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Cassette Tape Revival as Creative Anachronism

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ABSTRACT

Listeners of a certain age tend to think that the cassette tape fell out of favour sometime during the 1990s, but is experiencing a revival of sorts as curious Millennials discover the pleasures of mixtapes and decaying media. But cassette tapes have been in constant use since their invention in 1963. Outside of North America and Western Europe, the tape is still the predominant phonographic medium, and is unseating hard drives as the preferred medium for data storage. For whom, then, is this a revival? My article argues that the tape revival is less an attempt at neutral recuperation of the past than a purposeful rewriting of history. Cassettes are particularly potent because they signify death and decay more forcefully even than vinyl. Their acoustic imperfections and mechanical frailties are now aestheticized in novels and contemporary popular music. Even curated listening experiences, from podcasts to streaming services, are designed to replicate the mixtape. The second era of the cassette tape represents another example of Simon Reynolds' concept of retromania, and can be fruitfully understood as a chapter in the evolving story of phonographic waste.

In October 2012 I attended Soundwalk, an outdoor festival of sound art installations in Long Beach, California. One of the featured exhibits was a large, spare pyramid made of thin metal tubes. The artist wordlessly smiled thanks at my compliments, and then handed me a cassette tape labelled 'Midnight Pyramid' and 'Lavish Womb'. The paper sleeve for the tape was low-budget, perhaps printed out at FedEx Kinko's, with a grainy background image of Egyptian pyramids, and no accompanying text or track information. This mysterious gift brought to mind several questions. Did I still own a tape player? Assuming I did, what would I hear on the tape? And, to invoke the parlance of John Oliver, how was tape still a thing? But this was merely my tardy introduction to the cassette tape revival, which I since learned had been going on for at least the previous ten years. Back at home, I was able to play Midnight Pyramid's tape briefly, only long enough to hear a few electronic drones, before my just-recovered tape player broke, a casualty of dust and leaked battery acid.

This article addresses the current revival of tape culture. But a few parameters should first be clarified. 'Revival' suggests that a practice fell out of usage before being taken up again. But cassette tapes have never really fallen out of usage since their invention in 1963.[1] Outside of North America and Western Europe, the tape is still an important medium for sound recording, and is even mounting a comeback in hard drives as a viable medium for data storage.[2] For whom, then, is this a revival? The evidence indicates that we are witnessing a

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1 Lily Rothman, 'Rewound', *Time* 182/7 (12 August 2013), 1.

2 Chris Wickham, 'Death of Cassette Tape Much Exaggerated', *Telegraph-Journal* (13 November 2012), B.3.

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practice relevant to a small selection of relatively young pop music aficionados, people either under thirty or for whom musical taste tends towards recent music.[3] But again, this frame is not helpful. The sheen of youth and newness is ill fitting because the tape revival draws from a larger revival of the music, sartorial codes, and general culture of the 1980s. Simon Reynolds describes this phenomenon as 'retromania', or the recycling of past music and culture.[4] When people who were born after 1995 take up a set of signifiers that were rooted in the early 1980s, what does it mean?

To answer this question, it is worth taking a second look at contemporary revivalism, especially as it is parodied in a music video that appeared in the television comedy series *Portlandia*. In it, Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein extol the virtues of Portland, where locals defy corporate modern convenience by making sausages and raising chickens, growing long beards, using icepicks, and generally behaving as if the twentieth century never happened.[5] Armisen's hymn to Portland revivalists brushes aside obvious snags. The 'dream of the 1890s' may be alive in Portland, but it is certainly a dream, not an accurate representation of unsafe labour conditions, rampant disease, class and racial inequality, and the other blights with which Gilded Age citizens contended. The revival of 1980s tape culture does not go so far as to romanticize the abjection or suffering of the Reagan era, but it too skirts the issue of how and why certain people used to listen to tape.

Midnight Pyramid's tape gift could be explained as a manifestation of such retromania. For while tape was by no means a product of the 1890s, in comparison with the ubiquity of digital music and its promise of 'lossless' fidelity, tape might as well have come from the Gilded Age. Tape in general, and cassette tapes in particular, are more vulnerable to damage than vinyl or compact disc, and are (arguably) acoustically inferior to the competing sound recording media as well. A less-than-sympathetic observer of pop culture might critique Midnight Pyramid and me for taking this tape so seriously, for congratulating ourselves for our cultural capital. But this article contends that there is something at work other than the superficial free play of past fashion that, accurately or otherwise, is a calling card of today's retromaniacs. Rather, I argue that the tape revival is an act of 'creative anachronism'. By this, I mean that the tape revival represents fiction rather than some documentarian recreation of the past. This fictional aspect is crucial to the revival precisely because tape culture never really died, and is even flourishing in ways that would have been unforeseeable only twenty years ago. In this creative anachronism, the contemporary practice of the playlist is conceived as a revival of the mixtape, a curated collection of tracks that became popular with the emergence of the blank tape in the 1980s. Current invocations of tape – its appearance, sounds, and technical idiosyncrasies – romanticize how tape actually behaves. Tape's revival can be framed as a predictable consequence of the economy of waste that results from discarded sound recordings;[6] it also embodies a type of privilege in which participants purposively choose

3 Hua Hsu, 'Thanks for the Memorex', *Artforum International* 49/6 (February 2011).

4 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2011).

5 *Portlandia*, 'Dream of the 1890s', www.youtube.com/watch?v=0˙HGqPGp9iY.

6 Kyle Devine, 'Decomposed: A Political Ecology of Music', *Popular Music* 34/3 (October 2015).

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inconvenience. But the fantastical resurrection of tape culture is also an example of a creation rather than melancholic reiteration.

Mixtapes, playlists, and curation

Those old enough to remember tape from the 1980s have valid reasons for missing the medium. Cassette tape was one of the first sound recording media conceived and marketed with consumer participation, even creation, in mind. For cassettes were available not only as pre-recorded collections of music or other acoustic content (i.e., speeches, sermons, books on tape, stand-up comedy routines, etc.), but also as blank tapes. This may seem unremarkable according to the standards of the present day, when remixing has become routine. But from the beginning of the stereo- and LP- eras through the 1970s, phonographs were produced and sold in a top-down paradigm where the consumer received content passively, but did not create it. Blank tapes, by comparison, encouraged very different activities: audio home recordings of music or speech, games, or the sounds of nature; and copies or bootlegs of commercial recordings that possessed a decent audio quality. During the 1980s, tape recorders began to be sold as 'boomboxes', bundled packages of one or two tape decks plus AM and FM radio. The internal microphone enabled capture of surrounding sounds or radio transmission (but not both simultaneously). Dual cassette players enabled dubbing of tapes, which facilitated unauthorized copies of commercial recordings. By the 1990s, compact disc players were added to some boombox models, rendering CD-to-tape dubs possible.

Consumers of pop music regarded the blank tape as a mechanism for creativity, especially as it took the form of the mixtape. One of the most eloquent meditations on the mixtape is a famous passage from Nick Hornby's 1995 novel, *High Fidelity*. The protagonist Rob explains the mixtape as a covert love letter, a means of expressing attraction obliquely through pop songs. Here, Rob details the etiquette governing mixtape assemblage, a code dealing with everything from song tempo and genre to musicians' ethnicity:

> I spent hours putting that cassette together. To me, making a tape is like writing a letter—there's a lot of erasing and rethinking and starting again, and I wanted it to be a good one, because . . . to be honest, because I hadn't met anyone as promising as Laura since I'd started the DJ-ing, and meeting promising women was partly what the DJ-ing was supposed to be about. A good compilation tape, like breaking up, is hard to do. You've got to kick off with a corker, to hold the attention (I started with 'Got to Get You off My Mind', but then realized that she might not get any further than track one, side one if I delivered what she wanted straightaway, so I buried it in the middle of side two), and then you've got to up it a notch, or cool it a notch, and you can't have white music and black music together, unless the white music sounds like black music, and you can't have two tracks by the same artist side by side, unless you've done the whole thing in pairs, and . . . oh, there are loads of rules.[7]

7 Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 88–9.

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One corollary to the rise of digital music formats like the MP3 is that recordings are now easily reproducible and portable. But for those old enough to remember them, mixtapes inspired a sort of musical epistolary culture that was admittedly awkward, but also intimate. The mixtapes that Rob assembles are conceived with a recipient and goal in mind. And songs he chooses are grouped together on the basis of significant even if not universally recognized affinities. Lyric subject matter, or genre, or date of composition – any of these could figure into the organizational principle of a mixtape.

Mixtape values have been passed down at least in part through the contemporary practice of the playlist, a collection of tracks available on online platforms such as iTunes, YouTube, or Spotify. There are certainly similarities between mixtapes and playlists: they both consist of collections of tracks assembled after their composition, and often feature tracks that normally would not be heard back-to-back. But there is a crucial distinction: the mixtape was a private act of copying, an act generally not sanctioned by copyright law. Playlists, on the other hand, rely on the willing participation of the record industry, in that record labels make recordings available on sites such as YouTube that, at least for the moment, offer free access.[8] This openness and facility undercuts the countercultural frisson of having to construct a mixtape from scarce materials. In fact, the record industry has appropriated the rhetoric of the mixtape in touting platforms that supposedly curate personalized listening experiences – much like the original mixtape. To explain how this is so, we need to return to the tail-end of the tape era, when file-sharing was allegedly threatening the very future of music.

In the early 2000s, many musicians and journalists foretold the collapse of the music industry, citing peer-to-peer technologies such as Napster that facilitated large-scale filesharing.[9] But the industry has not collapsed, thanks in part to the fact that it has promulgated two new fictions: 1) there is too much music; and 2) those who choose to buy music (when they could have it for free) become patrons of the arts. The first fiction refers to a solution that David Kusek proposed around 2005, the 'music-like-water' proposal, which treats the 'whole' of recorded music less as an ocean of individual commodities than a public utility.[10] Consumers used to be told to think in terms of units such as songs, albums, or artists. But style has now become at least as important as any of these other units. And style necessarily entails an entire collection of works. The 'music as utility' business model has flourished because it has normalized the fiction that there is too much music to let slip by, unappreciated. Subscription services such as Pandora or Spotify are touted for their broad and deep catalogues, and for algorithms that suggest playlists based on a listener's preferences and listening history. This strategy works because it creates a false problem which it then

8 This could change if the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) is amended, as many record industry partisans are currently urging. Ben Sisario, 'Music World Bands Together Against YouTube, Seeking Change to Law', *New York Times*, 31 May 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/06/01/business/media/music-world-bands-together-against-youtube-seeking-change-to-law.html.

9 Joanna Demers, 'Music, Copies and Essences', in *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (London: Sage, 2015).

10 David Kusek, 'Music Like Water', *Forbes* (31 January 2005), www.forbes.com/forbes/2005/0131/042.html (accessed 19 April 2016).

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solves. Although vast, the catalogues of Spotify are far from limitless. But by proffering a semblance of customization, it restores to pop music the sense of intimacy of a mixtape shared between friends. In paying an admittedly small monthly subscription, users are not only granted access to a whole ocean of material, but can also rely on a guide to help them navigate that ocean.

Spotify, for instance, claims as one of its goals the obsolescence of genre, and encourages subscribers to broaden their listening choices beyond the confines of genre through curating track-lists for particular activities and times of day.[11] At first glance, this might sound like an echo of the curatorial impulse prompting the original generation of mixtapes. But playlists are resurrecting mixtape aesthetics selectively, deploying DIY rhetoric to repackage material that lacks the intimacy and personal contingency of the mixtape. Other practices mirror the mixtape: radio shows such as Jarvis Cocker's weekly Sunday Service, which features Cocker curating a two-hour show revolving around a theme. Cocker, the former singer for the British band Pulp, has an international reputation as a pop star-turned-intellectual, and his mixture of exquisite musical taste and witty discourse about that taste has made the show popular since its inception in 2010. There are other radio shows, of course, spanning the gamut from college and ham radio to corporate syndicated shows such as the decades-old 'Breakfast With the Beatles'. But radio shows are especially poignant today, since fewer listeners access music through radio than in pre-internet years. The playlist and the radio show are deliberate attempts to reinfuse pop with some of the agency that listeners enjoyed when mixtapes were still common practice.

The fictional past

Mark Kate is an electronica artist based in San Francisco. He released the album *Despairer* in March 2016. Kate sells his music both online through Bandcamp and in physical editions such as compact disc, vinyl, and cassette. At his album release event, Kate was surprised that he sold more cassette copies of his work than any other format, physical or digital.[12] This is not an isolated case, at least in niche genres such as electronica or punk or any genre not conceived primarily for hit success. This was an interesting and, for much of the music industry, a lucrative recording medium from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. But cassettes were acknowledged as acoustically inferior to vinyl, and were less durable than either vinyl or compact disc. The timing of the arrival of compact discs starting in 1982 meant that cassettes enjoyed only ten or so years of widespread usage in the United States, after which they assumed their lacklustre position as a cheaper and more portable alternative to vinyl. It is thus ironic that Kate, and a considerable number of artists like him, choose to release material on tape as well as in digital format.

11 Farhad Manjoo, 'Spotify Wants Listeners to Break Down Music Barriers', *New York Times*, 3 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/technology/personaltech/spotify-sees-a-future-where-music-genres-dont-really-matter.html?˙r=0.

12 Personal correspondence, 18 March 2016.

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It is on the basis of anecdotes similar to that of Kate's tape sales that Reynolds's *Retromania* ends on a subdued note. While there are certainly hopeful aspects to retro pop – Reynolds singles out Boards of Canada and Daniel Lopatin for commendation – the phenomenon bespeaks an absence of ambition to chart new territories. Reynolds is too observant to fall victim to the propaganda of originality and progress. And he rightly points out several past iterations of futurism that also enlisted talk rather than action. Still, aside from dubstep, the electronica genre he regards as veritably novel, Reynolds concludes by stating that pop is eating its tail in an infatuation with past artefacts and triumphs.[13] This is a valid criticism, especially considering that styles are being recreated wholesale in sound-alikes. Reynolds may well be right in diagnosing this ocean of pastness as aesthetic and even spiritual regression, or at least the opposite of progress, of courage. But for participants and enthusiasts, creative anachronism is dialectically related to, or even symptomatic of, the belief that music is becoming extinct. I do not intend to refute the conclusions of Reynolds's book, whose conclusions are unimpeachable. This might well be urging that we see the glass as half-full. Reynolds is far from the only one to believe that pop music is dying out, or at least foundering, sinking in the ocean of seemingly infinite choice and instantaneous recall. Future historians of the early twenty-first century will think, I would like to believe, that we did the best we could with the sudden onset of technologies, such as digital audio files and mobile phones, for which we were ill-prepared. Some of us acted like adolescents, using the internet for easy thrills. But others lost the plot in the best possible way, by imagining alternative endings, unlikely offspring, and fictive languages.

There were undeniable problems with tapes, as well. A cassette tape is only as good as its tape player, and playback depends on steadiness of power source. Listening to a tape player that was plugged in to alternating current (AC) was more reliable than listening to a battery-powered machine, for which playback speed would vary according to how much battery power remained. Tapes were sensitive to extremes in temperature, and so could not be left in a hot car. Machines in less than perfect repair could simply stop reading a particular register or timbral area, leading to the unsettling experience of listening to a song for which the voice or a single instrument is only faintly audible or even absent altogether, while the rest of the music continues at a normal volume. In retrospect, the irregularities and temperamental nature of tape playback furnished an unpredictable, even exciting listening experience. But high fidelity, it was not.

The cassette tape also had its quirks. It was one of the first commercial media that more or less encouraged hacking. On many commercially released tapes, the left and right ends of the top side of the box contained two square indentations. Left unchanged, these niches prevented the tape player from recording over the sounds on the tape. Covering these dents with Scotch tape enabled the tape recorder to record over the material, converting a unidirectional medium into one that made possible audio collage as well as complete effacement of the material underneath. Depending on the quality of tape cassette and tape player, sound material on one side could 'bleed over' onto the other. This was too rare to be a glitch worth fixing, and

13 Reynolds, *Retromania*, 403–28.

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would be audible only with the right conjunction of silence on the side being played, with loud material on the reverse side. The result was unearthly, a mere shadow of music played in reverse (since forward play on Side A means a retreat on Side B, and vice versa), smoky and ill-defined, but nonetheless recognizable to someone who spent enough time with the tape. And let's not forget the built-in inconvenience of a tape's topography. Unlike vinyl or compact discs, tapes cannot be played at any point instantaneously. They can be rewound or advanced through the fast-forward function, and these processes themselves exert wear-and-tear on the magnetic dust that encodes the sound, as well as the tape itself. Let's also consider this magnetic dust, the substrate by which sound can be transmitted on tape. Much has been said about William Basinski's magnum opus from 2001, *The Disintegration Loops*, which uses the degradation of tape dust as a point of departure for his gradually disappearing works.[14] But before Basinski repurposed this technical weakness into an aesthetic process, it was simply an annoyance for anyone during the 1980s who bought a tape only to hear that successive listening was slowly effacing the sound.[15]

All of these charms and peccadilloes of cassette tapes do little, in my mind, to explain why niche-genre enthusiasts and retromaniacs would want to rediscover or reinvest in the medium. The revival of vinyl records, also a phenomenon prevalent among listeners to various sorts of electronica, is understandable because vinyl records provide a warm analogue sound that is often absent on digital compact discs, and especially in MP3s and other compressed audio formats. A return to vinyl, for either old or new music, is a return to a putatively better acoustic experience. But a return to cassette is a bit like a return to a manual transmission, or black-and-white television without cable. Its rewards may have less to do with nostalgia, since many of the consumers of tape today may not have even been born by the time cassettes disappeared from the marketplace; another factor may well be that tapes are cheaper to produce than vinyl. Economic considerations notwithstanding, this revival posits the fiction that we lost something important in letting go of tape, a *memento mori* that today's formats, with their blandishments of permanence, refuse to accept.

The strange result of this revival is that cassettes are benefitting from an appreciation they never received their first time around. Independent artists with relatively small audiences are releasing cassettes. So are mainstream powerhouses such as Justin Bieber (the album *Purpose*, from 2015) and Kanye West (the album *Yeezus*, from 2013). That major stars should choose to jump on the bandwagon is another confirmation that the pop industry is encouraging listeners to curate their experiences. In choosing an antiquated format, especially one with so many idiosyncrasies, a listener furnishes her internal listening salon with memories fake or genuine, subcultural capital, and a format of restricted circulation that encloses what would otherwise be an overwhelming ocean of choice.

For that is the crux of the matter, that we are intoxicated by choice and niche-genres and formats and customizable experiences. If the fiction introduced at the beginning of this

14 Joanna Demers, *Drone and Apocalypse: An Exhibit for the End of the World* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015a), 80–3.

15 To be fair, the same is true of vinyl records that are played too many times.

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article is that tape is dying, the reality may be that tape never had it so good. Retromania is a concept absolutely beholden to fictions of finitude and morbidity and scarcity. The allure of tape, or genres such as hauntology or activities such as concert recreations, is that they are resuscitating what had already expired. But death is the opposite of the wild flourishing of the antiquated that we are witnessing. If we concur with Reynolds, we assume that retromania is a melancholic and futile enterprise. Revivals are thus rationalized as doomed, obsessive attempts to recreate the past, much like the character of Scottie in *Vertigo* is compelled to seek out a replica for Madeleine. The goal of retromania, as Reynolds describes it, is faithful recreation of the past, and the tragic undertone he perceives stems from artists' awareness that they cannot retrieve that past, that the gesture to recreate a past truth will never succeed. But the celebration of tape culture suggests an alternative to Reynolds's reading. The tape revival, and other facets of retromania, are not always undertaken with a forlorn desire for the impossible. Artists are smart enough to know that the past is permanently off-limits, if we treat it as a guiding principle that must be copied to the smallest detail. But if elements of the past, such as 1980s tape culture, are used as starting points for fictions, the tenor of the activity changes to burgeoning creation. Anything is possible in such moments of creative anachronism, especially when that which is created is patently impossible.

In referring to creative anachronism, I am of course referencing the Society for Creative Anachronism, an international club whose members recreate imagined characters and events based loosely on medieval European history. This group is distinguished from other historical re-enactment groups (some of which Reynolds discusses[16]) by its acknowledgement of the imaginative nature of its activities. The pleasure in SCA activities derives precisely from the fact that it is creating rather than recreating. We can do well to consider the tape revival as another such creative activity, for participants are both too intelligent and, by all appearances, having too much fun to be entertaining thoughts of futility.

A literal application of this creative anachronism appears in Kenzaburo Oe's novel *The Changeling*, where the plot centres around a box of cassette tapes containing the voice of a man who has just committed suicide. The narrator, Kogito, who is the recipient of these tapes, realizes straightaway that cassette technology sequesters him:

> Until recently, the streetcars had been teeming with crowds of youths listening to music on their Walkmans, but now those same kids were all busy chatting on mobile phones or nimbly typing text messages on the tiny keyboards. [. . .] At times like that, he couldn't help seeing himself as a lonely, isolated symbol of the generation gap, eating modernity's dust.[17]

Note the attention to the digital divide in this passage, the distinction between Kogito's older analogue culture and the youth's digital world. Kogito clings to his tapes in order to respond to and have conversations with his dead friend's pre-recorded voice – creating an alternative present in which his dead friend is still alive. The tape revival can be understood

16 Reynolds, *Retromania*, 44–54.

17 Kenzaburo Oe, *The Changeling*, trans. Deborah Boliver Boehm (New York: Grove Press, 2010).

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as a choice similar to Kogito's – a fantasy of an older, inconvenient, and inaccessible past that ignores tape's continued relevance.

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