The journey in capturing sound has been rapid due to the remarkable speed of development in recording devices – from phonographs to mobile phones – and this has forced the public to consciously and subconsciously change their social and environmental listening behaviours. As more and more concert organisers are asking their audience to turn off their phones and engage in active rather than passive listening and academic authors such as Michael Bull (2007, Sound Moves) are considering the inclusivity and exclusivity of mobile technologies.

The ‘Hearing History’ workshops actively engaged the public to confront the processes of committing sound to a medium to be stored and what it means to capture the sounds of the past to be then reheard in a future present. It was interesting to hear the fascination in the simplicity of the early technologies and then watch them instinctively reach for their mobile phones to record the recordings that had just been made and were playing back on the wax cylinders and the vinyl lathe. The attendees at the workshops were mixed in age, gender and social class and all had an interest in the idea of not only seeing and hearing but also using these technologies. Many of the attendees were taken by seeing the technologies in action, the cutting of the sound onto the surface and then its tracing in playback. Attendees also came to reconsider the ambient sound of these early recordings as something separate from the sound object itself. Early technologies inherently produce a hum and crackle when recording sound and this can present a false historical contextualization to the recording and all who recorded live onto these technologies were intrigued to hear this hum and crackle on something they had just recorded. One member of the workshop said she ‘was off home straight after this to re-listen to her Bessie Smith 78s and try and filter out that noise’.

There was an energy to these workshops which on receipt of the messages and tweets (using #HearingHistory) has continued after the event itself. Following on from these NISR funded workshops, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums set aside funding and maintained access to their archives to further promote research and impact this year (2015). In discussion with TWAM, lead academic Paul Fleet has championed taking research to the public (in the city centre rather than in museums) to engage more people who would not normally come across the idea of active / passive and inclusivity / exclusivity in recording technologies. This project has engaged the public, and will now lead to a journal article for Popular Musicology Online, drawing from the research undertaken.

“I have a new found respect for pressing record now I can see what is happening”

Workshop participant

Paul.fleet@ncl.ac.uk