



It lives: the startling rebirth of cassette tapes PAGE 56

# The Culture

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# Music

## Rewound. On its 50th birthday, the cassette tape is still rolling

By Lily Rothman

THE MAN WHO INVENTED THE COMPACT cassette tape doesn't remember what was recorded on the very first one, but he does remember what came next. Lou Ottens, who led the product's development for Philips, recalls the commotion that occurred when the Dutch company introduced the cassette to the world 50 years ago this month at a 1963 radio exhibition, the Funkausstellung in Berlin.

"It was a big surprise for the market," Ottens, now 87, says. "It was so small in comparison with reel-to-reel recorders that it was at that moment a sensation."

What now seems like a relic was a revolution in a plastic case. Keith Richards has said he wrote "Satisfaction" in his sleep using the tape recorder by his bed, which was the only way he remembered it in the morning. Tapes of Grateful Dead gigs are their own subculture. Cassettes let underground bands spread punk and DJs disseminate hip-hop. And it wasn't just music: we listened to books on tape, to recorded notes-to-self and to the hiss in the silence between tracks, not to mention the mechanical whir of fast-forward and the alveolar click that says *Turn the tape over, hit play once more*. Plenty of people, even now, are still listening.

From the beginning, the tape had a lot going for it. Reel-to-reel technology wasn't user-friendly: the reel tape was exposed and easily damaged; the machines were big; threading a tape from one reel to another was labor-intensive. Ottens' aim was to "make it smaller, make it cheaper and make it easier to handle." His tape was about half the width of the previous standard and protected by the cassette cartridge. The whole thing was, as a Philips press release pointed out, smaller than a pack of cigarettes.

The technology spread quickly. By the end of the '60s, tapes could be played in cars. National Audio Co. in Springfield, Mo.—the nation's largest producer of cassettes today—began selling the product. Current president Steve Stepp, who founded the company with his father in

1969, was confused the first time a sales rep brought one in. Used to 10-in. metal tape reels, he thought the cassette was a toy. Now his company churns out an average of 100,000 of them every day. "We're probably selling more audiocassettes than we've ever sold right now," Stepp says.

SURE, SOME OF NATIONAL AUDIO CO.'S success with cassettes is due to lack of competition. (Philips, for example, no longer makes them.) But that's not all, says Stepp. Tapes are cheap. Anyone can record anything on them. They have retro appeal and an appealingly analog sound. They're durable and portable.

The numbers confirm Stepp's observations. In 1993, Nielsen SoundScan found rough parity between the CD and the cassette. Although sales of the latter have declined, 200,000 albums sold on tape in the U.S. in 2012—a fraction of a percent of the 316 million total albums sold but a 645% increase over 2011 cassette sales. David Bakula of Nielsen's entertainment division says the tape's advantages (affordability, portability, recordability) keep it alive.

Evidence of the cassette craze is everywhere. New tape-focused labels have launched in the past few years, and larger labels are getting in on it too, with cassette releases this spring from She & Him and MGMT. Filmmakers Seth Smoot and Zack Taylor crowdfunded a documentary about tapes called *Cassette*, now nearly complete. They imagined the film as a eulogy, but before long they realized the story was about longevity, not death.

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One reason for that endurance is people like Mark Bijasa, a collector in Cerritos, Calif., who owns about 4,000 tapes. His goal is to have three of each recording: "one to rock, one to stock, one to swap," as he puts it. Bijasa, 33, grew up around tapes, but it's been less than a decade since he began hunting them down. He has a cassette-centric Instagram account with 6,000 followers, and as a graphic designer he creates J-cards (the cardboard inserts that go in tape cases) for record labels. He may even be spreading the gospel a bit too well. Rarities can now go for hundreds of dollars on eBay, pricing him out, and he says cassette aisles at record stores are often picked over before he gets there.

Then there's the mixtape. Mixes changed music history, says Rob Sheffield, author of *Love Is a Mix Tape*. "The way that mixtapes became a cultural institution really influenced the way we listen to music today," he says. "With a great deal of discouragement from the official music-world establishment, the audience invented this way to share music."

After all, what is a playlist if not a glorified mixtape, shared on Spotify or carried on an iPod? Tapes took music from labels and gave it to listeners, heralding a change in the very meaning of entertainment. That change has no rewind button. The world won't go back to listening to songs on an album in the sequence picked by a band, just as the news isn't read in the order a paper chooses and a TV show isn't watched at the hour it's broadcast. Mixtape culture thrives even among those for whom the cassette revival is out of earshot.

Like, ironically enough, Lou Ottens. Even though he invented the cassette, Ottens listens to most of his music on CD. (Then again, during the 1970s, he spearheaded the invention of those too.) He feels no nostalgia for the old format, preferring to look forward rather than back. "The cassette is history," he says. "I like when something new comes." ■

**LINGO**  
An empty cassette cartridge, with no tape inside, is a "c-zero"



**HARD SELL**  
Early cassettes cost about 250 Dutch guilders, or \$70

**OLD-TIME MUSIC**  
The engineers developing cassettes still used slide rules



**WORLDWIDE**  
Philips gave away its tape specs, so they became the industry standard

**LISTEN UP**  
Music cassettes, or prerecorded albums on tape, debuted in 1966