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## Website Review

Joop van den Bremen, *Streektaalmuziek in Nederland* [Regional language music in the Netherlands]. <http://www.streektaalzang.nl>

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In 1996, folk music fan Joop van den Bremen started his website *Streektaalmuziek in Nederland* (“Regional language music in the Netherlands”).<sup>1</sup> On this website he collects information on Dutch musicians singing in dialect.<sup>2</sup> As of September 2014, his still expanding database contains 6,164 artists that have performed in the past or are still active. This website highlights musical developments that often remain under the radar of established media and heritage organizations, particularly those operating on a national level. As such, *Streektaalzang* contributes to a wider recognition of dialect artists.

For Van den Bremen, the impetus for setting up the website was his personal interest in dialects and folk music and the advent of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. Indeed, the simple design of *Streektaalzang* is reminiscent of this phase in the development of the internet. Unfortunately, the structure and design of the website is a bit rigid. It is only possible to explore the content by searching on a specific artist or selecting the province where an artist is from. A more advanced database would make the website more dynamic. By using internet developments like web 2.0, the textual information could be contextualized with, for example, YouTube videos and input from the public. The Birmingham Music Archive is an example of a more interactive way of presenting local music heritage.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the sober layout gives access to a wealth of information on Dutch dialect music in the past and present. For every artist, the site provides a biography, discography and links to relevant websites and newspaper articles. As a result of his work for the website, Van den Bremen has become an expert on dialect music in the Netherlands. His database has been used by journalists of local and national newspapers and researchers (e.g. Grijp 2007; Goeman and Jongenburger 2009) of the Meertens Institute, a research institute for Dutch language and culture.

The website of Van den Bremen can be considered as an instance of “do-it-yourself (DIY) preservationism”. This term has been coined by Bennett (2009) to conceptualize the role of amateur collectors and archivists in preserving popular music and its culture. DIY preservationists collect, archive or present music histories that are often overlooked in national media or established heritage organizations. These projects can take the form of a physical archive, an online archive or even small independent record labels (Bennett 2009). What these initiatives have in common is that they are generally run by volunteers and happen outside the remit of established organizations (Baker and Huber 2013). However, in some cases they collaborate with professional heritage practitioners. According to Baker and Huber (2013), the feelings of passion and emotion music engenders are central to the practices of these volunteers. As Baym and Burnett (2009: 446) argue about “amateur experts” who, on a voluntary basis, participate in music scenes using online media:

Their social response to the pleasures of music is situated in deeply meaningful social phenomena that harkens back to much earlier phases of musical history, phases before there was an industry, when music was always performed in communities by locals for locals rather than by distant celebrities for adoring fans.

Indeed, Van den Bremen insists on the non-commercial character of his project and, in fact, many of the artists he presents on his website seem more oriented towards the community aspects of folk music than the commercial interests of the popular music industry.

In the Netherlands, various DIY preservationists have started similar initiatives to document music histories of specific places or genres. Examples include the books published by *Poparchief Achterhoek en Liemers* and the website *Zaanse Pophistorie*.<sup>4</sup> However, *Streektaalzang.nl* has a much wider scope, as it provides an overview of dialect music in all Dutch provinces.

To appreciate the content of the website, it is necessary to provide some background knowledge on dialect in the Netherlands. It is interesting to note that, although the website shows that the number of dialect artists is increasing, the actual use of dialects in everyday life is declining (Grijp 2007). Explanations for the decreasing number of dialect speakers are urbanization, higher levels of education and the use of standard language in national media. Dialects are often considered as inferior to the standard language and it is felt that their use might hamper social mobility (Goeman and Jongenburger 2009). Moreover, there is a trend towards regiolects, whereby local dialects converge and move closer towards the standard language (Goeman and Jongenburger 2009).

Given these threats for dialects, the vitality of dialect music in the Netherlands is remarkable. Following the success of many Dutch dialect artists in the 1990s, some researchers even observed a “dialect renaissance” (Goeman and Jongenburger 2009; Grijp 2007). It is against this background that we can situate the content of Van den Bremen’s website. As dialects become rarer, some people seem to again become aware of its cultural value. Although some of the dialect artists (e.g. Rowwen Hèze and Normaal) gained national recognition, the majority of the contemporary dialect artists have a local fan base. Nevertheless, singers such as Beppie Kraft and Arno Adams demonstrate that even within a region it is possible to build up a large following and gain critical acclaim.

From the graphs on Van den Bremen’s website, it can be inferred that the number of dialect artists in a given region is closely related to the speaking of dialect in that locality. As Grijp

(2007: 239) finds on the basis of an analysis of the data on Van den Bremen's website: "All in all, singing in dialect appears to be reasonably in step with the degree to which dialect is spoken." Unfortunately, the graphs on the website only provide cumulative numbers. This means it is not possible to see how many new artists started per year and which of them are still active. Nevertheless, from the cumulative numbers per province it is clear that Limburg has the most dialect artists. According to Grijp (2007), this can be explained by the annual carnival celebrations, which are a strong tradition in the catholic Limburg region. He argues that the many local carnival songs have an influence on the general music culture in Limburg. However, this does not account for the presence of dialect artists in other Dutch provinces, where carnival is a less prominent cultural tradition. From the literature on dialect and local music emerge four other common explanations for the interest of fans and artists in dialect music. These explanations illustrate how the content of *Streektaalzang.nl* relates to wider sociocultural and musical developments.

An often mentioned explanation, which also Van den Bremen advocates (*De Telegraaf* 2009), is that the popularity of music sung in Dutch or dialect is a consequence of processes of globalization. These theories revolve around the idea that globalization causes feelings of cultural rootlessness, which lead to the reassertion of local identities. As Achterberg *et al.* (2011: 604) conjecture: "The juggernauts of globalization and Americanization erode well-defined cultural boundaries and solid identities. Could it be that the increased popularity of national music in the European countries under study is motivated by a nostalgia for such boundaries and identities?" Similarly, Goeman and Jongenburger (2009: 52) conceive of the popularity of dialect music as a "defence" of local identity and an increased regional consciousness:

Dialect pop singers consider the local rural community as their in-group and demonstrate this regional loyalty through their songs. Their out-group is the population of the urbanized western part of the country that used to look down upon their dialects, where the threats to their identity come from and via which European Union regulations (which are considered to break up conventional ways of life) are mediated.

Although this is a very appealing explanation, it lacks empirical support (Achterberg *et al.* 2011). There is a lack of research on the motivations of audiences for listening to dialect music. However, the finding of Meuleman and Lubbers (2013) that the consumption of domestic music correlates with nationalist attitudes lends support for this theory. Van Eijck and Lievens (2008), meanwhile, conclude that listeners to folk genres cherish values such as community, authenticity and tradition. All in all, more research is needed to examine the role of place and dialect in the formation of taste patterns.

Another problem with this theory is that it puts a lot of emphasis on resistance to globalization. This might exaggerate the extent to which musicians and audiences deliberately use music to oppose changing geopolitical relations. Cultural tastes are mediated by other variables such as education, social attitudes and socio-economic position (Van Eijck and Lievens 2008). Moreover, this explanation disregards how many of the locally-oriented artists discussed on Van den Bremen's website have also been influenced by music from other countries. According to Grijp (2007: 241), "we can interpret dialect music as a special form of glocalisation—an attempt to preserve the local culture, in this case, the local or regional language, by combining it with global music styles". In other words, globalization could actually result in more local musical diversity as it leads to the fusion of dialects with

transnational sounds. The wide range of musical styles (for example, from hip hop to hard rock) discussed on Van den Bremen's website seems to attest to this.

A second explanation for the interest in dialect music is that this genre provides a better way to express emotions. According to Grijp (2007), it is a conscious choice for musicians to switch from English to dialect. As he finds after analysing the motivations of artists:

For all these Dutch singers—and more such sentiments have been documented—it is true to say that although they have a good command of English, they themselves do not feel that this helps them to get to the heart of things when they write lyrics (Grijp 2007: 235).

Moreover, dialect songs make it easier for the audience to identify with the lyrics and the local image of the artists. In that sense, to tap into local identities can also be a strategic way of marketing music.

Thirdly, local media are a good platform for dialect music. The Netherlands has a wide range of public and commercial radio stations catering for local communities. According to Grijp (2007: 237): “For these stations, dialect music is an excellent means of highlighting a region's profile, while at the same time offering entertainment that people with little or no understanding of dialect can also enjoy.” In some parts of the country there are even illegal (pirate) radio stations, playing local music genres that are, as the radio pirates claim, neglected by established media (Van der Hoeven 2012). Furthermore, local newspapers regularly pay attention to dialects artists. In fact, many of these newspaper articles can be found on Van den Bremen's website.

Finally, the wide availability of technologies for producing music is often mentioned as a factor explaining the increasing popularity of Dutch music (Achterberg *et al.* 2011; Grijp 2007). It has become easier and less expensive to record music and distribute it via the internet or small record labels. In particular, for local and beginning artists this is an opportunity to find an audience.

Similarly, Van den Bremen uses the opportunities offered by the internet to document the histories of these very artists. Online media have enhanced the access to music from the past and allow people to listen to music from places they are less familiar with. But then again, there is so much information available online that people can be overwhelmed by this abundance of musical choices. This calls for online curatorship, in order to guide internet users to relevant content. Unfortunately, Van den Bremen only *collates* information; he does not *curate*, like for example the editors of *Europopmusic* do (Barna 2014). On the page with the rules of the website he explains that the website only contains factual information.<sup>5</sup> In other words, no judgements are made about the quality and impact of the music. However, as an “amateur expert” (Baym and Burnett 2009), Van den Bremen would be an ideal person to fulfil a gatekeeper role. The website could highlight particular artists from the database for those visitors who are less familiar with the dialect music phenomenon. What are the artists we should listen to? Which artists have been most influential?

Nevertheless, we should not forget that Van den Bremen runs this website on his own. Like other people involved in practices of DIY preservationism, he puts, on a voluntary basis, much effort in the documentation of local music cultures. Such non-professional popular heritage initiatives often rely on the investment of time and money by one person or a few key individuals. This means they have to work with fewer resources than professional

cultural and heritage organizations. Baker and Huber (2012) raise awareness of the fact that the reliance on a few enthusiasts could put the continuity of non-professional music heritage projects at risk. This problem is even more salient when projects lack an institutional base. Hopefully, Van den Bremen will keep working on *Streektaalzang.nl* in the years to come, as the website is an interesting starting point for anyone interested in Dutch music culture in the past and present. It is a unique archive of a cultural form with a long tradition and a valuable source of information for both fans and music scholars. The significance of the website is such that it should be considered as an entry in the music encyclopedia of The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.<sup>6</sup> Van den Bremen's work on dialect music would be an interesting addition to that institute's overview of Dutch music history.

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## Notes

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2. According to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe 2004), there is a difference between dialects and regional languages. In this charter the definition "regional languages" is reserved for languages different from the official languages, and not dialects of the official languages. However, the terms are often used interchangeably, and so do I in this review.

3. <http://birminghammusicarchive.com> (accessed June 2014),

4. See [www.poparchief.nl](http://www.poparchief.nl) and <http://www.zaansepophistorie.nl> (accessed 20 September 2013).

5. <http://streektaalzang.nl/strk/strkvrwn.htm> (accessed 26 June 2014).

6. <http://www.muzykencyclopedie.nl> (accessed 26 July 2014).