

Pushing Play: What Makes the Portable Cassette Recorder Interesting?

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Blog post published August 29, 2011 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/9yk2x-3bk89>

Abstract

"Change the Speed": image from the "Vintage Kids" archive of flickr user theirhistory One of my earliest memories of sound recording is one of my earliest memories, period: an isolated image of my own index and middle finger trying to push down the "record" and "play" buttons on my father's portable cassette tape recorder.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Archival, Article, History, Play, Recording

Recommended citation

Stadler, G. (2011, August 29). Pushing Play: What Makes the Portable Cassette Recorder Interesting?. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/9yk2x-3bk89>

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"Change the Speed": image from the "Vintage Kids" archive of flickr user theirhistory

One of my earliest memories of sound recording is one of my earliest memories, period: an isolated image of my own index and middle finger trying to push down the “record” and “play” buttons on my father’s portable cassette tape recorder. More prominent than the visual element of this memory is the haptic one: I can still call up the sensation of the effort required to make the red button go down and latch and the stress on the top joint of my index finger as the resistance bent it backward. Also still with me is a trace sense of the threat of sharp pain, as if at some point previous I had been wounded (perhaps pinched?) by these buttons. How young must I have been to have experienced this degree of opposition from such a small, unassuming device? And whence this desire to persist in the face of it? And: how and where does this object—so unprepossessing with its five big buttons, volume slider, cartridge tray, and little speaker—fit into sound studies and the history of sound recording technology?

There’s a small, rich, growing body of work on tape recording—including work by scholars as different as Kathleen Hayles, Steven Connor, Michael Davidson, and this blog’s doyen, Jennifer Stoecker-Ackerman—but almost invariably it focuses on the reel-to-reel recorder, the device the cassette recorder was meant to simplify and miniaturize, at the expense of sound quality. The

reel-to-reel was a vital contributor to the development of stereo and hi-fi hobbyism; it was also the mechanism at the center of a series of bold modernist literary experiments with tape recording by [Samuel Beckett](#), [William S. Burroughs](#), [David Antin](#), and others.

Aside from Andy Warhol's use of it to tape huge swaths of his everyday life (in 1965, he "wrote" a novel consisting of 24 largely consecutive hours of transcribed cassettes) the cassette recorder has no such avant-garde pedigree. The name of the first model, the [Norelco Carry-Corder 150](#), which appeared in 1963, shows the primary focus of its manufacturers' vision. [Ads](#) and trade journal articles from around this time touted the ease with which the device could be toted around on a vacation with the aim of producing an "audio album" of the trip. Doubtless, such albums were made and some may even still exist. But I suspect that the most vibrant history of the Carry-Corder and its descendants lies in the device's easy adaptability into the play world of children. As I and many others of my generation remember it, the pleasure of playing with the device was the way it instigated various sorts of performance, usually based in mimicry of ones we'd consumed through other electronic media. In a manner not unlike Warhol, we created our own little media empires: Dj-ing, news announcing, sportscasting, hosting talk shows with the baby and the dog as guests, singing like Cher on TV, re-enacting TV comedy sketches, recording one's own comedy sketches, and on and on.



Child's play?: Young World BIC-202 Cassette Recorder

It's not obvious how sound figures in the context of children's play. Certainly, the quality with which the tape recorder recorded and played back sound mattered little, if at all. What mattered was the way the device initiated and constructed scenes, provided roles to play. Analogously, as [David E. James](#) has noted, one of the most powerful aspects of Warhol's practice of bringing his Carry-Corder 150 everywhere he went (he was an early adopter, purchasing one in 1964) was that it "ma(de) performance inevitable" and "constitute(d) being as performance" ([Allegories of Cinema](#), page 69). Even playback itself was a matter of secondary interest; how many times do you think I listened to the tape of myself "broadcasting" two innings of a random mid-70s Mets game,

delivered as I watched on TV with the sound turned down? My wager is on none. Still, sound is the *raison d'être* of the cassette recorder. A few years later, kids might have done similar things with a video camera, but to a lot of kids, the early mass-marketed versions of that device felt much more formal, complicated, authoritative. That was the instrument through which the “official” history of the family was to be told; the tape recorder picked up the creative fragments, the bored interstices, the embarrassments, the extremes—parts of a world that wasn’t to appear before guests. Plus, the sound-based device actually offered greater reach and flexibility along with more forms of integration into other media like television.

My early memory of the recorder, however, seems more primal. Given its intensity, it seems clear that the tape recorder served as a vehicle toward several important forms of self-demarkation, helping me to discover and negotiate certain limits: of my body, of my agency vis-à-vis machines, of my relationships to my parents, of my family’s position in a larger social and economic world. (And in fact, the device was an important part of my family’s livelihood, vital to my father’s work as a radio reporter.) In retrospect, I seem almost impossibly young to be left to my own devices with the machine, and I also have a vague sense that I had been violating some prohibition, perhaps a decree that the recorder is “not a toy.” I wonder how much the force of such a decree originated precisely in the ease with which it could and did become a toy.



*gramophone, film,
typewriter, and cassette
tape recorder?*

It’s unlikely that [Friedrich Kittler](#) was going to list “cassette tape recorder” next in his book title after “gramophone, film, and typewriter.” It’s unlikely he had an image of the device in mind when he wrote his bravura dictum, “[media determine our situation](#).” Some technologies don’t stand up to such sweeping statements, toward which media studies sometimes seems particularly drawn. Certain devices, I think, necessitate a broadened and diversified understanding of the things both sound and technology do—even things that aren’t “about” sound in a conventional sense. For many historical narratives of sound reproduction, the cassette tape recorder is a regressive device, a drag on the pursuit of greater audio fidelity, with fidelity defined as “presence.” But the qualities of the cassette recorder that make it significant to our field are manifold, and some of them will be qualities that arise out of their adjacency to the central fact of recording and playing back sound. The “forgotten” areas of the history of sound reproduction technologies aren’t the notable

failures—the 8-track players, which after all still draw camp-retro interest—but the most mundane successes. The portable cassette tape recorded never truly failed, it just got left back.

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