

Redubbing the Underground: Cassette Culture in
Transition

by

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INTRODUCTION

The intersection of music and technology is a field of study that has become consistently more complicated and diverse with the passage of time. Developments in recording and transmission technologies alter musical cultures in ways that deeply affect the intimately embedded structural logics that allow these cultures to operate and expand. The audio cassette was one such technology, and its democratizing effects on the creation and consumption of popular and experimental music were groundbreaking. For the first time in the history of recorded music, amateur musicians and enthusiasts were able to function outside the bounds of the mainstream industry. These effects were especially important for those producers and consumers who were not entirely satisfied by the aesthetically limited products and services offered by the establishment.

As a result, these individuals, aided by the cassette's technological advancements, were able to form the first truly autonomous underground music culture since the dawn of recording. Those involved in the global Cassette Culture, which is the term adopted by most participants and scholars, successfully took advantage of the creative and economic freedoms offered by the medium, and organized themselves into a vast network of self-sufficient and open-minded creators and consumers.

The cassette, invented and released in the early 1960s, gained popularity in the 70s as an alternative to the vinyl record and the 8-track tape. Its low cost, combined with its portability and durability, made it an obvious choice for

artists working without the support of the mainstream industry, as well as for consumers looking for ways to avoid the industry's monopoly on recorded music and support alternative and experimental methods of creation and distribution. The MP3, which went public and saw its first widespread use in the mid-90s, became the digital format of choice for tech-savvy music fans, who were then able to store and play back their music files on their personal computers. Its small file size, timed with the rise of widespread dial-up and high-speed internet access across the developed world, revolutionized the way consumers acquired and shared music. Today, it is the standard format for digital audio files, and its influence on culture and industry is felt worldwide.

Underground cassette culture, throughout the first decades of its existence, consisted of a nebulous and ambiguous network of creators and enthusiasts, primarily educated white males with some degree of leisure time, who were spread throughout the developed world and physically linked by fanzines and personal contact lists assembled through previous artistic interactions. Without a strict physical space to call its own, or a musical genre to unite its participants aesthetically, cassette culture operated as an irregular subculture, instead connected through the shared appreciation of an autonomous do-it-yourself creative process and an experimental approach to music-making. Interactions between members rarely took place in person, though through handwritten letters and one-of-a-kind cassette creations, participants were thusly made aware of each other's personal style and aesthetic backgrounds and beliefs.

With the majority of production taking place in the bedrooms and garages of the homes of isolated individuals, it appears to be nearly impossible to define with any certainty the bounds of this culture. The physically and artistically diffuse nature of this association of artists and consumers is in line with the more contemporary conceptions of subculture, where members are part of “an imagined world of taste and practice” instead of a strictly defined nationality, region, or social class (Slobin 2000: 19). Similarly, the lack of important cultural gatekeepers, who would traditionally evaluate one’s ability to access the culture, allowed for a virtually endless flow of potential participants who may or may not have contributed to production or discussion. One individual whom I discuss at some length in this thesis is John Foster, founder of the well known underground fanzine *OP*, and while I have generally avoided the valorization of individual participants, I single out Foster as more of a “greeter” than a gatekeeper, as his work with *OP* served only to document and expand the scene, not keep others out. Cassette culture operated on a largely personal level, though with few exceptions, the community gained its small share of recognition for its shared activities and ideologies, not its superstars.

With this in mind, I wish to briefly offer clarification of my use of the term “underground.” As an example of one of James Clifford’s “translation terms,” an explicit definition of one of these expressions only serves to “fall apart” after any amount of close examination (1990; in Slobin 2000: 19). I instead intend to suggest a way of understanding underground in the context of cassette culture and in its relationship to the mainstream culture industry, in order to clarify

“what goes on in your head when you match [the term] with reality” (Slobin 2000: 13).

The insular nature of this culture, whereby most artistic production remains within the bounds of the community itself and not within public markets, precludes the type of visibility that may be afforded to more traditional subcultures that are geographically or aesthetically centralized. Subsequently, this insulation and the relative physical and cultural isolation that characterizes most individuals involved in cassette production prevents the formation of a unified mass following, locally or internationally. Finally, the highly experimental nature of much of the work produced within cassette culture all but prohibits the type of potential mainstream appeal and commodification that reached more radio-friendly subcultures like Seattle’s hard rock scene in the early 1990s. Still, a relatively homogenous demography and a shared appreciation of the do-it-yourself ethos unite these seemingly disparate individuals in a community that is in some sense subcultural. With these conditions in mind, I suggest that the term “underground” is an appropriate prefix to “cassette culture”, in that it describes the community’s isolation, insulation, relative invisibility, and resistance to cooption by corporate entities.

While I use the term throughout this paper for the sake of continuity, in my concluding remarks I will reexamine the usefulness of the term in light of contemporary technological developments. The internet has played a large role in challenging what one might consider “underground” in relation to my

explanation above, and while it appears that this fact could warrant an entirely separate scholarly investigation, I will explore it preliminarily below.

This thesis offers an examination of the role of the compact audio cassette on the creation and development of a distinct global underground music culture. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the cassette network stretched across the globe and remained vital through the maintenance of interpersonal connections facilitated by underground music fanzines and the international mail system. Today, cassette culture remains a vibrant and diverse musical community, though with developments in recording and communications technology, specifically the MP3 and the internet, the cultural context in which the contemporary culture operates is vastly changed. Likewise, certain aspects of the culture itself have changed alongside these developments.

Chapter One (Side A) is an in-depth look at the reasons why the cassette was technically capable of spawning a distinct and long-lasting culture in its wake, and it contains an historical ethnography of this culture that investigates the ways that participants utilized the cassette medium as a tool for their own creative and personal development. The chapter is organized according to four distinct changes that occurred as a result of the adoption of the cassette: changing roles, changing aesthetics, changing modes of consumption and exchange, and changing social relations.

Chapter Two (Side B) is primarily concerned with contemporary cassette culture, and the way that cassette producers have negotiated and exploited recent technological developments that have largely rendered the cassette an

out-dated and obscure medium. Based on original ethnographic research conducted over the internet, this chapter is similarly an ethnography centered on artists' and fans' relationships to the technology that allows cassette culture to survive in spite of more user-friendly alternatives. It is broken into two sections: the ideological and practical logics that remain the same despite technological changes, and those that have experienced a shift since the internet made its indelible mark on the culture.

The conclusion that this paper offers is that the compact audio cassette was an essential technological development whose dissemination and adoption directly enabled and facilitated the rise of the first successfully autonomous underground music culture. The medium's technical and aesthetic divergences from other media fostered the creation of music communities that, in hindsight, arguably offered more to mass culture in the realm of production and distribution methods than they did with their music. My examination of contemporary cassette culture reveals the existence of a community of thoughtful music enthusiasts who still have a passionate relationship with the physical medium despite the increases in efficiency and affordability that characterize current digital, non-physical media.

In thinking about the conflicts that typify the present situation regarding downloading and the music industry, and the recent resurgence in popularity of the vinyl LP, it appears that contemporary cassette culture is at the forefront of a movement that seeks to reexamine our relationship to musical objects and their creators. With this in mind, cassette culture, past and present, represents a

focused lens through which we can examine the tools and methods that we use to both create and study popular and experimental music.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted between Spring 2009 and Spring 2010, and evolved conceptually from an earlier paper, referenced in the conclusion below, examining the role of the MP3 album blog on contemporary underground music culture. I decided to expand this topic to focus on the cassette underground after a number of interactions, both personal and virtual, led me to believe that the cassette, as an alternative music delivery format, is essential to understanding the origins of underground music culture, as well as the way underground music today is formulated and understood. The role of technology on music cultures is a relatively popular field of study, and though many before me have examined the effect of recording and dissemination technologies on mainstream and/or ethnic musics, very little has been written about the way that underground music cultures negotiate their relationships with these exterior developments.

I believe there is much to be learned from underground producers. It goes without saying that much of what becomes popular among mainstream consumers has at one point been considered alternative or underground. Hip-hop is a shining example: with its origins in the inner city, throughout the 1980s countless handmade albums and mix tapes were sold out of the trunks of cars and at impromptu performances before mainstream outlets like newspapers, television, and radio began to catch on, providing a mass audience for these recordings. Similarly, many of the more experimental production and composition techniques that were developed within the underground tape

network in the 1970s and 80s are now important and ubiquitous influences on the independent rock and pop scenes today. And just as the cassette during this time period allowed independent musicians to release their music without the industry's support, today, the MP3 has encouraged a newer generation of likeminded musicians and producers to do the same, though with varying stipulations and results that are a direct effect of the shift in cultural logics that run parallel to the shifts in the technological landscape.

Underground cassette culture has its roots in the pre-internet era, and so for the first chapter of this thesis, I made a point to access as much information as possible from publications created within underground tape communities in the 1980s, and those written more currently by those who were active participants. These primary source documents are difficult to find, due to the limited print runs of many of the zines and books published decades ago that today serve as a time capsule from an earlier time. While these resources ended up to be less factually helpful for me as a researcher than they presumably were for the culture's participants, they did allow me to witness first-hand the nature of the discourse surrounding cassette culture during its conception and early development. One exception to this sentiment is Robin James' excellent compendium of cassette culture writings. *Cassette Mythos*, published in 1992, served as an invaluable resource both in the information that it provided, written first hand by dozens of notable cassette enthusiasts and musicians, but also in its presentation, which mirrored the look and feel of many of the zines from which I culled information. Littered with Xeroxed collage illustrations and

images of cassette packaging, this book instilled in me a burst of enthusiasm every time it was opened.

Any study of contemporary music culture would be at fault for not utilizing the massive collection of rapidly developing information available on the internet. Aside from a wealth of message board conversations and blog posts detailing the activities of standout cassette labels and musicians, the majority of the original data collected for this study was culled from email interviews with participants in the contemporary cassette underground. I surveyed a number of cassette label operators through email in Winter 2009/10, and a handful of underground album bloggers and blog readers with a similarly structured survey in the spring of 2009. It was with this data that I hoped to collect enough information to form some of my own conclusions on the state of underground music in the internet age, and the individuals who participate in its activities that must negotiate their relationships with these technologies.

Additionally, I wanted to be sure to avoid the pitfalls made by earlier scholars of subcultures, like Dick Hebdige and the BCCCS, whose examination of the British punk underground in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* lacked the personal perspectives of the culture's participants, which today are deemed a necessity for any proper ethnography. I made a point in my contact with cassette culture insiders to be sure my questions were as open-ended as possible in order to avoid pressuring my informants into making canned responses that fit with my project's goals and hypotheses. I have attempted to let these

individuals speak for themselves, as I believe their words are as valuable as my own.

I collected contact information for a number of label owners and musicians by trawling the internet for their websites and Myspace pages. Often when I reached the homepage of one label or musician, the contact information of several others was readily available. The few personal contacts within the subculture that I did maintain before starting work on this project were essential in providing additional names of individuals who I could survey.

Ethnomusicologist René Lysloff calls the internet “one gigantic ghost town, a great dreamlike metropolis where I always seem to arrive the moment everybody else has left...where I find traces of life everywhere, but no people, no living bodies” (2003: 23). In 2003, when Lysloff published this piece on virtual ethnography, I have no doubt that the internet did feel barren and lifeless. Today, however, with the internet’s role in daily life being so ubiquitous, perhaps the opposite is true. In 2003, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, which update by the second with the goings-on of one’s network of virtual friends, were nowhere to be seen. The reality of daily life did not necessarily include the networked virtualization of real-time personal contact between living beings as it does for many today.

Many scholars studying human culture, including ethnomusicologists, are embracing the internet as an integral part of day to day lived experience, and subsequently, as a new space for academic investigation. “Virtuality is only as real as any other cultural production; it has only the meaning with which people

imbue it. Focusing on how *people* experience—and invest power and meaning in—communicative technologies returns the ‘ethno’ to virtual *ethnography*” (Cooley, Meizel & Syed 2008: 91). My approach to examining the internet’s role in underground cassette culture is informed by this idea—how do participants in the culture negotiate their relationship with the internet, and how does it influence the creative and practical choices they make as a result? My research probes for the answers to these questions, and only through engaged discussion with my informants – taking place through email – was I able to obtain these answers. The value of the internet’s tools and resources for ethnographic research, then, is only as great as each researcher allows it to be. But by recognizing that the location of cultural production is increasingly shifting from physical geographic spaces to virtual cyberspaces, one can only foresee a growth in the importance of virtual fieldwork in the academic setting.

I recognize that my age, academic standing, and personal interests and expertise allowed me perhaps a greater level of access to the cassette underground than would necessarily be afforded to someone who was more clearly an outsider. Only two months before I began sending out questionnaires to tape label heads, a music project of which I am a part released an album on one of these labels. By using this information not as an introductory credential, but as a topic of conversation later in the interviewing process, I believe these participants began to see me as an equally interested party, whose enthusiasm for cassette culture stems from a personal curiosity, not exclusively an academic one. I maintain personal contact with several of the label heads that I met

through researching for this project. My role as a participant-observer, then, inherently informs my approach to this thesis – while I whole-heartedly believe this to be a resolutely objective investigation into a community, it would be wrong to deny wholesale the potential influence of my personal involvement in its outcome.

Finally, I actively refrain from discussing critically and descriptively the specific musical creations that were a result of underground cassette production. It is not my goal to necessarily inform my readers about this music, as there is already a wealth of this information, both in zines and on the internet, written by individuals with greater strengths in that field. I am instead examining the structural logics that constitute the formation and development of a music culture, with a focus on the technologies that informed this development. While I do discuss the aesthetic shifts that occurred as a result of the cassette's dissemination, I do so to illustrate the creative mindset that is ultimately related to the more social and technical changes that occurred within the culture as a whole.

SIDE A

THE AUDIO CASSETTE AND THE BIRTH OF AN UNDERGROUND

“We see emerging, piecemeal and with the greatest ambiguity, the seeds of a new noise, one exterior to the institutions and customary sites of political conflict. A noise of Festival and Freedom, it may create the conditions for a major discontinuity extending far beyond its field. It may be the essential element in a strategy for the emergence of a truly new society.”

-Jacques Attali, *Noise* (1985: 133)

THE CASSETTE: AN OVERVIEW

Since the invention of the phonograph in the late 1870s, it has been nearly impossible to discuss the history of music without acknowledging the role that recording and playback technology have played on its dissemination and development. Prior to this invention, music was an ethereal entity. The development of musical notation represented a shift in the politics of musical production, creating “a thing no longer produced organically by a community of people, but rather speculatively, for a market,” and recordings allowed sound itself to enter into the realm of the object – to be bought, sold, and collected (Cutler 1985: 139). The existence of physical recordings brought about monumental changes in the way that music was created and consumed. No longer confined to the concert hall or local gathering, music was brought into the home, though initially the cost of purchasing a phonograph and recordings limited ownership to the upper class and cultural elite.

Over the course of the several decades, a number of innovations to Edison’s original design spawned the electric turntable, or record player.

Designers and producers were able to reduce the cost of ownership, and by the 1950s, having a collection of vinyl records became financially within reach for a large population of middle class music fans. In the early 1970s, when the 8-track tape challenged the dominance of the vinyl record with its portability and durability, a shift in focus occurred for the listening public. The removal of the personal music collection from the living room, and its reinsertion into public spaces through car stereos and boom boxes, signaled a major change in the way that music listening was constructed socially. This trend expanded with more permanence later that decade when the compact audio cassette replaced the 8-track as the portable format of choice. Operating both in the car and eventually on foot with the invention of the Sony Walkman in 1979, the cassette became a medium that was enjoyed regardless of physical location.

While the Compact Disc, introduced in 1982, played a major role in the eventual embrace of music in a digital format, its social and cultural effects were not nearly as groundbreaking as those of the cassette. The digital technology that would change music, however, would come to prominence over a decade later. The MP3, which went public in 1994, revolutionized the way that music was stored and transported. For the first time, recorded sound was not tied to a physical object, and the MP3's synergistic relationship with the growing popularity of the internet made the transfer of music and other media easier than ever. The growth of peer-to-peer filesharing services like Napster and Kazaa, introduced in 1999 and 2001 respectively, reflected a desire on the part of music enthusiasts for a convenient and efficient method for the acquisition

and sharing of music. Today, music, the MP3, and the internet are inseparably linked by the millions of individuals who choose to use these technologies for the majority of their music purchasing and listening needs. The internet's influence on contemporary cassette culture will be examined in great detail in the second chapter of this thesis. For now, I will focus specifically on the cassette's unique place in underground music history before the internet was even a blip on the public's radar.

The compact audio cassette revolutionized the music world; inexpensive, portable, and durable, it effectively granted creative individuals the power to reappropriate the means of music production and distribution (Hegarty 2007: 11). Replacing the reel-to-reel tape for pro-level portable recording and the 8-track for consumer-grade portable playback, the cassette recorder/player encouraged about novel approaches to interacting with music as an ethereal and physical medium. This change altered consumers' relationships to the music industry and the modes of production and reproduction, which, since the beginnings of recorded music, had been completely controlled by large corporate entities. No longer were the acts of music listening and production restricted by the commercial media channels through which sound flowed.

The goal of this section is to provide a brief historical context for the time during which the cassette achieved a reasonable share of popularity among Western consumers. By examining the technological conditions prior to the widespread use of the cassette, we are better able to evaluate its effects on the industry and the social and musical landscape on which it made its largest

impact. Specifically, I argue that the development of DIY underground music cultures in both America and Western Europe can be traced back to the introduction of the cassette to mass consumer markets. Precise historical events will largely be ignored, for the purpose of this study is not to create a timeline of landmark developments in the technohistory of musical subcultures, but rather to evaluate the intangible shifts in ideology among creative individuals brought about by the cassette, in an effort to loosely connect these shifts to a distinct subcultural lineage.

The widespread dissemination of the cassette medium in its prerecorded, mass-produced form, as well as the incorporation of cassette recorders in most home hi-fi systems, appeared to the industry as simply another revenue stream based on society's innate desire to possess the latest technological devices. Labels could begin reselling previously released albums on cassette, hoping to capitalize on the new medium's smaller size and more durable construction. The blank cassette however, originally designed for recording dictation, allowed listeners to easily make backup copies of their favorite vinyl records for the cost of a single tape. Instead of buying an album at retail cost, one could simply borrow an LP from a friend or family member and make a personal copy on this new alternate medium that was more durable and portable than vinyl. Consumers also had the option of recording music from the radio, or assembling personalized compilation tapes from a variety of sources. The culture surrounding this particular artifact, known popularly as the mix tape, will be discussed later.

While the reproductive and creative freedoms offered by the cassette were more than enough justification for its popularity, consumers were also receptive to its portability and durability compared to that of the large and delicate vinyl record. These properties of the new medium changed the way that music was enjoyed outside of the domestic sphere. The integration of cassette players in vehicles,¹ and boom boxes and Walkmans on the street, allowed listeners to enjoy an unprecedented level of control over their sonic environment. Carrying cassettes in a pocket or handbag was easier and less precarious than doing so with vinyl, and the ability to cheaply send them through the mail with less worry of damage or loss encouraged individuals to spread their musical tastes and creations to wherever they had a willing recipient.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this study, the home or portable cassette recorder paired with inexpensive blank media served as a low-budget personal recording studio, encouraging the creation of new sonic material by professional and amateur musicians alike. Without the prohibitive costs related to purchasing professional studio time or equipment and pressing a run of vinyl LPs, or the highly selective and political process of gaining major label support, creative individuals and groups of all types were able to record, produce, duplicate and distribute their music, at any level of technical skill or promotional prowess. Certainly a democratizing technology, this development

¹ According to Steve Jones, cars were “essentially home to many teenagers” (Jones 1990: 77).

eliminated the monopolistic control on recorded musical output held for nearly 100 years by the mainstream music industry.

THE CASSETTE AS CATALYST

The instantly appealing technological novelties offered by the cassette meant more to the history of underground music than may have been initially apparent to its users. As the cassette became more widespread and the number of individuals utilizing the medium's features for their own ends expanded, a landmark shift in relations occurred. No longer was there an inherent dividing line between the producers and consumers of music. The previously all-powerful industry had lost its virtual monopoly on recorded music for the first time since its beginnings. Its consumers, many of whom were individuals desiring something more meaningful than a mass-produced LP, were now able to produce, duplicate, and distribute recorded music outside of the industry's control. The long-term result of this shift, I argue, is the development of perhaps the first successful, truly underground music subculture since the beginning of recorded music. Without the artistic limitations imposed by label A&R personnel, and the financial limitations imposed by the costs of recording and releasing music on vinyl, creative individuals around the world for the first time could take complete control of the creation and publication of recorded music.

In the following sections, I'll examine the sociopolitical and cultural effects of the cassette in greater detail: how did the cassette allow for the development of a unique underground community, and how did this affect the

music, and the social relations surrounding it? I propose a four-pronged approach to qualitatively assessing the cassette's impact: I'll investigate the 1) changing roles, 2) changing aesthetics, 3) changing modes of consumption and exchange, and 4) changing social relations that were a result of the adoption of the cassette.

CHANGING ROLES

The advent of the cassette marked a great increase in the available roles available to musicians and music enthusiasts. No longer relegated to the function of passive consumer, individuals were now offered opportunities to, "create the conditions for taking pleasure in the act of composition" that were previously restricted to professionals working within the industry (Attali 1985: 145). The agency afforded to consumers by the cassette allows for this "composition" to take place in four distinct but interconnected ways: duplication, assemblage, distribution, and production.

The first, and perhaps least radical transformation occurs with the act of duplication², in which consumers took part when creating copies of LPs or radio music on cassette. How is this duplication different from the "mechanical reproduction" that takes place in commercial facilities? Home taping challenges the "aura" of the mass-produced official release, which according to Benjamin is lost when many reproductions are made. Duplicators, due either to convenience

² Or to use Benjamin's more historically significant term, *reproduction*. I'll continue to use *duplication*, as it is more literally applicable to the act of *duplicating* a tape, in reference to the tape duplicator, a device that does just that.

or to disenchantment with the aforementioned mass-produced object, give their dubbed cassettes a new auratic life that due to their involvement in its creation “reactivates” the copy by instilling it with a new history (Benjamin 1986a: 221). This new history is one of personalized production that is, conscious or not, a dissident response to the conditions created by the industry-mediated mainstream market. The ability for consumers to bypass the mechanisms that alienated artists and consumers was empowering. It granted home tapers the agency to create their own musical products, and it encouraged the rebellious act of acquiring music without funding the further development of these mechanisms.

The second transformation occurs with the assemblage of preexisting music from various sources. The creation of a mix tape is subversive: it is a liberation of sound material from the album- and/or radio-centric contexts dictated by the artist and the industry. It is a statement of creative intent that exhibits its creator’s taste and imbues artistic autonomy without requiring any level of musical or technical ability. Decontextualizing songs from their intended sonic environment has the effect of creating new meaning and new musical power, as, “the process [of assembling a mix tape] can make previously occulted connections explicit”, and new, “juxtapositions [of sonic material] reveal new cadences [within them]” (Stannard 2008: 41). No consumer format prior to the cassette permitted this approach to production. Certainly LPs and 45s could be and were played sequentially to create a similar effect in a live setting, but the

time and effort injected into the compilation of a mix tape returned a completely unique and, by definition, auratic object.

When created for private enjoyment, the mix tape became a way to personalize sonic space, both in and out of the home. In 2005, Sonic Youth founder and guitarist Thurston Moore edited a collection of personal mix tape stories in the aptly titled book, *Mix Tape*. In one of his own accounts, he details his acquisition of a “ghetto blaster,” and the creation of a number of mix tapes in preparation for long car rides during a mid-80s American tour:

I made a dozen solid mix tapes of NYC hip-hop and had planned to jam them all summer long in the van on tour. I wasn't sure whether Kim, Lee, and Steve were aware of all these obscure sides, but the music was so raw and current that I was almost positive we'd all be 'doing the wop' and break-dancing across the USA. So I went into this Delancey Street store, and, using the band's limited funds, bought the biggest boombox on display. (2005: 11)

When a mix tape is created for the purpose of giving to someone else, it is a form of highly personal language that reflects back on its creator:

The time spent implies an emotional connection with the recipient. It might be a desire to go to bed, or to share ideas. The message of the tape might be: *I love you. I think about you all the time. Listen to how I feel about you.* Or maybe: *I love me. I am a tasteful person who listens to tasty things. This tape tells you all about me.* There is something narcissistic about making someone a tape, and the act of giving the tape puts the recipient in our debt somewhat. (Moore 2005: 28)

The mix tape, in all its forms, is a gesture of autonomy. It represents freedom from top-down tastemaking, and it is an inclusive form of creation in which anyone can take part.

The third transformational role assumed by cassette enthusiasts allows them to act as distributors of sonic material. The aforementioned physical

characteristics of the tape, its small size and durability, coupled with its low cost, encouraged its dissemination both through hand-to-hand exchange (it was small enough to fit in a pocket to bring to a friend's house) and perhaps more importantly, through the mail. Cassettes allowed for an extremely quick production and distribution schedule. For some, this wholly informed their interaction with the medium; Grifters guitarist Scott Taylor explains, "It's not about spending a lot of time and money to record. You just get the songs out there without concern over making a number 1 record" (Lips 1994: 76). David Keenan elaborates, "The instant nature of the tape dub...allows new music to interact with the world while it's still at its most potent, before it has been formulated, absorbed, and made fully explicable by any form of critical consciousness" (Keenan 2008: 41). This spontaneity also played a large role in the improvised nature of much of the music recorded and released on cassette; this will be discussed in further detail below.

Without the personal network infrastructure that supported locally centralized subcultures, cassette producers relied heavily on the mail system to spread their music to interested individuals around the globe. The exchange of cassettes meant more than just the exchange of music, *per se*, as "the thrill was in receiving a personally hand-crafted audio greeting card, (occasionally a painfully noisy one-time listening experience), that connected a Western civilization of estranged fellow travelers" (Marshall 1995: 212). And as a result, cassette fans saw themselves participating in a culture that had a greater appreciation for the art form and the personal bonds created by its spread, qualities that many saw

lacking in the mainstream culture industry: “Exchanging cassettes was like exchanging elaborate cultural calling-cards of information virus rather than consuming empty marketing commodity...we were all privy to a deeper and more personal, private, and inspiring aspect of communication than mere letter writing or phone calling” (Marshall 1995: 212). The distribution of cassettes was the means by which personal bonds were created, and musical ideas spread and enjoyed. The development of a distinct underground “scene” relied heavily on this method of distribution, because although fans were spread throughout the globe, the cassette was successful in uniting them based on a common interest and ethos.

The most radical of the role transformations brought about by the adoption of the cassette is that of the autonomous musical creator who records their own music. Attali’s political economy refers to this stage of musical society as “composition...the ultimate form of production” (1985: 134). The cassette provided both the means to undertake this production, in the form of mic-enabled boomboxes and consumer-grade multi-track cassette recorders, as well as the medium through which the production was stored and copied (the tape itself). Previously, musicians who wanted to record their music would most often require the expensive equipment used by recording studios, and the service of an audio engineer who could record the music and later transfer it to an appropriate medium for distribution (probably a vinyl LP or 7”). In many cases, the musician or producer who worked with cassettes assumed several, if not all, of these newly liberated roles.

For many, Calvin Johnson, lead singer of 80s post-punk band Beat Happening and founder of Olympia, WA-based K Records, put a face on this new style of autonomous music production. He explains, “I trace lo-fi back to the technological revolution that was the ghetto-blaster. Prior to 1981, cassettes weren’t a viable format. Then, all of a sudden, there was an entry level thing where the results were instant. You could make your recording by setting your blaster in the middle of the room, then dub off 15 copies and sell them at shows” (Lips 1994: 76).³ Embracing the DIY/lo-fi ethic and aesthetic that the cassette encouraged, and utilizing the still-embryonic music fanzine as a tool for promotion and distribution, Johnson was integral in bringing cassette culture to the attention of a larger, but still decidedly underground, audience.

Discussing cassette culture without at least a cursory investigation into the world of fanzines would be a misstep. The two media were largely intertwined, and had strong roots in the Pacific Northwest underground scene that Calvin Johnson called home. The first highly successful music zine originated at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, and was founded by then-student John Foster. Entitled *OP*, it would go on to, in the opinion of one insider, “[open] more doors of perception, [bring] together more widely-scattered people, and [inspire] more creative juices to flow than any music-based periodical either before or since” through its “wealth of news, reviews, and interviews with the leading lights of and minds of the burgeoning international

³ I’ll talk more about the “lo-fi” aesthetic, and its relationship to the cassette tape, at some length in the next section.

independent music scene” (Marshall 1995: 212). It began as a simple program guide for the college’s freeform radio station, KAOS-FM, but by the end of its predetermined print run lasting from 1979 to 1984 (26 issues, Issue A to Issue Z), its influence had spread internationally, spawning a number of imitators that adopted the artsy aesthetic and underground mentality to support local independent music and expose its readership to the international underground that *OP* had largely fostered.

In hindsight, one might say that perhaps most historically important of *OP*’s contents was a constant stream of underground contacts – the names, numbers, and addresses of labels, writers, distributors and musicians who possessed a common DIY mentality in regards to the production and distribution of cassettes. Because of this invaluable information, cassette culture grew as a community of creators who were most often forced to work individually, but relied on personal communication networks to get their music heard.

In looking below the surface, we can see that the fanzine did more for underground music culture than simply act as a forum for small-scale advertising and promotion. For individuals who didn’t necessarily have the skill or desire to make music their chosen form of expression, the zine was “the embodiment of an ethic of creativity that [argued] that anyone can be a creator” (Duncombe 2008: 210). Zines like *OP* primarily dealt in reviews for vinyl LPs and 7”s, but the zine’s cassette-only *Castanets* column, begun in 1982 and edited primarily by Graham Ingels and Robin James, regularly accepted reader reviews of underground cassette releases.

C.W. Vrtacek, initially just a reader, eventually started submitting reviews to *OP*; his experience in doing so led him to begin writing reviews for other magazines and newspapers. In his adoring retrospective letter to the editor in the Z (final) issue of *OP*, he explains the zine's effect on his personal and musical life: "I've extended my boundaries in a way I never thought possible. I've met new people, I've made new contacts helpful in my own musical career, and I've gotten a chance to hear some pretty terrific music which I might well have never heard at all, had I not been associated with this magazine" (Vrtacek 1984: 8). By opening up the reviewing process to non-professionals who were concerned with qualities beyond musical technique and recording polish, the democratization of the roles of critic and tastemaker redefined traditional standards for what might be considered "good music."

John Foster describes *Castanets* as "the first column I'm aware of that treated cassettes as artistic products, not merely demos for artists hoping to snag recording contracts" (1992: 52). With this in mind, reviewers took into account all aspects of a cassette's presentation, from the packaging, to the liner notes, to, of course, the music itself. The zine was a proving ground for the new aesthetic logics that arose out of the popularity of the cassette. This is the subject of the following section of this chapter, where I will examine these logics in more depth.

The industry was, as one could assume, not entirely thrilled with the idea of consumers performing the roles they previously held fixed.⁴ Their most logical point of attack, and the only one that had a chance of standing up in court, was to address the duplication of copyrighted works by home tapers, which they saw as a violation of their copyright on recorded media. Blaming home tapers for declining album sales, the British Phonographic Industry launched a publicity campaign claiming, now infamously, “Home Taping is Killing Music,” placing stickers with the slogan on retail packages of blank and recorded tapes. In order to recoup their supposed losses, they proposed a tax levy of one British pence per minute on blank recordable tape, which would effectively double the cost of a consumer-grade 90-minute blank (Heylin 1995: 238). They were unsuccessful in taxing blank cassettes, but the precedent that was set, that which proposed that the vilification of consumers was an appropriate response to industry woes, would return later with the rise of the MP3 and peer-to-peer filesharing services. These technologies will be examined more in depth in the next chapter.

CHANGING AESTHETICS

The importance of the cassette tape has been established in explaining the availability of new creative roles that were assumed by underground musicians and fans in the early 1980s. The mainstream cultural logics that

⁴ This battle seems to be given new life with each new development in media technology (i.e. CD burners, MP3s, peer-to-peer filesharing software). See the next chapter for the MP3’s effect on cassette culture, and how cassette revivalists aimed to maintain the philosophical and aesthetic ideals set forth decades ago despite the ubiquity of the digital format.

barred most individuals from taking part in meaningful musical production were eventually sidestepped by these individuals out of a desire to be part of a more autonomous and subversive society. Not surprisingly, the aesthetic qualities of underground music changed as a result of the cassette's popularity, both due to the inherent sonic properties of the medium, as well as the economic and artistic freedom granted to its users.

I trace four strands of aesthetic distinction to the use of the cassette. The first is an appreciation and exploitation of the cassette's inherently noisy and low-fidelity sound quality. The second, an appreciation of anti-virtuosic music production, can be traced to the medium's democratizing affordability and its technical accessibility to individuals of all musical skill levels. Thirdly, the cassette encouraged a level of improvisation and experimentation in performance and recording that can again be attributed to the medium's affordability, as well as a deliberate ideological shift away from pop- and industry-oriented songwriting. Finally, cassette culture embraced the visual arts as an essential aspect of the creation of an artistic multimedia object. Jacket art and package design, which offered a larger degree of flexibility than the LP format, played an important role in the creation of a distinctly cassette-oriented aesthetic. Examining these aesthetic shifts, we can begin to make sense of the sonic and visual distinctions that were the outcome of the introduction of an accessible new medium. As a result, we can gain insight into how these artistic choices informed the social relations that were unique to cassette culture.

The cassette, partially as a result of its inexpensive materials and construction, was never known for its crystal clear sound quality. Despite developments in consumer-grade tape technologies like Dolby noise reduction and metal tape coatings, the cassette was and is an inherently noisy medium. Instead of acting as a barrier to artistic ingenuity, however, this aspect of the cassette's makeup has been valorized and exploited by artists working across all styles and genres. "Hi-Fi isn't the issue; creativity is," explains Plunderphonics tape-guru John Oswald (1992: 1). The low fidelity that characterized much of the music released on cassette was at first a necessary aspect of the medium and its users' unfamiliarity with the peculiarities of recording on the device. This soon became moot, however, when musicians began embracing tape's noisiness as both an aesthetic choice, as well as a political statement against the high-budget sonic polish that characterized mainstream production in the 1980s: "the no-polish aesthetic appears as a reaction to the music industry ideal of clean digital sound as a reason to replace your dusty old LPs with shiny new CDs" (Lips 1994: 78).

Apart from the sounds that producers put on their cassettes, the noises produced by the medium itself are important in analyzing the way that the cassette changed the aesthetic logic of its community. The cyclical action of duplicating a duplicate (of a duplicate of a duplicate...) reveals unintended artifacts that are not exclusive to the sonic realm. This repetitive process carried out on a Xerox machine, for example, degrades the source image with each generation of duplication, accentuating the boldest aspects of the image, but also

revealing the physical and technical flaws of the machine itself. Within a few generations, a scratch or fingerprint on the machine's glass bed becomes a central compositional form. In the same way, the duplication of cassettes instills each successive dub with a number of sonic artifacts that are only amplified with further duplication.⁵

David Keenan recounts a conversation with Phil Todd of the UK underground group Ashtray Navigations, who "recalls years of listening to 'nth generation cassette copies' of hard to find psychedelic rock records, not realizing until years later that the shades that seemed to define them weren't on the original recordings at all – it was all in the translation to tape." This sonic misunderstanding, however, greatly informed Todd's approach to making music of his own:

in the meantime he had started to make his own music, attempting to recreate the aura of the cassettes that had first hypnotized him. And so in its translation via pirate media, the music itself went through a process of accidental evolution, a form of creative misrepresentation that future artists gave the status of an alternative canon, until the whole concept of modern psychedelic music had less to do with expanding on the initial blueprint laid down by radical 1960s rock groups and more to do with the ghosts that preyed on cheap analogue tape. (Keenan 2008: 41)

Keenan uses the term *aura* to underline the intangibility of the cassette's unique sonic characteristics, but in applying the term as Benjamin intended, we see that it also has importance; the "nth generation cassette copies" in which Todd revels contain an important sonic history that speak to the individuality of each of these tapes. Keenan doesn't go into detail regarding how Todd acquired these

⁵ Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room* is a fine example of this process in action. (Hegarty 2007)

tapes, but we can only imagine an instance where their sonic pedigree stretches back to a quick dub made by one of the original band members themselves, connecting creator and listener in a bond formed through the reproducibility of the tape medium.

The existence of noise in music recorded and released on cassette had several important implications, both practical and theoretical. Attali defines noise as “a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission” (1985: 26). This view, which suggests analog television static or a skipping CD, while in some contexts would be appropriate, would soon be dismissed by artists who used noise as the message itself. At the time of the first publication of *Noise* (1977), noise as the explicit subject and sonic material of musical composition, and not just as an unwanted side effect of recorded media, was just beginning to make a splash outside of the academy. Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music*, a double-LP containing four sides of abrasive guitar noise, had been released two years prior, and has since been seen as a point of origin in the history of the genre.

Noise as music is, and has always been, a site of much theoretical discussion and contradiction. On one hand, as discussed above, noise was used as an aesthetic tool to sonically distance its creators from the digitally-enhanced sterility of 1980s recording technology. The cassette tape was, “the carrier of choice for noise music precisely because it’s the noisiest of media, a favorite of transgressive industrialists and misanthropic power electronics outfits because it’s literally degrading: it’s cheap, it’s backwards and it tends to infect whatever

comes into contact with it with all sorts of aleatoric symptoms” (Keenan 2008: 41). The medium’s sonic instability was a challenge to the supposed perfection and permanence of the modern (digital) sound, so while advancing the state of experimental musics through aesthetic liberation and progression, noise music’s initial reliance on the cassette tape was perhaps an act of traditionalism – the embrace of older “outdated” equipment for its technological lack. The politically and culturally subversive aspects of noise music were also tied, in large part, to the cassette. Essentially unmarketable, noise music was completely free from fears of being co-opted and commodified by the mainstream industry.

Similarly, underground acts like Beat Happening, the Olympia-based three-piece indie rock band, challenged aesthetic notions of quality by proving that technical skill was not a prerequisite for successful musical creation. Michael Azerrad writes about Beat Happening, headed by K Records founder Calvin Johnson: “They could barely play or sing. Implicit in Beat Happening’s music was a dare: If you saw them and said, ‘Even I could do better than that,’ then [sic] the burden was on you to prove it. If you did, then you had yourself a band, and if you didn’t, you had to shut up. Either way, Beat Happening had made their point” (Azerrad 2002: 455). Beat Happening’s point was that underground musical production didn’t require one to possess virtuosic skill or proficiency, or even ownership of an instrument. Guitarist Bret Lunsford explains, “we were, on some level, maybe just being obnoxious and presumptuous, but we were challenging the idea of how you were supposed to do things in a band” (Azerrad 2002: 471).

This intentional subversion of macho rock music constructs went hand-in-hand with the way that underground producers were utilizing the cassette to churn out lo-fi home recordings – previous standards set by the establishment were all but ignored. It was a rejection of the mainstream culture industry that encouraged the worship of guitar gods, pop divas, and studio magicians. The cassette encouraged the development of an aesthetic that instead saw redeeming qualities in solid songwriting, sincerity and authenticity, removed from any sort of technical mastery over one’s voice or instrument. Listeners often felt a deeper connection with artists who were less-than-competent on their instruments. This highly homespun approach to production ran parallel to similar approaches to recording that emphasized a sonic proximity and intimacy with which high-gloss studio recordings couldn’t compete. Some saw this aesthetic liberation as a double-edged sword: “such freedom led to a large output of poor quality and self-indulgent material in the name of 'artistic creativity'. On the other hand, many found in cassette-culture music that was more imaginative, challenging, beautiful, and groundbreaking” (“Lo-fi/DIY” 2010).

The fact that cassettes were so inexpensive, and home recording equipment as easily accessible, prompted users to strive for a level of experimentation in production that was unreasonable, and for most, impossible, with previous technology. Vinyl, especially, carried with it exorbitant studio fees and minimum pressing runs that restricted amateur unsigned musicians interested in creating “difficult” music from recording and releasing their music on the format. The experimentation encouraged by the cassette format played a

large role in the development of new musical styles, and the democratization of existing ones. One example of this democratization is in the experimental tape-based composition methods pioneered by academic composers during the 1960s and 70s. Tape-Collage and Musique Concrete, both initiated by composers situated in the academy, became accessible to a number of amateurs who, with a bit of technical know-how and enough effort and energy, could create highly sophisticated compositions using cassettes and home recording equipment.

The cassette was able to further unite the underground and the academy through the widespread use of portable cassette recorders by ethnomusicologists who now had the ability to effortlessly record vast amounts of music with minimal equipment. Non-Western musics had a great effect on underground experimentation and academic composition, as many composers and performers, especially those associated with the 1960s minimalist school, heard these sounds for the first time on ethnographic recordings captured on the cassette (Theberge 1993: 156). The Cagean ethos, which claimed that anyone could be a composer in the experimental style, had become a reality with the spread of the cassette tape (Furgas 1992: 16).

This spread also prompted a shift in visual aesthetics. Without the aid of label budgets for art direction, underground cassette producers needed to personally negotiate the visual presentation of their music. For some, this meant simply handwriting or Xeroxing simple titles and track lists, but for others, cultivating a visual component to their music was an essential part of the creation of a total aesthetic. In some cases, the cassette's packaging

overshadowed the music itself. Scott Marshall, who founded Panic Records & Tapes in Chicago in 1984, was one of these creators who was serious about a visual component to his art:

Myself and our little Chicago collective...concentrated on developing the overall concept of the cassette as a fetishized *objet d'art*. For us...it was the limited-edition of custom hand-crafted packaging and adornments that mostly carried the concept. Our cassettes came encased in a melted-LP 'fortune cookie' that as often as not, would remain un-opened and un-listened-to, out of deference to the package. (Marshall 1995: 212)

Intentionally or not, Marshall and his collective were making a clearly subversive comment on the material culture of music during a time of the LP's mainstream dominance. Recycling LPs for reuse as containers for cassettes reflected the lack of aura surrounding these objects in their intended state – mass produced in runs of thousands, each copy exactly the same as the next, creative individuals found uses for the essentially worthless pieces of grooved plastic. Recontextualized as the container for a more unique sonic object, the LP was granted a new life, though perhaps not one that label execs imagined. The destruction of the LP's playing surface through its folding and marking was the *coup de grace*, eliminating the ability for the music to be heard at all.

Unconventional cassette packaging was a way for underground producers to distinguish their work from that of the mainstream, as well as that of other like-minded producers. Even when cassette packaging wasn't as structurally inventive or subversive as *Panic's*, it still resonated with an aura of originality that emphasized its hand-made construction and the personal connection between producer and consumer. Even simple Xeroxed cover art and track lists were a statement; replicating the processes used by mainstream

labels in creating thousands of identical copies of an LP's cover, the hand-assembled Xerox insert was a low- or no-budget alternative that carried with it an aesthetic of its own. Multi-media collage was a consistently popular aesthetic that utilized the process, and its reappropriation of existing images, often in an absurdist manner, mirrors a similar approach to sound collage that was championed by people like John Oswald who eschewed mainstream copyright concerns in the creation of highly original sample-based art. Cassette producers have rekindled interest in the collage style today, despite advances in visual technologies that make the use of Xerox less of a necessity. In the next chapter, I'll explain why cassette design and packaging is more important than ever in today's post-MP3 musical universe.

The aesthetic distinctions, both sonic and visual, that developed in conjunction with the cassette's adoption forever changed the way that recorded music was viewed and consumed. The ability for individuals to create unique and progressive art without the aid of the mainstream industry carried with it implications that altered social and economic relations for those involved. In the following two sections, I'll examine these changes, and how the cassette medium played an essential role in the development of an enduring DIY culture.

CHANGING MODES OF CONSUMPTION & EXCHANGE

The autonomy granted by the cassette tape to underground producers also played a large role in redefining how these producers interacted economically with their fan base. Without the centralized retail operations that

supported the mainstream music industry, underground cassette producers developed alternate modes of exchange that were less firmly rooted in the capitalist system than they were in more primitive systems of barter and personal commodity exchange.

The nature of the commodity itself had changed as a result of this new autonomy, bringing a greater focus to handmade and unique objects as opposed to the identically mass-produced commodities of the mainstream industry. As a result, the way consumers interacted with and collected these commodities was reformulated. In this section, I will examine tape trading, an explicitly anti-capitalist mode of exchange that characterized 1980s cassette culture. The trading model was used out of necessity, and as a political statement.

Additionally, I will look into record and tape collecting, and how this common hobby takes on a new form when analyzed in relation to underground cassette culture. With an understanding of these economic underpinnings, we can more coherently investigate the medium's importance in the culture's development and the social logics that characterized it.

Determining an economic framework through which to analyze cassette culture, and tape trading specifically, has proven to be a difficult task. Jacques Attali's political economy of music, as described in *Noise*, proposes an alternate history broken into five distinct periods of musical production, the last of which, "composing", represents the final step in society's progression towards a utopian ideal. It is in this stage of society that we see music become separated from the hierarchical forces of the market, "exterior to the institutions and customary

sites of political conflict” (1985: 133). It is here that I see a profound parallel between Attali’s ideal society, and the intimate, autonomous culture created by cassette producers and consumers.

This society engaged preconceived notions of the economics of production and consumption, recognized their faults, and aimed to alter them in order to create an artistic environment in which creativity and community reign supreme over fame and profit. Attali, in a 2002 interview, argues that “music foretells the evolution of society because changes in musical paradigms happen more quickly than in social organizations....Therefore, the mutation in the organization of noise, in the nature of sounds, in its technology, helps one to understand and predict the evolution of the society as a whole” (2002). I do not wish to expound on the implications of cassette culture on society as a whole. I do believe it is important, however, to recognize that the economic model used by cassette culture does pose a challenge to the authority of the capitalist system, and predates the post-MP3 free-for-all by over twenty years.

The underground cassette community enjoyed a level of autonomy in production that, out of necessity and desire, led to the development of new methods of consumption and exchange. Without the crippling costs associated with recording and pressing vinyl records, and in the case of signed artists, the economic control demanded by major labels, cassette producers were able to create their own terms for the distribution and sale of their tapes. For many, the most basic way of getting ones music heard involved no exchange of currency whatsoever. Tape trading, while economically necessary for many, represented

a deliberate rejection of the capitalist economic model and the hierarchical social relations it fostered. Formed in its stead, the trading model values recognition and collaboration over profit and fame.

The necessity aspect of tape trading is a result of the relatively small numbers of participants involved, and the geographic dispersion of those participants. Operating primarily through the mail, there were few, if any, storefronts that regularly carried underground cassette releases. The tape community of the 1980s was also largely made up of recording artists themselves who had little money but a wealth of recorded material that could be used as currency. As fans of homemade art objects, many of these artists were more attracted to the idea of building a collection of personally-crafted recordings from people around the globe. This desire overshadowed the prospect of making a few dollars from an official sale of a cassette.

Tape trading was just as much a sociopolitical statement as it was a necessity. Tape traders sought to create a non-hierarchical community that was dedicated to artistic experimentation and collaboration, not money-making. Trying to avoid the inevitable alienation that comes with capitalist exchange played a large role in the development of this logic. Marjorie Kibby, writing about folk music communities, explains, "The decline of...music communities, where music was an active, incorporative practice, and their replacement with a music product that was merely consumed, was 'a classic case of what Marx called alienation: something human is taken from us and returned in the form of a commodity' [Frith 1987, p.54]" (2000: 92). Cassette producers sought to

maintain this human aspect of production by eliminating the dehumanizing aspects of the economically-driven industry model of commodification and the cassette's minimal investment costs allowed this to be a reality: "the goal was the democratization and de-commodification of music. Many of us are still producing, and still enjoying wonderful friendships as a result of our shared commitment to unvarnished personal musical expression" (Furgas 2005).

Producing and distributing music on the cassette medium, as discussed previously, required very little monetary investment – a few hundred dollars for a four-track or boom box (if you didn't want to borrow one from a friend), and a couple bucks for a blank tape or two. In the mainstream industry, where bands and artists went into massive debt to their labels to cover the costs of professional recording, duplication, marketing and promotion, a large degree of creative autonomy was lost. Without these restrictions, cassette artists were able to record and release whatever they desired, without the prospect of serious monetary loss - most cassette producers had "little or no commercial-music potential" anyway, so the thought of making a living on these recordings was not realistic (Marshall 1995: 212).

Kevyn Dymond explains, "no home tapers actually make money on their music. Participants gladly make the investment to have an opportunity to share their musical visions with anyone who is interested" (1992: 85). Cassette culture's economic model, then, is focused more on the collective enjoyment of others' recorded music than a notion of economic or popular success. Cassette production is largely a labor of love, involving, in Attali's words, "doing solely for

the sake of doing, without trying artificially to recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language” (1985: 134). Cassette producers actively fought against the old code, the capitalist industry model, in favor of a new code that embraced an experimental mindset both in the creation and the distribution of new audiovisual works.

Racks full of cassettes and shelves lined with LPs and 45s visually frame several of the artists featured in *Grindstone Redux*, a collaboratively produced documentary on the 1980s underground cassette network. Charles Goff III, founder of Taped Rugs Productions, lies on the floor, immersed in a pile of colorful tapes and cases. One result of widespread tape trading among cassette artists and enthusiasts was a general lack of monetary gain. In lieu of currency, the circulation of tapes and other underground media prompted, perhaps forced, individuals to assemble extensive collections of recorded music. Despite rejecting many of the aesthetic and ideological principles of the preceding generation of artists, underground cassette culture was, deliberately or not, heavily steeped in a notion of historical preservation. The cassette medium, and the care taken by its enthusiasts, played an important role in the acceptance of this mindset. The cassette’s aesthetic standing as art object, not empty market commodity, assisted in the shared acknowledgement of this new code of value, and a desire to collect and preserve these objects was simultaneously adopted by its users.

A rather common activity for people of all backgrounds, the building of a collection can be seen as an act of uncontrolled consumption, or, on the other end of the spectrum, an activity that is driven by the desire to heroically rescue underappreciated objects from obscurity and destruction. Most collectors fall somewhere in between these two extremes – they are individuals who have a somewhat chaotic passion for objects that, in their eyes, possess a profound non-monetary value that transcends their understood use value or purchase price (Benjamin 1986b: 60). Strikingly similar to the creation of a mix tape, the deliberate assembly of non-identical objects into a collection recontextualizes each object, granting each a new meaning based on the contents of the collection.

Whatever the reasons are for collecting objects, it is perhaps more important to discuss the cultural implications of the establishment of a curated collection, be it personal or public. More than simply a sustained hyperactive act of consumption, record collecting is in many cases a highly productive and creative undertaking not unlike musical production itself. Russell Belk explains, “Collectors create, combine, classify and curate the objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection, emerges. More precisely, they participate in the process of socially reconstructing shared meanings for the objects they collect” (Belk 2001 in Moist 2008: 102). This reconstruction of meaning is common to all forms of collecting, though when applied to underground recordings, it has the potential to take on a more subversive character: “By highlighting lost or obscured objects and areas of society that have been marginalized or ignored by mainstream culture,” collectors provide an

invaluable service to such underground communities that perhaps had not the forethought to preserve the memory of their activities (Moist 2008: 102).

Walter Benjamin, an avid book collector during his lifetime, wrote about collecting in his essay, "Unpacking My Library." According to Benjamin, the collector's existence is tied to "a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate....for a true collector, the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object" (1986b: 60)." The fate of objects, or in other words, the imbued meanings granted to objects by the collector, is what drives collectors to continue assembling their collections.

Benjamin's passion was books, but his ideas translate to other media, and in the case of recorded media, specifically underground cassettes, I believe his ideas are amplified in their potential to spur further creative action through the assemblage of collections. Underground cassettes are by definition highly auratic objects – they possess unique individual histories, are often handmade and assembled, and their propensity to transcend traditional understandings of the reproduced object allows for a wide range of interpretations of meaning for collectors.

One way that cassette artists actively reconfigured collection as participation in cultural production was through the creation of private-press record and tape labels. Neil Cooper, founder of the seminal New York tape label Reach Out International Records (ROIR), began taping underground New York

punk and no-wave shows in the late 70s, first releasing them on tape in 1981 through independent distributors here and across the Atlantic. Cooper was able to avoid conflict with label contracts by releasing live and demo recordings that otherwise wouldn't have been satisfactory for official release (Adams 2009). In this way, Cooper was the overseer of an important collection of underground recordings that were essential to the authentic preservation of a culture that had little such support otherwise. Without the use of the cassette, which allowed "second rate" recordings like these to be economically feasible to produce and distribute, it is safe to say that much of this history would have been lost over time.

The creation and collection of cultural "artifacts," as Thurston Moore calls them, was "the only reason [he] started record labels and stuff" (Moore & Mike D 1992: 79). These artifacts, which shine a light on the cultural and aesthetic conditions of the past, are essential in the creation and recollection of memories, which inform the aesthetic choices made by artists today, as well as provide a historical context for the events in one's life. "Collection makes recollection possible: it's your life in music and you can play it again. The albums you've listened to, the books you've read. They sit on your shelves, and it is memory made visible, memory in motion. Artefacts [sic] stay and accumulate, and they mean that you've got a past and therefore a story – they make sense" (Reynolds 2009).⁶ The appreciation of the auratic art object, and the meanings derived from their arrangement and recontextualization were integral to cassette

⁶ "Applejack" Fanzine creator Elodie Amandine Roy quoted in Reynolds 2009.

enthusiasts “making sense” of their place within their culture, as well as in society as a whole. These social aspects of cassette culture are what I will examine next.

CHANGING SOCIAL RELATIONS

The democratization of production roles within cassette communities altered aesthetic trends within underground music – in turn, producers began developing alternate modes of commodity exchange to distribute and collect recorded music. Tape trading redefined the previously steadfast adherence to the capitalist model of exchange, instead presenting an alternate model that resisted hierarchical structures. One result of these artistic and logistical shifts was a complementary change in social relations within the tape community, as well as a formation of a loose social code that facilitated the entrance of interested outsiders into the community. Furthermore, the cassette Walkman and boom box encouraged the customization of personal and social sonic space, while the mix tape provided a method of interpersonal communication that was not possible with previous recording media. These social logics are integral to a thorough understanding of cassette culture, its historical importance, and its influence on future music subcultures. In the next chapter, I’ll analyze cassette culture today, and how it has negotiated the political ideals set forth decades earlier, while applying new social and cultural logics based on developments in technology and aesthetics over the past 30 years.

The underground cassette community operated in relative obscurity, allowing it to avoid the pressures and enticements that lead to alienation and oppression within the mainstream music industry. The creation and spread of new and exciting art was the central concern, and the idealized attitude that most participants shared was that anyone could take part, as long as they made an effort to contribute. Cultural activity largely took place in a decentralized non-geographical space that also permitted participants to “exist independent of the personal politics that grow out of local scenes” (Lips 1994: 77).

These two facts led to the development of a community that was non-hierarchical in most respects: tape trading, which rejected capitalism, was an exchange between equal partners whose goal was to share their music, not make a profit. This exposed home tapers to be extremely passionate individuals who were willing to, in a large part, forgo the minimal monetary rewards offered for their music in exchange for a tightening and enrichment of the community itself. The aesthetic shifts that rejected traditional notions of technical skill and the glorification of virtuosity, in favor of sincerity and authenticity, empowered individuals who would have otherwise been shunned from recording and performance. This was especially helpful in including women who were tacitly unwelcome in both mainstream circles and the aggressive hyper-masculine punk scene (Azzera 2002: 455). The affordability of cassette technology was liberating for artists historically restricted by economic barriers and those who were interested in simply dabbling in the medium.

In speaking about entrance rituals to the home taping culture, it is important to note that there does not exist a unified global underground cassette culture, in practice. In many cases, especially early in the culture's history, tapers would congregate initially as a small group of friends and relatives who were interested in sharing, efficiently and creatively, their music with each other. Over time, as these artists became more acquainted with the subculture, they would start sending their tapes to zines and radio stations, where they would become acquainted with other cassette enthusiasts. The subculture grew organically in this way around the world. The global connections that linked home tapers were a result of a concerted effort on the part of producers to experience art from outside their comfort zone, and communicate in a meaningful and creative way with other individuals like them.

Entrance into the home taping subculture, while ideally inclusive, still remained difficult in practice due to its low visibility and unconventional methods of exchange. Geographic decentralization made the recorded medium more prevalent than live performance, so without the usual cues that recruited members to more conventional musical subcultures, like flyers and announcements in local newspapers, entrance required a concerted effort on the part of the uninitiated. Once inside, individuals had access to a wealth of connections for the acquisition and distribution of music; though despite efforts on the part of insiders to spread their work and gain new fans and collaborators, much of this activity remained restricted to the interior.

Large national record store chains, which had the greatest potential for the spread of music and information, were highly ingrained in the mainstream music industry and encouraged the expensive large-scale advertising and promotion that sold records, leaving underground artists, who promised little in sales, to fight for limited shelf space. Local mom and pop record stores lacked the effectiveness to recruit tapers due to the wide geographical spread of cassette enthusiasts, and owners' reluctance to put cassettes on their shelves (LPs were still the format of choice throughout much of the 1980s) posed an additional obstacle. Tape trading, which worked wonders for insiders looking to share their music, was largely closed off to those who were new to the scene and had little to trade, or lacked the knowledge of the subcultural logics that dictated actions inside. Word of mouth, which was perhaps the most successful recruiting tool for more geographically centralized scenes, was effective to a point, but it lacked the ability to rally large amounts of people, perhaps due to the experimental nature of much of the music being put out on cassette.

Without the widespread accessibility that characterized popular music, and the built-in audience of friends and collaborators that supported more geographically centralized local strains of underground music, cassette culture remained below the radar of most casual music listeners and mainstream press outlets. This low visibility required a conscious effort on the part of producers and distributors to connect on a more personal level fans and consumers. This intimate one-on-one exchange of goods and ideas is perhaps the most definitive characteristic of the cassette underground.

Among those affiliated with the home taping movement, participation meant more than just recording music and filling orders. In Attali's words, the ideal musical society creates "the most fundamental subversion we have outlined; to stockpile wealth no longer, to transcend it, to play for the other and by the other, to exchange the noises of bodies, to hear the noises of others in exchange for one's own, to create, in common, the code within which communication will take place" (1985: 143). The "code" established by cassette enthusiasts values direct contact between individuals – if someone wants to buy or trade a tape, the accepted method of doing so would be to contact the musicians themselves, not an impersonal middleman.

Underground zines facilitated these connections by publishing the personal contact information for a vast number of underground producers and distributors. They published honest reviews, written by regular folks, of tapes recorded by regular folks, and allowed others to contact the artists to get a copy. Tape trading was first and foremost about communication, and so by creating direct links between individuals, meaningful communication was facilitated that benefited both artist and fan. This social network predates the internet by several decades, but the two are similar in many ways that will be explored in the next chapter.

The cassette's small size and durability inspired the creation of two revolutionary listening devices that allowed users to personalize their sonic space, in and out of the home. The boom box, which began circulating in the late 70s and gained essential status on the streets in the mid-80s due to its adoption

by hip-hop culture, was, by most standards, the first portable cassette/radio player that was loud enough to be used outdoors and in urban environments. Most often battery-powered and capable of recording to tape, the boom box was the technology industry's first successful foray into allowing individuals to customize their sonic environment outside of the home or vehicle.

The device encouraged the outdoor gathering of musically likeminded individuals who could communally experience the same music at the same time. The public and highly visible nature of this activity transformed record listening, which had previously been restricted to bedrooms and living rooms, into an activity of external taste display. Additionally, flashy boom box designs gave the device's users a tool for the display of wealth or style. Hip-hop culture is much indebted to the boom box; its volume, bass response, and relative affordability made it an appropriate tool for breakdancers and MCs who relied on impromptu outdoor performance to broadcast their art. The addition of built-in microphones or mic inputs on the boom box made it an extremely simple lo-fi recording tool, often used for demo tapes, rehearsals, or improvised recordings where quality was not of the utmost importance (Lips 1994: 76). If one was lucky enough to have a boom box with dual cassette decks, there was the potential to run an entire recording/duplication/distribution operation with a single device; many did. The boom box, then, served double duty as both a device that led to the increased socialization of the listening experience, as well as a tool for individuals and groups to document and reproduce their activities.

Like the boom box, the Walkman, first sold in Japan by Sony in 1979 and imitated countless times since, represented an extraordinary shift in music listening. The first handheld, portable, personal stereo, it allowed unprecedented control over one's personal sound environment, no matter the time or place. Removing himself from the reality of the outside world, the Walkman listener "[seeks] the perfection of his 'individual' zone of listening, he is the *minimum, mobile and intelligent unit* (Robert Fripp) for music listening" (Hosokawa 1984: 167). The quest for this perfect personalized listening zone parallels both the trained and discerning tastes of underground music enthusiasts, as well as the mental and geographic isolation that forced many tape enthusiasts to work alone.

The Walkman allowed individuals living with others (parents, spouse, etc) to listen to the music of their choosing at home without disturbing those intolerant of the more abrasive strains of experimental music. Not everyone saw the customization of personal sonic space as a constructive action: Geoff Kirk explains, "The biggest problem of them all is the withdrawal from the rest of the world. All of the familiar sounds of life are replaced with a private soundtrack. In a society that's already too individualistic, why should we be any more isolated" (Kirk 1992: 15)? Kirk's viewpoint is certainly valid – tapers were spread so thin throughout the world, it would have been foolish to disguise your interest in music through the use of the Walkman. I don't know if Kirk would be made much more comfortable by everyone on the street carrying around their

own boom box – with the massive cacophony that would ensue, would anyone’s music be heard at all?

Shuhei Hosokawa argues that Walkman usage is not isolating; instead, users are “unified in the autonomous and singular moment,” which allows them to take complete control of at least one aspect, the sonic, of their environment (1984: 170). Hosokawa’s explanation is rather heady, but to paraphrase, the Walkman allows its user to decontextualize the given subtext of their environment, of which sound plays a major part, while recontextualizing it, sonically, with the music of their choosing. It undermines the work of the urban acoustic designer, enabling its user “to move towards an autonomous pluralistically structured awareness of reality, but not towards a self-enclosed refuge or into narcissistic regression” (175). Hosokawa goes as far as to suggest that Walkman listening is more than a passive act – it is a form of living performance art, though one which is shrouded in mystery, the mystery of what the device’s user is listening to: “Through the walkman, then, the body is opened; it is put into the process of the aestheticisation, the theatricalisation of the urban – but *in secret*....Until the appearance of the walkman, people had not witnessed a scene in which a passer-by ‘confessed’ that he had a secret in such a distinct and obvious way” (177).

We’ve explored the wide-ranging possibilities of unconventional cultural production as facilitated by the audio cassette – collection, distribution, assemblage, and even listening. Unlike the vinyl LP, the cassette offered to its users a wealth of creative and practical applications. It was the first music

technology to break down the one-way flow of culture from the industry to its consumers, offering its users the technical means to democratically take part in the production of that culture. No longer limited by the tools of production, it is no surprise that cassette culture developed into a globally active community of creative individuals who never seemed satisfied with the status quo. Without the structural restraints in place to prevent experimentation, the only limit to the aesthetic and social advances that the culture could achieve was that of the ingenuity of its participants. If this chapter conveys anything, I believe it is that this ingenuity was anything but lacking. In the next chapter, I will examine contemporary cassette culture and its relationship with the technologies that define the musical landscape today – the MP3 and the internet. What I hope to suggest is that despite operating around an “out of date” technology, current cassette producers still maintain a level of critical thought and creativity that fosters a community built around experimentation and growth, not simply nostalgia for an earlier time.

SIDE B

CONTEMPORARY CASSETTE CULTURE AND THE INTERNET

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty or so years since the invention of the compact disc, and at the end of what I'll call first-wave cassette culture, enormous shifts in the technology and media industries effected great change throughout the music world. Perhaps most significant for music fans, and the music industry, was the invention and dissemination of the MP3 – the first widely-adopted format for digital music storage and transmission, and the “first widespread music delivery technology to emanate from outside industry control” (Harvey 2010). Irreversibly altering the musical and technological landscapes, the MP3 for the first time allowed music to be stored, shared, and played without the need for any kind of physical medium.

The internet, which began entering homes in the mid-90s, around the same time that the MP3 got its start, would also prove to drastically alter all aspects of music, from the modes through which listeners acquired and shared it, to the way that it was marketed and sold by the music industry. This development in communications technology critically threatened the power structures that supported the industry's stability. The synergistic effect unleashed by the simultaneous boom in usage of the MP3 and the internet proved to be beyond the comprehension and control of industry officials, who, at the time of this writing, are still attempting to develop methods for capitalizing

economically on the unintended effects of the technologies' widespread adoption.

Some might say that contemporary cassette culture can more readily be defined and categorized today due to the increase in information available on the internet. Labels have their own websites, musicians have Myspace pages, and fans of cassette music can talk about it publicly on Last.fm and Twitter. Still primarily composed of young educated white males with a measure of free time and energy, the small community of tape enthusiasts has recently seen a resurgence in popularity brought about by an increased degree of visibility and recognition. The image of the isolated young man, hunched in front of his tape deck, licking envelopes and writing labels more than likely remains the same, though now there is also a computer by his side, connecting him to the outside world and to a community of likeminded individuals who are a few mouse clicks away from real-time communication.

It is this connectedness that makes contemporary cassette culture simultaneously easier and more difficult to categorize. While the identities of some producers and fans are in plain sight, for each one of these, there a dozen more under the surface who remain anonymous, arguably part of the scene, but not at all part of the social community. So while much tape production has been brought "above ground," there remains a large and innumerable population of enthusiasts who hide behind their computer monitors and the veil of internet anonymity that makes the technology so socially interesting. This fact must not

be forgotten when attempting to make sense of any community that has a home base on the web.

In this chapter, I will examine the contemporary cassette underground in an attempt to understand both its ideological and practical relationship to its pre-internet predecessor. The effects of the internet on the mainstream music industry have been well researched and publicized, often by the industry itself, which is largely taking an offensive stance towards some of the more democratizing elements of the technology. Using original ethnographic research conducted over the past year, I hope to make sense of the internet's effects on an underground, non-mainstream music culture.

Contemporary cassette culture is, I believe, a unique and interesting example, due to its simultaneous reliance on the cassette, an "outdated" technology, and a range of modern technological developments that arguably offer increased efficiency at the expense of some of the more intangible aspects of the culture's origins. The ramifications of these developments on underground music cultures have yet to be definitively comprehended, but they play a large role in the aesthetic, economic, and social realities in which the contemporary subculture operates. I will examine these effects in greater detail in this chapter, in an attempt to shape an understanding of underground cassette culture, current and past, in light of the technologies that both encourage and challenge the culture's development.

CONTEMPORARY CASSETTE CULTURE: WHAT REMAINS THE SAME?

Despite existing in a world that has been forever changed by the internet's omnipresence, today's incarnation of the cassette underground has chosen to maintain a large percentage of the ideological and practical logics that developed during the culture's birth and development in the late 1970s and 1980s. In spite of the fact that the cassette tape is arguably no longer the cheapest nor most efficient form of music production and distribution (perhaps the most important factor leading to its original adoption), the conscious choice to continue the use of the cassette for production and distribution is a clear statement that reveals a wealth of information about its users and the subculture as a whole.

Many of the reasons for its use are the same as they were twenty-five years ago – they deal with aesthetic choices, economic principles, and social ideals of music making and appreciation that underscore the quickly diminishing communal aspects of artistic creation. The fascination with the cassette medium that is felt by contemporary tape artists and enthusiasts evades the deduction of a simple motive. Each user has highly specific personal reasons for choosing the medium, and those reasons have been affected by modern technologies, but the range of responses I received to a series of questionnaire prompts indicates that cassette culture continues along an unbroken continuum that is linked by ideological and practical principles related to the perceived role of the artist in society and a desire to make that role an enriching one.

Contemporary cassette culture borrows several of the more intangible ideological constructs from its predecessors. While the cassette is no longer a necessary tool for the efficient production and spread of underground/DIY music, physical and phenomenological aspects of the medium are inseparably tied to these borrowed cultural logics. Using the cassette ensures that underground producers maintain a theoretical distance from the modes of production practiced by the mainstream industry. The idea that using the latest and greatest technology is the best way to be successful and get noticed flies in the face of DIY producers who instead choose to embrace a technology that has a history and a renegade politic behind it.

When I asked Britt Brown, co-founder of Not Not Fun, what his understanding of the “underground” is today, he explained, “the primary motives for being involved [in cassette production] are *creative* ones, rather than financial ones, and the music/music-culture activity is in some way attempting to diverge from whatever the established precedent is. Underground music isn’t just a more obscure form of the same product being sold at the higher mainstream level, it’s intrinsically *different*, with slightly altered goals.”⁷ The sociopolitical goals of cassette culture have been largely consistent over the past forty years – adherence to a DIY ethic that encourages autonomous cultural production, an enthusiasm for and championing of underappreciated culture and

⁷ Note on sources: Unless otherwise noted, quotes in this chapter are attributed to the tape label heads referenced in the acknowledgements, with whom I shared personal correspondence over the course of December 2009 and the first three months of 2010. If the speaker is not identified in the text, they will be cited parenthetically. In the bibliography, these conversations are listed separately according to informant’s surname in items labeled “Cassette Culture Survey.”

experimental music, and the use of music production and distribution as a tool for building communities.

This commitment to the development of personal relationships and larger musical communities can be seen in the way that today's tape label proprietors interact with their consumer base and the bands with which they work. Over time, labels often develop a personal brand that engages both the sonic and visual aspects of their work. As a result, individual consumers who begin to readily identify with a certain label's aesthetic become repeat customers. The preservation of a roster of repeat customers plays a large role in keeping tape labels from folding under financial strains, and these repeat customers unconsciously form a community around the appreciation of a label's individual style.

These facts are certainly recognized by label owners, who often go above and beyond for those customers who can be relied on for sales, but also have the potential to become friends or coworkers. "I like to go 'above and beyond' for my repeat customers, sending them special releases that are not offered through my website," explains David Russell of A Sound Design Recording. "If there is a title coming out that I know a certain regular customer might like, I will certainly let them know personally," adds Al Bjornaa, head of Scotch Tapes. The majority of label heads have close personal relationships with the bands and musicians for which they release material. They assist not only in the processes of recording and distribution, but the planning of concerts and tours, and the building of contacts within the community. Not only does this make the creative

process more functional and productive, but also it assists in the development of communities within the cassette subculture, making the entire operation feel more like a purely collaborative act. “The more family-like the label feels, the better we like it” (Brown).

The internet has heavily influenced the economics of contemporary cassette culture, and much in this respect has changed since the 80s. However, some aspects remain firmly rooted in the traditions of the original pre-internet culture. Cassettes are still seen as completely legitimate music releases – though they are now competing for attention with vinyl LPs and 7”s, CDs, and digital formats. Luckily, the cassette still occupies a rather specific niche within the market for recorded music. Among underground artists operating even marginally within the tape sphere, and in genres like noise or improvisation, many find that the medium still makes the most sense economically and artistically.

David Russell started producing cassettes because “the majority of my peers had already begun primarily producing cassettes and the format very quickly became the desired medium amongst ‘noise’ musicians. I immediately discovered that I was selling a higher volume of cassettes as opposed to CDs.” Christopher Riggs, a touring experimental composer/performer, and founder of Holy Cheever Church Records adds, “From an economic standpoint, tapes and LPs are easier to sell than CDs. If I want to sell recordings at shows while on tour to pay for food or gas money, I can’t have a merch table filled with CDs. LPs are more expensive to produce and currently out of my range. Tapes can be dubbed

at home and are more suited to the cottage industry I've got going on at the moment." This is the case for many cassette producers, who simply see the cassette as the best of both worlds – the convenience of the CD or MP3, combined with the aura and sound quality of a vinyl record – it simply makes sense, for “though you might not be making much money or anything, you're not really losing much either” (Naideau).

One economic facet of the original cassette underground that has been sustained throughout the past few decades is the emphasis placed on the collection and preservation of recordings and art. This fact in and of itself says something about the act's effectiveness – clearly those who actively supported underground collecting and preservation in the 70s and 80s were successful in preserving the notion itself that collection-building is an important form of cultural production. Or – people have always, and will always be drawn to the act of cumulative commodity acquisition. Either way, the cassette medium, and its understanding as art object, has encouraged the fetishization of the medium and the subsequent accumulation of its artifacts.

Rafael Spielman of Eggy Records attributes the founding of his label in part to his interest in documenting and preserving ephemeral experience: “I'm interested in local music scenes and regionalism in music, and the cost and flexibility of tapes make them the ideal way to go in terms of documenting something in flux.” But why cassettes over CD-Rs or MP3s? The answer is multifaceted, but cassette producers today have a lot to say about the nature of the cassette *object* as an auratic package deal: music plus art (plus concept). For

some, it seems difficult to articulate the specificities of these feelings: “such a different, more tactile quality than CDs;” “It goes beyond words; easily the most personal format;” “a really tangible and cohesive medium.”

The appreciation and, perhaps, fetishization, of underground cassettes is the same as it was thirty years ago – the objects possess both an endearing personality derived from their homespun design and construction, and an individuality that is inherent in the unpredictability and the time- and use-sensitive degradation of the tape medium itself. Furthermore, the medium’s durability (especially compared to the fragile playing surfaces of vinyl and CDs) encourages its immediate thrust into the rigors of daily life: “tapes present themselves as marginal in ways that actually promote their wear and tear. They have no delicate surfaces and essentially beg to be thrown around” (Adler 2010a).

The lack of apprehension that cassette users feel towards their recordings advances their inclusion into real life experience, both personal and communal. Once a cassette is brought on a road trip, or taken to the beach in a boom box, the wear and tear it experiences becomes part of its unique history, and on the part of the user, the memory formation associated with the music on the tape; personal experience becomes part of the work. For this reason, cassettes are understood to be among the most auratic of media, and so are prone to be fetishized and collected by their enthusiasts. But unlike the form of commodity fetishization traditionally associated with capitalist modes of exchange, where the object is inherently (and falsely) imbued with value, the

underground cassette is understood to be inherently devoid of this extraordinary value until it is “used” properly, i.e. included unanxiously in real life experience.

Modern day cassette producers engage with the medium for a wide range of reasons, many of which are carried over from decades-old cassette culture. The maintenance of aesthetic control is among the most important of these reasons. Similar to their 1980s counterparts, many artists actively reject the polish, perfection, and sterility of digital recording, which due to inexpensive desktop production software like Apple’s Garageband, is now more convenient than ever.

Christopher Riggs explains, “I had been recording directly onto my computer for a few years, but I was never happy with these recordings....I was going for a dirty sound that didn’t mesh with the glassy polish of digital.” After starting to record on cassette, he felt the medium better reflected his aesthetic sensibilities, so much so that the sound of the medium itself ended up having a great effect on Riggs’ compositional process: “This created a bit of a feedback loop though. The more solo tape recordings I made, the more my actual playing was informed by the sound of the cassette tape.” We saw an example of this reflexive relationship with the recording medium at the early stages of the culture’s development – the natural embrace of cassettes by early noise and industrial outfits mirrors Riggs’ own fascination with the sonic artifacts imbued on his recordings by the medium itself.

The unique opportunities offered by the cassette medium for visual experimentation in design and packaging are also a consistent response to the

question, “why tapes?” Zully Adler, founder of Goaty Tapes, uses the visual aspect of cassette production to respond to the notion that the medium is exclusively a tool for storage and preservation:

The process of recording and duplication itself becomes a part of the work and not just a means of dissemination. If you consider how the cassette lends itself to greater freedom in packaging and art (it’s not as fragile and there are an incredible number of surfaces to work with), the cassette and its package becomes more than a receptacle for music – it’s like a multiple, an intimate reflection of process and production. (2010a)

David Russell, of A Sound Design Recording, finds that he has a greater degree of flexibility when designing artwork for cassette – “I use spray paint stencils as a design element. Spray paint on a CD-R is often taboo as it can deteriorate the information and flake off inside the player. Spray paint on a cassette can be more contained and less intrusive on the player.” When evaluating others’ cassette creations, Russell’s interest in the design element (he received his BFA in graphic design) of tapes is informed by a desire for the unique auratic object. He continues, “In this digital age, I find myself strongly desiring a physical object. A well crafted limited edition cassette holds the same value for me as a unique 2d or 3d artwork, possibly even more so because it is also accompanied by an audio element.” His reference to “this digital age,” and his (or anyone’s) strong desire for an anti-digital object could possibly be explained today by a term coined by Sam Han, and influenced by Walter Benjamin. *Mediaura*, which Han explains, is a new mode of perception brought about by new media, is an ever-present concept in any culture that deals in “outdated” technologies, be they cassettes, VHS tapes, or analog synthesizers (Han 2007: 40). This idea will be

important in gaining a greater understanding of the material culture surrounding cassettes in the age of MP3s and the internet.

CONTEMPORARY CASSETTE CULTURE: WHAT HAS CHANGED?

“The internet has allowed me to market a ‘dead’ format to the world,” claims Al Bjornaa of Scotch Tapes. The internet, by connecting individuals with highly discerning taste and obscure obsessions with the well-hidden purveyors of these musical oddities, is facilitating a comeback of a long-outdated medium. Much has changed, however, since the internet has become involved in cassette culture. Among the widespread shifts in the ideological and applied practices of cassette culture brought about by modern technologies are transformations in the modes of economic exchange. As we saw in the last section, some of these aspects have remained true to their pre-digital roots – the appreciation of the underground cassette’s aura, and the subsequent accumulation of such items hasn’t much changed. Cassette producers still do not expect to make any significant amount of money peddling their wares, but among their circle of enthusiastic fans and consumers, the cassette as musical object is still in high demand. Perhaps the greatest shifts we are seeing today in cassette economics involve the methods of their exchange.

The internet has provided a highly efficient platform for the promotion, marketing, and sale of underground cassettes – almost every tape label respondent to my questionnaire indicated that the internet is completely essential to the financial stability and everyday functioning of their label.

Responses at times sounded like paid testimonials endorsing some kind of miracle tonic for businesses: “Before my label was on the internet, I had almost zero sales. Now, thanks to internet sales, promoting, etc., I have sales and label-based interactions with people daily” (Miller). Beyond simply maintaining the status quo, however, the internet is, for many, creating a demand for the medium that is perhaps unprecedented within the past twenty years. The reasons for this newfound success will be explored in this section.

The internet assists in the researching of new talent, which can now be done without attending a single concert: “The internet is just making everyone radically more plugged-in. The bulk of the labels we’re friends with find out about the majority of the bands they ‘sign’ by just trolling the internet and hitting up total strangers via email” (Brown). Promotional information regarding recordings and concerts can be disseminated hundreds of times more efficiently than it could have been done ten years ago: “Years back when you mail-ordered a tape or record, you got a little catalogue that told you about the next releases. Now I can tell 1,000 people with a couple clicks of a mouse” (Bjornaa). The explosion of websites like MySpace gives labels a seemingly endless pool of talent from which to solicit for recordings, and all at a fraction of the cost: “It’s allowed me to save literally thousands of dollars in A&R. I don’t have to drive to large cities to scout out bands. Now a cool band from Des Moines can email me a couple tracks and a video. It’s opened up great talent to smaller labels” (Bjornaa). Automated payment systems like PayPal allow a label or distributor to be open for business 24 hours a day, with their wares being

visible from anywhere in the world. Consumers simply press a button and enter their credit card info, and can sit back and wait for their tape to arrive.

Using tools like Paypal, the role of underground cassette consumer has subsequently been made much easier. Prior to the internet, an interested individual with “access” to the home taping scene, would have to contact by mail an artist or distributor who had the tape they were interested in buying. Assuming it was in stock, which due to the sometimes long interim periods between zine publications or label/distro newsletters was not always a guarantee, the consumer would find it necessary to wait for a series of postal service-mediated interactions to be completed before anything ever arrived in their mailbox.

With the internet, the entire process is made almost instantaneous. Before even deciding to purchase anything, the consumer has the ability to, “check out our website, see pictures of our releases, and read descriptions of our bands and then research them [theoretically downloading songs or complete albums] to see if they like them. That’s a huge insane asset, and it has totally changed the ways labels work from how it used to be in the pre-internet era” (Brown). Many labels, in addition to selling their recordings themselves, sell their wares to online distribution outlets that stock large quantities of releases from likeminded DIY labels all in one convenient virtual location. Consumers can save on shipping costs by purchasing multiple recordings from different labels from a single distributor, eliminating the need for excessive email exchanges and credit card charges. From the filling of orders, to the promotion

of records and concerts, to the researching of new talent, the internet has indeed made the job of running a label much more efficient. These developments have passed on the convenience to the consumer, who now has to expend minimal effort to obtain their desired merchandise.

But has the convenience and flexibility offered by the internet had a negative economic effect on the underground taping community? Some label heads think so, or at least they agree that some of the issues plaguing the mainstream industry regarding the sharing and downloading of music have made business harder:

Just because people have access to more information and culture doesn't mean they appreciate it anymore. There are several thousand people on our label's mailing list but only a tiny fraction of that number choose to financially cast their vote by buying a record or tape. The vast bulk of music lovers I know download everything for free online, discard 98% of it as unremarkable, and then get off their asses to buy a physical copy of the one or two albums that are perfectly aligned with their tastes. This is great for consumers but terrible for bands, record labels, distributors, and record stores. (Brown)

While I'm not aware of any research that proves that an album downloaded illegally is equal to a lost sale, Brown's point is well taken. Largely gone are the days of blind-faith record store purchases encouraged by the picture on the front of an album and the wise voice of the music nerd behind the cash register. Why risk wasting your hard-earned cash on a record that you might not like, if you can take a listen at home beforehand and be sure that your investment is a worthy one? But also gone is the feeling when a blind purchase becomes life changing, a seeming alignment of the musical cosmos. And does the accessibility

of music online allow producers to take less care in the assembly of a whole art object, scrutinized to the tee by a discerning shopper?

Luckily, the cassette underground is supported by a dedicated base of participants and consumers that, despite the convenience associated with digital music formats like the MP3, are simply obsessed with music in its physical form. This is perhaps the most important reason for the cassette's lasting appeal, and the underground cassette community's continuance into the twenty-first century. The cassette medium is no longer a necessity, by any means, for efficiently producing and distributing music. With the spread of inexpensive digital recording software, anyone with a computer and a microphone can be a producer, with less fuss than is required with tape. The MP3 and the internet have eliminated the need for a physical format at all, and subsequently, the exchange of physical commodities. But among hardcore music fans, there is still a strong desire for all that is lost with the digital medium. In many ways, certainly for older fans of the medium, or younger enthusiasts who grew up during the tail end of the CD's reign and perhaps recently discovered and became enamored with their parents' vast record collection, this mindset is perhaps a conscious response to the emptiness that MP3s have come to represent.

"As digital formats become more popular, the idea that objects carrying music are only of value when treated as art themselves becomes more popular as well" (Miller). While it is perhaps too early to tell if there is a direct causal correlation between the rise in popularity of digital formats and more art-

oriented physical releases, it certainly is a compelling argument that would go a long way in explaining the recent surge in popularity of the cassette medium. Just last month, independent music giant Pitchfork published a feature titled “This is Not a Mixtape,” officially announcing for the indie-mainstream the cassette’s return to the limelight, and attributing this development to “a confluence of cultural trends,” that include the digitization of the music listening experience, and the subsequent lack of enthusiasm in that experience. Author Marc Hogan explains, “Instant access to almost any recording [in MP3 format, via the internet] has left some of us over-stimulated, endlessly consuming without really digesting what we hear” (2010).

For many, the effortlessness that characterizes the consumption of music online reflects the same lack of effort we put into listening and attempting to understand that music. The absence of physicality within the digital medium certainly contributes to this semi-conscious state; when putting on a cassette or LP, it's natural to absorb oneself in the artwork and liner notes, which were expressly designed to be physical counterparts to the sonic experience. When we listen to music digitally on our computers, there is nothing to hold and read, so we naturally gravitate to the computer itself, reentering the networked abyss that is the internet, the source of the sound, and the source of endless audiovisual stimulation/distraction.

Enthusiasm for the physical medium can take several forms, though a common thread running through the responses to my questionnaire emphasize the cassette’s ability to be a more effective artistic representation of an artist

than is possible through an MP3 or CD. Zully Adler explains, “there is a greater premium put on the physical object, because there is a stronger interest in the musician as maker. You want some physical manifestation of who the musician is and how the music came about.” Similarly, Brian Miller of Deathbomb Arc adds, “an object can carry authenticity and an intangible sense of the artist’s true intention in a way that I think appeals to an audience’s desire for meaning in their music.” Why, then, does the cassette carry this talismanic quality that is seemingly lacking in other media? The creation and purchase of a limited edition underground tape represents a shared statement of intent that connects the artist to the listener. Since the cassette release is no longer automatically justified by its unparalleled efficiency, there is a mutual understanding between the two parties that acknowledges, as Shawn Reed of Night People puts it, the “intentionally obscure and marginal, almost pointless” nature of the medium itself (Hogan 2010). The formation of small underground tape labels and the independent release of new music on cassette, both of which appear to be on the upswing (Hogan 2010; Breihan 2010; Solarski 2010; Dombal 2010), have seemingly signaled the resurgence of a community that values the physical medium and the subsequent personal connection that occurs through its consumption.

The role of online “marketplaces” (traditionally a physical space defined by wide-ranging consumer choice and social interaction) like Ebay have allowed for the redefinition of the economic terms of underground distribution and consumption. Since these online marketplaces are user-driven and the items

and services available for purchase are not defined by a mainstream/mass market system of consumer demand, one has the ability to insert previously “outside”/underground objects like the DIY cassette into the mass marketplace where their value is anything but pre-determined. One effect of the incorporation of cassettes into this market is in their *financial* treatment, a change that mirrors that of traditional mainstream art objects that are often bought and sold with values that reflect their rarity and pedigree. The practice of “tape flipping” involves the purchase of limited edition homemade cassettes from underground artists and distributors, at the standard price of between \$5-\$10, and reselling them on Ebay at much higher prices that reflect their scarcity and nature as fetishized art objects. In a discussion with Zully Adler, we talked about his experience with having his releases “flipped,” and the way that this practice is an example of commodity fetishism gone awry:

Although it’s true that the limitations on quantity imposed by the DIY aesthetic and the emphasis put on the physical object can lead to the type of obsession that breeds heavy spending, I think that tapes have a lot of characteristics that hinder or invert this process....Where it starts to get confusing is in the muddling of our dialectical relationship to processes of aging and decay. Because tapes are volatile in their fidelity, some put a premium on the maintenance of their original character, which is in truth antithetical to the reasons they are used. The medium is specifically selected for its internal processes of degeneration, so to value the original is actually to devalue the material, its production, and one’s own contribution to that process. My output is supposed to be the beginning of a larger development that includes each individual’s relationship to the product and not the elimination or limitation of that relationship. When I see a tape of mine go up on Ebay, if it’s being sold for a fair price, I don’t mind, because it’s likely the seller listened to the tape, didn’t like it, and wanted to make room for something new. If it’s being sold as a rarity, however, the seller is essentially masking or marginalizing the process of transference, which is saddening, because they value the tape in some detached manner, but devalue their own relationship to it. (2010b)

What we see happening then is the development of a new form of value attached to the cassette that hadn't been explored prior to the culture's integration on the internet. It is not a new form of value for art or music by any means, but one that had been circumstantially avoided by cassette culture due to the highly personal and anticapitalist aspect of the interactions between its members. Does the appearance of \$50 cassettes on Ebay signal the end of the personal in cassette culture? Certainly not, at least according to many label heads who told me that the internet's speed and ease has made their interactions with consumers and artists *more* personal.

Sam Goldberg, founder of Pizza Night Tapes, recalls an instance of his own tapes being flipped on Ebay that ended up bringing individuals together: the individual:

was in a rock band in Brooklyn, moved to Chicago, starting digging on Emeralds [a well respected Cleveland noise outfit with several cassette releases] and then realized he could flip, so he did. After about a year and lots of weird internet interactions with people like me, the Emeralds crew, and Mike Pollard from Arbor [a label out of Brooklyn] he revealed himself and kinda made peace with everyone. Now me and him are close buds and I think even his own tape label's releases (Avocado Jungle) are on Ebay. (2010)

Due to the democratizing effect of the internet, previously-inaccessible subcultures like home taping now have the potential to be "infiltrated" by individuals who do not necessarily follow the same cultural logics that were previously required for entrance into a non-virtual culture. This, and other aspects of the social organization of post-internet subcultures, will be the topic of discussion of the next section.

With the changes in economic logics that accompanied the internet's entrance into underground cassette culture, several shifts in the social relationships between participants have occurred. As stated above, the use of modern tools like email and PayPal make communication between producers and consumers much more efficient and, as a result, allow labels and distributors to access a greater audience to whom to sell their wares. But this prompts a look beyond the economic effects, a look into the way that this increased efficiency is altering the essential social element of cassette culture. Recent developments in online social networking have played a role in shaping how participants interact, and these tools have redefined the nature and usefulness of word-of-mouth communication. The internet's ability to make underground artists visible to the masses has proved to have wide reaching social and aesthetic implications for cassette producers, and the democratizing effect of the internet has largely eliminated the notion of localized scenes, which in turn challenges the existence of "underground" cultures in general. This section will examine these developments in more detail, and assess these technology driven effects and their role on cassette culture as a whole.

David Russell believes that the internet is a true community builder. He explains, "the internet has made it possible for countless numbers of underground scenes globally to weave together a new type of community online....I have never before felt so much a part of something that reaches further than any music scene tied to a single city or region." For better or worse, the internet has changed social relations within the home taping community.

Recent social networking technologies like Twitter and Facebook encourage internet users to communicate regularly through the exchange of short multimedia messages and links to locations on the web. Music oriented networking services like Myspace and Last.fm function similarly, allowing fans of small underground subcultures like the home taping network to operate within a virtual space that is not restricted and obscured by geographic location.

The ability for fans to locate each other effortlessly on the web signals a great change since the days of reliance on the “operating apparatus” – zines and the postal service – that facilitated communication in the 1980s and 90s (Spielman 2010). Word-of-mouth communication is now instant, and in many cases, for example on a Myspace band page or Last.fm event listing, can be seen publicly by thousands of interested individuals. Where flyers used to be posted on a few telephone poles around town to bring some extra fans to a concert, the Facebook event page now can be seen by anyone even marginally connected to someone in the scene. The ability for these geographically disparate but likeminded people to be connected virtually allows for the growth of global communities that previously had been limited to a physical location or an exclusive personal network of traders.

As a result, the internet allows previously exclusive subcultures to become relatively open systems, for both producers and fans. “There weren’t any prerequisites for joining the ‘scene.’ I only had to produce work and people were willing to buy it,” explains Christopher Riggs. Fans of underground cassette music now have greater access to these communities, organized by

artist, label, or Myspace and Last.fm genre specifications, than ever before. The anonymity granted by the internet removes the need for social posturing and ladder climbing that tended to become a part of hierarchical local scenes, but it also removes the highly personal face-to-face aspect of participating in one.

While virtual accessibility to formerly exclusive scenes can be seen as a positive change in regards to the promotion of releases and events, the sense of community fostered by exclusivity may suffer. Marjorie Kibby reminds us, through her examination of an online community based around a single musician, “connection does not necessarily lead to the development of community, and gathering in an online place is not automatically followed by the formation of social bonds” (2000: 95). The internet’s ability to overstimulate its users certainly challenges the perceived social value of these virtual interactions. With so much cultural production available at such little expense of effort, the ability for users to be interested in an artist or community one day and forget about it the next is a troubling reality. In this regard, the exclusive bond formed among participants in earlier underground cultures does force individuals to make a commitment to the appreciation and development of a scene.

This presents an even more basic question, one that attempts to understand the true value of internet communication in today’s society. Zully Adler, like many label heads, works with artists around the globe, so the chance of meeting physically in person is often impossible. “This is one of the most glaring paradoxes of the tape community,” he explains, “which celebrates the intimate nature of the medium, but still relies almost exclusively on the internet

and long-distance communication to work with bands, sell and distribute merch, and set up tours.”

Email, which has replaced letter writing and phone calls as the communication method of choice for underground tape enthusiasts, could certainly be seen as a highly inhospitable, as it lacks the personal touch of an individual’s handwriting or voice. However, as I have discussed, it serves the same purpose, and does so more efficiently than anything that has come before it. There is still value in this mode of exchange – it broadens one’s network of contacts, “and when you do get to meet these people on tour and watch them perform, it’s totally rewarding” (Adler 2010a). The internet is a technology that reshapes reality, and like any other such technology, its users adapt it to meet their own ends. Individuals still crave personal contact, and whether or not that contact occurs in the form of an email or text message doesn’t necessarily make that contact any less real for those involved.

My personal experience within cassette culture has been almost exclusively mediated by the internet and email, but I’ve repeatedly experienced the type of personal correspondence that some might argue was lost when email replaced letter writing and Paypal replaced concealed cash. Over the past several weeks, I’ve ordered a handful of cassette releases from underground labels, one of which came with a handwritten note, “Ian- Thanks so much for buying the tape. I hope you like it!” and another whose distributor contacted me via email saying, “Hey Ian, thanks for the order! This is will be out before I leave for tour in a few days. Funny thing, I was just talking to a pal from Middletown a

few days ago- hope all's well on your end." After a few more emails were exchanged, we identified the "pal from Middletown" to be a friend of mine. Almost immediately after initially writing this sentence, the distributor appeared on my email chat list, and we began discussing this thesis. It's not my goal to speculate on the motives of these virtual interactions (these are certainly the actions of a great businessperson who would want more of my money), but I'd like to think that these friendly exchanges are simply an attempt to keep the social aspect of underground music exchange and consumption alive.

Some tape producers argue that these social issues transcend simple concerns over the technological modes of interpersonal communication. Britt Brown sees the MP3 and internet revolutions changing the entire enterprise of underground tape production. However cynical, it appears that every step of the process, from the creation that occurs in the mind of the musician, to the exchange that puts the final product in the hand of the buyer, is transformed by the internet's effects on communication: "It's just people in cubicles sending audio files to other people in cubicles to dub 50 tapes, sell them to Paypal strangers, [who then] rip [the files] to the internet so everyone can download them without paying for them. It's a mess" (Brown). The geographical implosion that brings everyone on the internet within shouting distance has essentially eliminated the need for the socialization of musical practice. Brown continues, referring to a recent wave of bedroom recording artists gaining a fair

bit of internet and real world fame over the past few years⁸: “We’re in the age of the non-touring internet-only solo project right now. Cassette culture over the past few years mainly seems to be documenting these sub-underground constellations. It’ll be strange to see what, if anything, stands out ten years from now as having meant anything to anyone.”

Adler expresses a similar sentiment that places contemporary cassette culture at a turning point in its creative and social history. Asked where he places his own work in this history, he explains, “right at the cusp between the end of cassette culture as a casual, unconscious and diverse constellation of individual projects and the beginning of cassette culture’s incorporation.” For better or worse, the visibility that the internet has granted the previously underground subculture appears, in many cases, to have had the effect of standardizing, or “incorporating,” the methods of production. He continues, “When I started making tapes...I felt like cassette aesthetics were just becoming established – like a fetishism was emerging. Whereas earlier everybody had a different means of making their product – hand drawn, recycled tapes, mismatched cases, whatever worked – cassette culture began to standardize its operations.” Cassette producers began producing predetermined runs of their releases (common tape editions today are 50 and 100 items, though this number varies depending on the size of the operation and the popularity of the artist), and once that run was sold out, no additional tapes were made.

⁸ Internet fame, a new phenomenon, described astutely by Brian Miller of Deathbomb Arc: “Bands that don’t sell well nor have attendance at their shows, but lots of people blog about them and lots of people download their music.”

A shift in mindset appears to have occurred: “Before you used cassettes because you could always make more. Now it is like a fixed object that, once made, couldn’t change. I feel like people started seeing tapes as a commodity, which followed a prescribed aesthetic and had a particular market in mind” (Adler 2010a). To briefly revisit my discussion of economics above, it appears that online marketplaces like Ebay have created a larger demand for these tapes than had been possible to attain pre-internet. In order to avoid a constant stream of individual requests for tapes, producers saw the batch-production method to be more convenient, and the limiting of editions a way to create an aura of rarity around their releases. In many cases, today’s culture is far from the days of personally dubbing tapes one-by-one with a specific recipient in mind. But, as always, musicians and producers are consistently required to respond to the demands posed by cultural and technological realities.

CONCLUSION

REASSESSING THE UNDERGROUND & THE FUTURE OF CASSETTE CULTURE

The audio cassette was a revolutionary technology that allowed for an unprecedented amount of creative and economic control over the production and distribution of musical recordings. The physical and technical advantages of the medium directly led to the development of a community of creative individuals who had a strong desire to make and share their music without the myriad rules and limitations imposed by the mainstream establishment. Cassette culture, as I explain above, represented an idealized form of cultural production that was inclusive, experimental, and constantly responding to shifts in ideological and practical realities.

The cassette's physical characteristics, like its small size and durability, made it an incredibly popular portable medium. As a result, it became an important tool for the spread of music listening outside of the home, and it led to the greater socialization of this activity through the use of boom boxes and Walkman personal stereos. Smaller and more durable than the vinyl LP, the medium encouraged its users to share tapes personally, and send them through the mail to friends in faraway places. Its affordability encouraged an exceptional level of experimentation in the composition, production, packaging, and distribution of cassette recordings, and as a result, these objects represent arguably some of the most daring and progressive music and design ever seen.

The technical innovations offered by the cassette, like its ability to be repeatedly erased and rerecorded using only a consumer-grade tape deck, led to the development of a number of novel activities that had been previously impossible due to the limited flexibility of recording media. For the first time, consumers could operate independent of the mainstream music establishment, creating copies of their LPs and favorite radio broadcasts for only the cost of a blank cassette. Even more importantly, the cassette allowed individuals for the first time to record and produce their own music without ever having to enter a recording studio or pay the high cost to press a run of vinyl LPs. This democratization of the recording process, initiated by the cassette medium, would have an immense effect on the development of non-mainstream, or underground, music communities and subcultures throughout the next several decades.

Cassette culture represented, for the first time, the ability for individuals who had neither the ability nor the desire to work within the mainstream music industry to take part in cultural production on their own terms. The do-it-yourself ethos that permeated the culture's practical and ideological logics led to the assumption of creative roles in music that were previously limited to trained professionals. The diversification of these roles, then, led to an explosion of novel ideas that challenged the accepted methods of production and consumption practiced by the industry. Cassette artists effectively operated their own recording studios, art workshops, and marketing and distribution

centers, creating what became, as I have explained above, the first successfully autonomous underground music culture.

With the advent of the MP3 and the internet in the mid-1990s, cassette culture was presented with both an enormous challenge and opportunity. The internet presented a new and efficient model for the distribution of cassettes, and it allowed for real-time communication between individuals and groups no matter their physical location. Cassette culture today utilizes the internet fearlessly, and maintains many of the practical and ideological beliefs that were developed out of necessity several decades ago. Cassette artists are still committed to the do-it-yourself approach to production, which encourages the inclusion of anyone and everyone interested in creating music and art, and the experimental methods applied to composition and packaging remain an important aspect of the culture's identity.

Modern technologies do, however, pose a threat to the existence of a unified underground cassette culture, as the medium is no longer the most efficient or inexpensive way to record and distribute music. Free and low-cost recording software is readily available to anyone with a computer, and the digital medium requires no investment in physical objects and packaging. The MP3, and its seamless integration into users' internet activities, has challenged our relationship to the physical medium and to the act of music listening. No longer necessarily the isolated, ritualized activity that is exemplified by the act of turning on a record or tape while reading its liner notes and studying its art, listening seems to have become, more than ever, a background activity. Cassette

enthusiasts today, however, are actively trying to restore an appreciation of both the physical medium and the listening process by producing objects that they believe to be worthy of listeners' time, energy, and money.

With the shifts brought about by the MP3 and the internet revolution affecting all aspects of music culture, certain reactions to these changes are becoming relatively widespread. The recent resurgence in popularity of the vinyl LP, of which sales have been increasing in leaps and bounds over the past few years (Dell 2010), represents a sentiment among music fans that digital formats are not meeting all of their desires. LPs are touted for their "warmer" sound quality, the presence of large-format art and liner notes, and for their ability to emphasize the socially interactive aspect of music listening that is lost with MP3s and iPods. The perceived connection to the musician is also enhanced for those who feel that, "with iTunes there isn't anything collectible to show I own a piece of this artist" (Dell 2010). While vinyl sales still only make up less than one percent of total music sales, even mainstream entities like Warner Bros are taking notice, reissuing classic albums on vinyl, and releasing vinyl editions of new releases.

Some music enthusiasts whose tastes or wallets cannot be fulfilled by cassettes or LPs are finding ways to utilize the internet to satisfy their need for a personal musical experience. Underground album blogs, which are usually run by one or a few dedicated specialists or enthusiasts, offer free downloads of albums that are, for one reason or another, difficult or impossible to find in their physical form. Blogs operate as self-published curated collections that reflect a

blogger's personal taste, either through the uploading of rarities from their personal collection, or through the sharing of links already floating around on the internet. The value of these cyberspace outposts lies in their ability to connect fans of obscure or out-of-print albums and artists with bloggers who possess similar aesthetic preferences, and like a good friend, they'll supply a copy of the album for you at no cost. One blog reader, a respondent to a survey I conducted as research for a paper on album blogs, explains, "The key for me is their 'personality.' Blogs are rad because it's like having a literal stable of friends who are really knowledgeable about music but instead of just telling out about an album, they GIVE it to you" (Staub 2009: 6).

While the legal and ethical issues surrounding unauthorized downloading are complex and inappropriate for discussion here, the fact stands that blogs remain a popular source for free music, despite attempts by the establishment to derail their operations. Blogs' ability to connect individuals with a love of obscure or experimental and hard to find recordings is a reflection on the lengths to which music enthusiasts will go for a music experience that is tailored to their personal tastes and desires. Furthermore, it is one of many examples that confronts the constantly shifting online musical landscape that is slowly becoming part of our everyday life.

There remains a wealth of this cultural activity that occurs exclusively on the internet that has yet to be formally researched. While some of these activities may end up being more ethereal than others, even this fact itself has research potential. Exploring the intersection between music and technology,

and the social relations that are fostered by this intersection, is today an extremely important field of study that only becomes more so as interactive technologies like the internet become increasingly ubiquitous. The audio cassette, and its volatile relationship with modern technology, is one gateway into this realm of investigation. As time goes on, and our relationships with the machines that alter our physical and mental realities develop, there will certainly be others that beg for further examination.

My attempt at presenting a definition of “underground” in the introduction above dealt with the term’s use in relation to cassette culture before the launch of the internet. Some of the ways that underground culture was formulated and operated in past decades have changed drastically. The fact remains that many cassette labels and individual producers maintain their operations in geographically isolated locations. Al Bjornaa of Scotch Tapes, for example, lives in Batchawana Bay, a remote area of southeast Canada, and works as a fisherman during the warmer months of the year. “There really isn’t a local scene,” he explains, but due to the internet’s ability to make small pockets of culture like this visible to anyone willing to look, he regularly deals with sales and fans worldwide, even maintaining a few regular customers in Africa.

This visibility has allowed cassette culture to become less insular and more open to interaction from the outside. The modes of exchange advanced by the internet, which I examined in detail above, have allowed for individuals with no personal connection to cassette producers or distributors, or to the

community as a whole, to take part in the previously secluded ritual of tape acquisition and collection. This is not to say that cassette culture is becoming a mainstream phenomenon or an economic powerhouse, though people are indeed beginning to take notice. Pitchfork, perhaps the largest online music publication dealing with independent music today, published a cassette label feature only weeks before this writing. The article delves into the recent “underground resurgence” of the cassette medium and features analysis and interviews with “a few of underground music’s heavier hitters” like Thurston Moore, who claims he only listens to cassettes (Hogan 2010). Does the appearance of cassette culture on one of the top 1000 most visited sites in America⁹ proclaim the end of the community’s underground status? I argue that cassette culture is simply becoming assimilated into the social and technological realities of the internet, where anything and everything of interest is available to anyone and everyone with the time to look for it. Mainstream invisibility is no longer guaranteed to communities and cultures that wish to maintain it.

With this outward shift in visibility and interaction, the only remaining, and I argue, the most essential, tenet of my previous definition of “underground” culture is an intentional rejection of the modes of production practiced by the mainstream industry, those which result in alienation on the part of the producer, and disillusionment on that of the consumer. Most music that gets released on cassette today is still dangerously experimental, and wholly

⁹ Alexa site traffic info for www.pitchfork.com:
<http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/pitchfork.com>

unmarketable to a mass audience. This, however, may theoretically change if industry heads devise a plan to somehow generate profit from the most challenging strains of left-field composition and production. Self-sufficient creation, however, will prosper as long as there exist the tools and materials needed for its satisfactory completion. Cassette producers still take pride in the do-it-yourself approach to recording music, duplicating tapes, creating artwork and packaging, and distributing wares. This, today, appears to be the only reasonable requirement of a culture or community to be considered underground.

Cassette producers never explicitly laid out their intentions for staying off the radar of mass culture – it was simply a matter of circumstance. They never idealized a secretive, highly exclusive culture that had no interaction with those who showed interest but couldn't "walk the walk." Cassette culture has always embraced the idea that anyone could become a musician, artist, or fan, operating in the realm of experimental cultural production. After all, it was the humble cassette itself, the unassuming small plastic box filled with magnetic tape, that offered this open opportunity, not an official decree by the head of the Philips Corporation, or a formal announcement published by John Foster in *OP*. The ideological constructs that defined the development of cassette culture in the 1970s and 80s remain a vital component of the culture today.

Underground music, however one understands it, will always exist in the hands of those individuals who find pleasure in the activity of personalized cultural production, and in the social bonds formed between those who share

the fruits of this labor. While the internet might be successful in bringing this activity to the attention of a mass audience and initiating its eventual commodification by the establishment, the do-it-yourself ethos that is blind to medium, music, and message is the cockroach that survives the industry's attempted nuclear Armageddon. Future formats will eventually erase the cassette from popular memory, but there will always be those individuals who desire an authentic and personal musical experience that cannot be bought in a store or downloaded from the cloud – they'll be the ones to start all over again when the smoke clears and the dust settles...AUTOREVERSE.

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APPENDIX: CASSETTE CULTURE SURVEY

*A survey sent, via email, to the operators of tape labels around the world.
December 2009/January 2010.*

1. For what reasons did you personally decide to get involved with the production and distribution of cassettes?
2. How geographically far-reaching is your fan base and distribution?
3. Do you maintain regular contact with your customers? What about the musicians that you work with? Do these interactions go beyond those required by the day-to-day functioning of your label?
4. In your experience, what value do musicians, labels and fans put on the physical object today? The digital object?
5. Is your label/distro physically connected to any local scene? If so, please describe.
6. Is your label/distro virtually connected to any online scene? If so, please describe.
7. How does the internet affect (facilitate, disrupt, etc) your activities as a label?
8. How do you see yourself fitting into the history of underground cassette culture?
9. How do you see your work interacting with mainstream music culture and the industry?
10. What does “underground” mean to you in regards to music and music culture? Is there an alternative word or phrase that you think might better describe the scene? Does the word “underground” still retain meaning despite the internet’s ability to make all culture globally visible?
11. What effect has the internet had on the development of underground “scenes” as you understand them? How has it changed the way that musicians, fans, and people like you are interacting?
12. What is the future of underground cassette culture?