

# Displaying sound: the National Poetry Library's vinyl collection, 2019–2024

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This article explores how the National Poetry Library has developed its historic collection of vinyl LPs over the course of four years, describing the challenges of balancing the preservation of audio objects with their accessibility and discoverability, and examining the opportunities this unique collection presents in building new audiences.

*"We reject the library as a space of silence. The fixity of the printed word is made alive by the spoken word, the sounds where the resonance of the body is present."*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 2016, the National Poetry Library digitised a large part of its collections, including its extensive holdings of audio material on outdated vinyl and cassette formats. Although the organising and sending of the cassette tapes proved quite straightforward, preparing the vinyl for digitisation revealed that aspects of this part of the library's audio collection needed some attention, and that some work would be needed to ensure this unique, visually impactful material could be properly preserved and presented in the future. This digitisation project provided an opportunity to look at this part of the collection afresh.

The vinyl records were sent to an external company to be digitised, and when they returned, three key areas for improvement were identified to improve their discoverability, accessibility, and their preservation:

1. Storage: to find appropriate storage units and location for the material
2. Collection development: to ensure continued currency and relevance
3. Promotion: to draw attention to this collection

This article will examine the improvements made to the library's vinyl collection in each of these areas. It will reflect on successes of the project so far and consider how some things could have been done differently – and it will conclude by outlining what the next steps might be for managing this vibrant and diverse collection.

## Storage

### *Before digitisation*

Prior to the digitisation project, the library's approach to storing these records favoured preservation over access, which is understandable given their fragile nature, the rarity of some of the items, and the common perception of them as an obsolete format. Long-term planning for the digitisation project contributed to this approach – the logic was to keep these hard copies as masters, and provide public access to the audio through the digitised copies. As a result, a large number of these LPs, mostly uncatalogued, were stored in the library's rare books room (Fig. 1), inaccessible and invisible to the public, meaning that over time they were no longer prioritised by staff.

1. Heide Hinrichs, Jo-ey Tang, and Elizabeth Haines, "Shelf documents: art library as practice – an introduction." in *Shelf Documents: Art Library as Practice*, ed. Heide Hinrichs, Jo-ey Tang, and Elizabeth Haines. (Antwerp: b\_books Verlag, 2022), 21.



Fig. 1: LPs stored in cabinets in the library's Rare Books room.

Keeping the tactile, visual objects out of public reach was limiting the potential for engagement with this rich and wonderful resource. Although the aim was to eventually make the digitised audio content available, this was only really half the story. Restricting access to the record covers and liner notes, and fundamentally making this collection hard for people to find, or even to be aware of, limited its potential. It seemed that to raise awareness of this unique collection, the objects would need to speak for themselves on the shelves.

Meanwhile, many of the library's catalogued LPs were publicly accessible at this time, but stored inappropriately, in no particular order. They were stored vertically between bookends on a shelf, with spines facing outward. The small size and flimsy nature of the bookends meant that the LPs didn't have much support and would often slide into diagonal positions, putting them at risk of damage. This arrangement also made the LPs difficult to browse – it was difficult to pull the covers out to look at them without disrupting how LPs were balanced between bookends. On top of this, the records were stored at a far remove from the related audio-visual materials such as CDs, cassette tapes, DVDs etc, and, more importantly, separated from the turntable necessary to listen to them.

### *Rehousing the vinyl*

The pandemic put a pause to these considerations until, in 2021, library staff were galvanised by the prospect of re-opening after lockdown, and a new storage unit for the vinyl records was ordered from IKEA. This opened up many more options for both storage and display, with doors to protect the records from sunlight (Fig. 2). The design team at the Southbank Centre (the arts centre in which the library is housed) drew up some colourful custom signage for the shelves, and the library team did a bit of DIY work modifying the unit to avoid the hinges of the doors scratching the covers of the records.

This unit was installed in the audiovisual section of the library, where library users are now able to comfortably and easily browse the records. This position also opens the possibility of creating displays of vinyl records that tie into the library's exhibition programme. An example of this can be seen in Fig. 3, a photo taken during the library's 'Poets in Vogue' exhibition, which focused on the fashion choices of eight women poets. Here, vinyl records of readings by Stevie Smith, Edith Sitwell and Sylvia Plath were a perfect fit among other items on display, which in this instance included a skirt once owned and worn by Sylvia Plath, on loan to the library from The Second Shelf bookshop.



Fig. 2: New shelving for the library's LPs.



Fig. 3: The vinyl collection in the exhibition space.

This is a good demonstration of how this collection can be used to enhance the visual side of the library's activity. The breadth of the vinyl collection allows for versatility in choosing items for display to tie in with all kinds of exhibitions – for example, during an exhibition of physical and digital interactive 'Poetry Games', the record on display was by Alison Knowles, a Fluxus artist who encouraged other artists to perform inside her artworks.

### *Risk of damage*

Inevitably, this position comes with risks: favouring access over preservation has resulted in some records – particularly those which are prominently on display – being damaged, especially on weekends when the library is busy with children. In response to this, the library has begun to take the approach taken in a lot of record stores – keeping the covers out for display and browsing purposes, and keeping the LPs themselves in protective sleeves behind the desk, where library users can request to listen to them. This is with a view to achieve the balance between celebrating and sharing this collection, while keeping the fragile items safe from harm.

The library is currently working on a user-friendly and visually appealing way for visitors to access the digitised copies of this material. In an ideal situation, visitors will be able to browse the original record sleeves and immediately listen to whatever they wish digitally, only handling the physical LPs in exceptional circumstances.

This is all still a work in progress - balancing preservation and access for these fragile materials, a special collection within the fairly small, family-friendly public space of the library, is an ongoing process. But as we will see further below, making this collection more visible has helped us engage with new audiences across a variety of disciplines.

## Collection development

### *Historic material in the collection*

While rehousing the vinyl collection, the library team also turned their attention to developing it.

Prior to the digitisation project, the library's vinyl collection was largely historical, consisting of items produced between the 60s and 80s, predominantly by record labels such as Caedmon and Argo, who specialised in releasing spoken word recordings by well-established poets such as T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Edith Sitwell, and many others. Some examples of these more historic items can be seen in [Fig. 4](#). While a few contemporary records and reissues could be found among the library's LPs, including releases by Holly Pester, Ursula K Le Guin and The Last Poets, these newer releases were outliers.

This rich historic collection provided a solid foundation upon which to collect new poetry audio releases.



Fig. 4: Examples of historic items in vinyl collection.

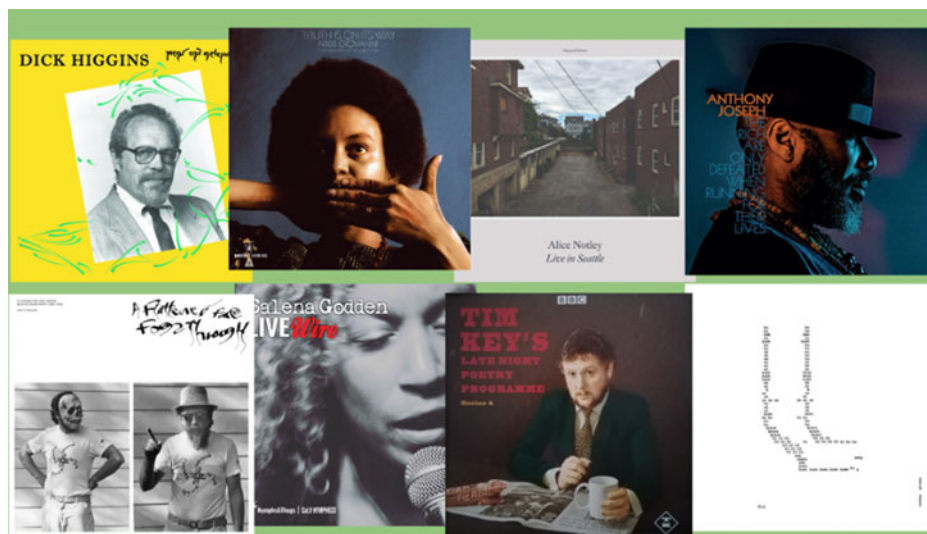


Fig. 5: Examples of recent vinyl acquisitions.

### *Developing the collection*

Once an annual budget had been set for building upon this collection, the library set about researching currently active record labels specialising in poetry, as well as identifying gaps in its collections. The net was cast wide, using information sources outside the library's usual channels, to ensure that these new acquisitions reflected the diversity of text and sound being produced, resulting in a huge range of new acquisitions on vinyl, both old and new. So far, these acquisitions have included an album by poet laureate Simon Armitage's band, a spoken word album by comedian Tim Key, reissues of albums by jazz poet Nikki Giovanni and Hungarian sound poet Katalin Ladik, and many more (Fig. 5 gives a sense of new material that the library has collected). Developing this collection has not only updated it to reflect current trends in recording and releasing poetry; it has



Fig. 6: 'Vinyl of the Month' display.

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## Poetry Vinyl

As well as printed material, the National Poetry Library holds a wealth of audio-visual material across a variety of formats. Among the treasures of this collection are over 200 vinyl records, giving library users the chance not only to hear work in the poets' own voices but also to appreciate a huge range of poetry LP cover art.

Below are a selection of highlights from this vinyl collection, all of which can be listened to on the turntable in the National Poetry Library's audiovisual section.



### On the move

Thom Gunn, recorded in Oakland in 1959



### Listen

Stevie Smith reads and sings her poems



### The poetry of Langston Hughes

Read by Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis

Fig. 7: Collections Page on the National Poetry Library website.

also helped us to connect with members of the poetry community we hadn't been in touch with before, such as Pearl Home Records and Nymphs and Thugs in the UK, as well as Recital and Fonograf in the US, opening potential avenues for new and interesting collaborations.

A fascinating outcome of this process has been tracing different lineages and influences across this collection. These histories are just as vital as those that flow between the books on the shelves, telling a different part of the same story – listeners can hear Linton Kwesi Johnson's influence on Roger Robinson, Henri Chopin's influence on Felicia Atkinson, and Kamau Brathwaite's influence on Anthony Joseph. The collection is now perfectly placed for practising poets and musicians to discover these rich sonic histories and take up the mantle themselves.

## Promotion

### *Vinyl of the month*

To facilitate this kind of discovery and creative engagement, the library has worked hard over the last few years to draw people's attention to the vinyl collection. The most immediate way of doing this so far has been in the library itself,



Fig 8: blog piece on the Southbank Centre website (Southbank Centre 2022).

with a regularly rotating 'Vinyl of the Month' display (Fig. 6). An effective visual signpost, this lets people know about the collection within the space of the library itself, and this will often be shared on social media.

#### Website and blogs

Features about this collection have also been posted on the websites of the library and the wider Southbank Centre. Fig. 7 shows a screenshot from a Collections Page on the National Poetry Library's website, highlighting LPs with particularly striking covers,<sup>2</sup> and pictured in Fig. 8 is a piece on the Southbank centre blog, where library staff members each wrote a bit about one of their favourite records.<sup>3</sup>

These examples show how this collection provides a wealth of nice visual content for the library to share as an invitation for people to come and explore.

#### Radio: Plastic Language on NTS

As for the audio itself, a bimonthly show on NTS Radio called Plastic Language draws largely from this collection, promoting the library to a substantial new audience and offering entry points into the genre for people who may not have previously had an interest in poetry (Fig. 9).<sup>4</sup> Licences such as PRS on NTS offer more flexibility in disseminating this material than we are able to through the library's own channels. While this is not an 'official' radio show for the library – rather, this is an extracurricular project that grows from and acknowledges this work – the show demonstrates how this versatile resource can capture imaginations beyond the library's usual audiences.

#### Partnerships

Recent partnerships have also given the library an opportunity to share this strand of the library's collections with a wider audience - in particular the Sound of the Year Awards. In 2021, organisers for the awards approached the library to

2. "Poetry vinyl," National Poetry Library 2018, <<https://www.nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk/visit-our-collections/poetry-vinyl>>.

3. "Vinyl Countdown: Introducing the National Poetry Library's Vinyl Collection," Southbank Centre 2022 (blog), <<https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/articles/vinyl-countdown-national-poetry-library-vinyl-collection>>.

4. "Plastic Language," NTS Radio, <<https://www.nts.live/shows/plastic-language>>.

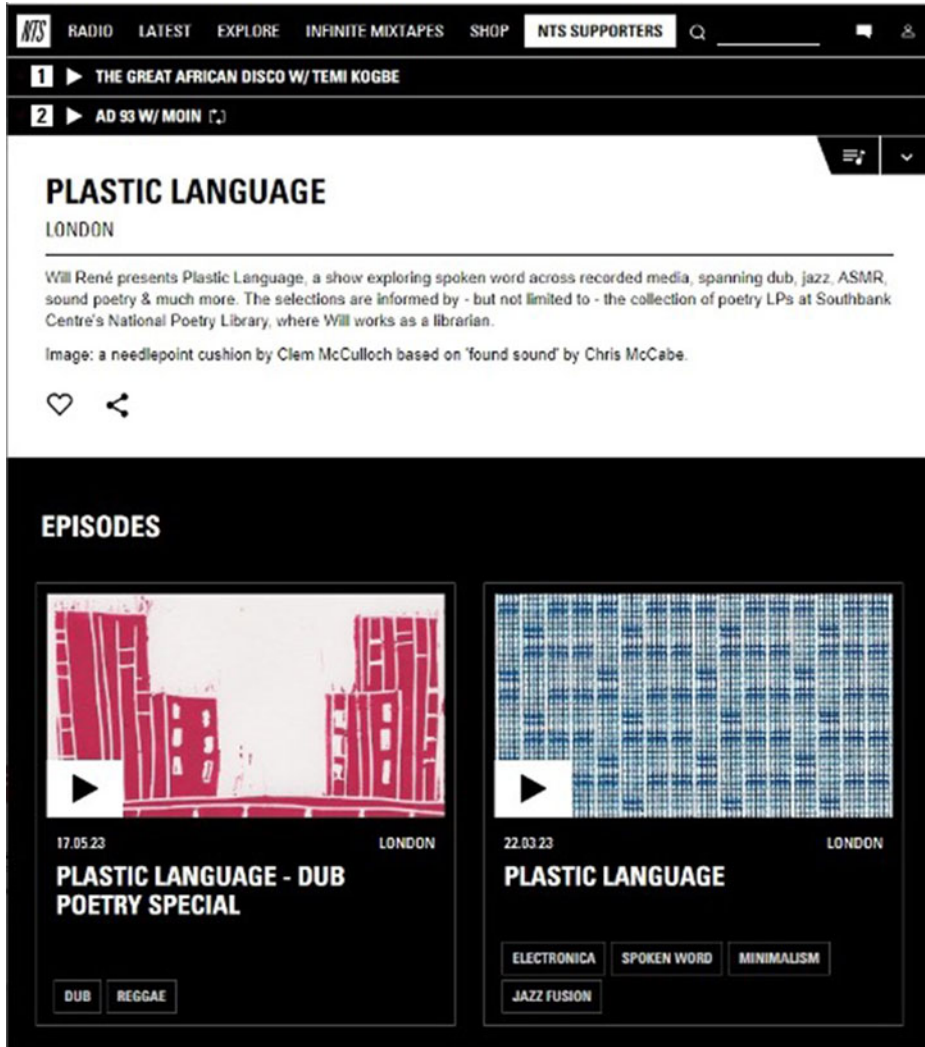


Fig. 9: Screenshot of Plastic Language on the NTS Archive (NTS n.d.)

partner on their 'Best Imagined Sound' category (Fig. 10), an invitation for someone to deploy their poetic skills and submit a description of a sound that doesn't yet exist.<sup>5</sup> This ongoing partnership essentially involves annually helping to promote the category through the library's digital channels. This focus specifically on sound is the perfect springboard to share the library's work in this area, and to catch the attention of artists for whom sound is central to their practice.

5. "Sound of the Year Awards," Sound of the Year Awards, <<https://www.soundoftheyearawards.com/>>

**Feedback**

Now that this collection has been re-housed, developed and promoted, feedback from visitors has been broadly positive, with many library users spending a lot of time digging and listening, or even flicking through and making a note of things they've not yet come across to listen to later. One particularly striking interaction was that of a father showing his daughter how to use the turntable while periodically exclaiming, 'I can't believe they have this!', which felt like a good intergenerational learning and teaching moment, entirely facilitated by the vinyl records.

Several visitors who hadn't read poetry before, or who were coming back to it after a long time of not reading it, have stated that they've found the audio to be a perfect entry point into it. Often, engagement with the collection is visible only in subtle ways, with records sometimes being removed from the general shelves and put into more prominent display areas by library users.

Some negative feedback has come from library users who have expressed shock and concern that these fragile objects are completely accessible to the public - but these conversations have helpfully fed into the library's thinking around the next steps in storing these and preserving them into the future





Fig. 10: Social media flyer for the Sound of the Year Awards' 'Best Imagined Sound' category.

## Conclusion, and future plans

By identifying and making improvements on the three areas of storage, collection development and promotion of its vinyl LPs, the National Poetry Library has breathed new life into a unique resource, expanding the range of its holdings and drawing in new audiences in the process.

While much has been achieved, there is still work to be done to ensure that the collection can continue to grow fruitfully and reach a wide audience, while still being preserved to ensure it lasts in the long term.

The library's first priority, as mentioned above, will be to ensure the LPs are stored safely behind the library desk, while their sleeves remain discoverable and browsable on the library shelves. This will allow library users to engage directly with the visual material and to be aware of what's in the collection, while ensuring the more fragile material is only accessed and used with supervision and advice from library staff.

Having started to promote this collection in a variety of ways, the library is now looking toward new ways of sharing it. Copyright clearance training for staff is currently being looked into, which would enable the library to get some of this unique audio out on its website and social media channels, be this in the form of one of the website's 'Poems of the Day' or as part of some kind of official Poetry Library podcast.

Given the versatility of this material, there are a number of ways it could be incorporated into new activities in the library's programme. Listening party events have been discussed, as has the idea of commissioning poets or musicians – or even both – to respond creatively to the collection. While these ideas are hypothetical at this stage, they point positively in the direction of new entry points to the library and to poetry generally, as well as to the production of new creative work.

And finally, it is important to acknowledge that, while the emphasis of the library's collections is on physical material, staff are also aware of the current wealth of material being produced on born-digital formats, such as podcasts, recordings of significant readings, and albums with digital-only releases. As

mentioned above, at present, the library is working on installing a user-friendly PC terminal for people to be able to browse and access the digitised audio material acquired from the aforementioned audio digitisation project at the library. Once this work has been completed, an infrastructure will be in place for the team to start thinking about collecting and sharing this new kind of born-digital material. Essentially, the work being done around the preservation and accessibility of its vinyl LPs is preparing the National Poetry Library to collect and share new kinds of audio material into the future.

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