing.
6. The consortium will work to establish a more systematic user referral network among member libraries.
7. The consortium will formalize an agreement by which materials from one institution will be lent to another for the on-site use of researchers.

#### **Promotion:**

The consortium will establish a wide variety of programs to promote the importance and use of popular culture collections. These might include:

- cooperative travelling exhibits
- sponsorship of working papers and topical studies
- flyers with locations, hours, and other pertinent information for all member libraries
- conferences to discuss the role of popular culture collections in scholarship
- grant funding to establish fellowships for the purpose of research at member collections.

#### **Preservation:**

The consortium will provide a forum through workshops and conferences to discuss the problems of preservation as they pertain particularly to popular culture materials.

The consortium will share information about preservation problems and remedies which may help preserve endangered popular culture collections nationwide.

The consortium as a cooperative may submit funding proposals for grants to assist in the preservation of materials at member libraries.