



Points of View

**Key insights from the research project
Lost Sounds, Written Sources**

1. Why this research was undertaken

Music plays a visible and active role in Dutch society. It is present in concert halls and cafés, in community centres and public squares, and across radio, streaming platforms and social media. It shapes communities, marks generational shifts and reflects social developments.

Yet within the national library and the broader heritage infrastructure of the Netherlands, music as a field of documentation is far less visible. This is not due to a lack of material. Rather, much of the writing through which music is discussed, interpreted and historicised falls outside traditional collection frameworks.

This research began with a straightforward question: **how is music represented within the national library, and what remains outside its structures?**

The focus is not on sound recordings or musical works themselves, but on writing about music. This includes reviews, interviews, specialist magazines, zines, blogs, web publications, festival documentation, scene-based platforms and other forms of music-related text. These sources document how music is understood, debated and situated within specific communities and historical moments. They record how genres emerge, how scenes develop and how musical practices acquire meaning over time.

Interviews with researchers, archivists, journalists, collectors and cultural practitioners revealed a consistent pattern. Documentation exists in abundance, but it is dispersed and unevenly preserved. Websites disappear. Independent platforms cease to operate. Small-scale publications

rarely enter national collections. As a result, the written record of musical life is fragmented and difficult to navigate, even when material has survived.

The way music documentation is organised therefore exposes broader structural questions within heritage practice. The issue is not whether music deserves special treatment. The issue is how heritage systems recognise and accommodate forms of publication that do not fit established formats. Which kinds of documentation are routinely collected, and which depend on coincidence or individual initiative? How do these patterns shape what can later be reconstructed as part of the cultural memory of the Netherlands?

By examining music-related writing, this research makes these mechanisms visible. Music is not treated as an exception, but as a case through which processes of selection, omission and recognition within heritage infrastructures can be more clearly understood.

2. Documentation, visibility and loss

Interviews with researchers, archivists, journalists, collectors and cultural practitioners revealed a consistent assessment. Across genres, regions and professional roles, respondents described the same structural issue. Documentation of musical life in the Netherlands exists in abundance, but it is dispersed across institutions, private collections and digital platforms. It is rarely organised or accessible as a coherent field.

Sources are held in many different places, including national collections, local archives, personal holdings and online environments. However, there is often no shared framework that connects these materials or clarifies how they relate to one another. As a result, music related documentation requires prior knowledge of specific titles, individuals or initiatives in order to be located and interpreted.

A significant proportion of music documentation is sustained by individuals. Journalists, collectors, programmers and researchers have built archives over many years, often without formal institutional support. These collections contain not only documents, but also **contextual knowledge** about provenance, networks and informal histories. When those responsible for maintaining such collections are no longer able to continue, both material and the knowledge needed to interpret it are at risk of being lost.

The shift to digital publication has added further complexity. Since the 1990s, a growing share of writing about music has appeared online in web magazines, blogs, forums and independent platforms.

These environments have played a central role in documenting developments across musical practices. However, they depend on commercial hosting services, changing technical standards and short term funding structures. Websites are discontinued, domains expire and platforms are removed. Even when web content is archived, it may lack the descriptive information required to situate it within a broader historical development.

Respondents also identified recurring gaps in national collections. Documentation relating to regional music histories, **diasporic traditions**, popular genres and community based initiatives is often incomplete or difficult to trace. This is not due to a lack of activity or significance. Rather, many of these practices have been documented in formats such as small scale publications and community websites that do not align easily with established collection procedures.

The central issue is therefore not scarcity but **fragmentation**. Music related documentation is present, but insufficiently connected. Without structures that link materials across institutions, formats and communities, reconstructing the development of musical practices over time remains unnecessarily difficult.

3. Three structural patterns

The material gathered for this research reveals three recurring structural patterns. They do not stem from isolated mistakes or individual oversight, but from the way heritage systems are organised. Together, they clarify why music-related documentation often remains fragmented, difficult to access, or unevenly represented.

The first pattern concerns the gap between **holding material** and **making it visible as a domain**. Written sources about music are present within collections, but they are rarely framed or connected in ways that allow them to be understood as part of a coherent field. They are distributed across catalogues, newspaper databases, web archives and external collections. Without thematic orientation or recognisable entry points, users must already know what they are looking for. Material that cannot be approached in relation to other material remains underused and gradually recedes from wider circulation.

The second pattern concerns **digital scale** and **digital instability**. Since the 1990s, large volumes of music-related writing have appeared online: reviews, interviews, blogs, forums and scene-based platforms. Much of this material was central to how music communities documented and interpreted their own activities. Yet the environments in which it was produced are unstable. Websites disappear, platforms close, and formats become unreadable. Even when content is archived, the surrounding structure that gave it context is often missing. What is lost is not only individual texts, but the relationships between them.

The third pattern concerns the relationship between **local production** and **national recognition**. Music practices develop in specific places: cities, regions, venues, community networks and digital communities. Documentation often circulates within those contexts. It enters national collections only when it aligns with existing collection criteria, descriptive standards or recognised publication channels. Where such alignment does not occur, locally significant documentation remains marginal at a national level.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that the issue is structural rather than incidental. It lies in how systems organise, connect and prioritise material. In this context, music does not appear as an integrated field of documentation, but as dispersed material that requires active reconstruction in order to be understood.

4. What music reveals about heritage practice

Music is not exceptional, but it makes structural issues visible with unusual clarity. Many music practices unfold in time, in social interaction and across digital environments. They generate documentation in reviews, blogs, programmes, forums and local publications. These forms do not always fit easily within collection models that were developed around stable publication formats and clearly bounded objects.

The vulnerability of written and digital music sources therefore highlights a broader issue: heritage practice depends on **infrastructure**. Material that fits existing acquisition routes, descriptive standards and preservation workflows is more likely to be collected and maintained. Material that circulates through informal channels, digital platforms or local networks is more difficult to integrate, regardless of its cultural significance.

Music also makes clear how dependent meaning is on **context**. A review, blog post or forum discussion gains significance through its relationship to specific communities, events and developments. When such relationships are not recorded or cannot be reconstructed, documentation remains present but becomes difficult to interpret. Sources survive, but their historical function weakens. In this situation, heritage risks becoming accumulation without orientation.

Finally, music reveals how selection practices can produce uneven representation. Genres, regions and communities that align with established publication channels and institutional traditions are more likely

to enter national collections. Others remain under-documented not because they lack history, but because their documentation does not fit prevailing collection criteria or descriptive conventions.

The central issue is therefore not whether everything can be preserved. It is how **heritage practice is organised** so that diverse forms of documentation can be recognised, connected and sustained over time.

5. Considerations for the KB

This study does not argue that the KB should simply collect more material. Rather, it shows that written and digital sources about music require clearer **orientation** and sustained **domain specific knowledge** if they are to remain meaningful over time.

The central question is not whether every music related source can or should be acquired. The question is how the KB can strengthen continuity in a field where documentation is dispersed across institutions, private collections and digital platforms.

As the national library, the KB holds a distinctive position. It combines a national mandate with large scale infrastructure and long term preservation capacity. This does not mean centralising music heritage or absorbing existing initiatives. It means providing coordination, visibility and continuity where fragmentation currently prevails.

Written and digital sources about music are already present within the KB in catalogues, digitised newspapers, web archives and special collections. However, they are rarely visible as part of a connected domain. Without a clear approach, materials remain separated within different systems, even when they are technically preserved.

What emerges from this study is the importance of **domain specific knowledge**. Treating music related writing as a recognisable field rather than incidental material makes it possible to identify risks, trace developments and detect gaps as they arise. Such expertise supports informed decisions about web archiving, description and access, and

strengthens collaboration with partners and communities.

Attention is also required for existing holdings. Substantial music related material is already present within the KB, but it is not always easy to identify or relate within a broader context. Developing clearer entry points and being transparent about what is missing would significantly improve usability without requiring expansion of collections.

In this light, the issue is not quantity but **coherence**. The KB can contribute by clarifying what exists, how it connects and where vulnerabilities remain. Through coordination, expertise and improved access structures, written music heritage can become more legible as part of the national cultural record.

6. Moving forward

The issues identified in this study cannot be addressed through a single measure or project. They concern structural questions about how written and digital music sources are recognised, organised and sustained within national heritage practice.

The study does not argue for overturning existing systems. It calls for examining where they struggle: where documentation is dispersed, where contextual knowledge is lost, and where certain forms of music related writing remain difficult to identify within established collection frameworks.

The central point is not that music is exceptional. It is that written and digital sources about music expose structural limits that also affect other domains. When formats change quickly, when publication takes place online, and when documentation circulates through informal or regional networks, heritage infrastructures face challenges of recognition, description and long term continuity.

Responding to this does not require comprehensive expansion. It requires clarity. Clearer choices about what is actively followed. Clearer articulation of what falls outside current capacity. Clearer recognition that some fields require **domain expertise** if they are to remain interpretable over time.

At the same time, the study shows that collaboration is essential. National institutions, regional initiatives, specialist archives and community actors each hold parts of the record. Strengthening relationships between them is more realistic and more sustainable than centralisation.

Finally, there is value in continued experimentation. Artistic and computational approaches, such as those explored in this project, demonstrate that access is not limited to retrieval. They show how written sources can be analysed, visualised and translated in ways that reveal patterns and assumptions embedded in infrastructure itself. Such experimentation does not replace traditional archival work, but it can sharpen understanding of how systems operate and where they need adjustment.

This study does not offer a final model. It offers a framework for reflection. If taken seriously, the findings support a more **coherent** approach to written music heritage: one that strengthens visibility, safeguards vulnerable documentation and situates music more clearly within the national cultural record.