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Play. Stop. Rewind. Record.

How the cassette changed our relationship with sound

By: Usha Raman

"We were, in many ways, coached into listening—casually, closely, intimately, itinerantly—by the cassette tape. It made sound available to us beyond broadcast radio, and allowed us to curate our own soundscapes."

I'm in the kitchen listening to a feature story on my phone, received through an app and transmitted to my Bluetooth connected airpods.

The reporter is talking about how [TikTok audio memes](#) changed our relationship to sound. *Wait a minute*, I think. *We've been here before.*

Flip the calendar back to roughly four and a half decades earlier. It is the early 1970s, and a friend had just received, via relatives visiting from the US, the last Beatles album, "Let It Be". We pass the glossy black LP around our small circle, turning it over in our teenage hands and staring in admiration at the sleeve featuring the Fab Four, barely hearing the cautioning whispers of "steady, careful". Vinyl records were delicate things, easily scratched, and certainly not to be casually loaned and exchanged. A record player, while not uncommon in middle-class households, was far from ubiquitous even in this group.

Fast forward another 10 years, and shareable, exchangeable—even recordable—music of all kinds exploded, packaged in portable 4-inch wide plastic-encased magnetic tape. So, when a friend received a gift of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Double Fantasy" in 1980, I could not only borrow it for a listen, but I could also make a copy using a dual cassette tape deck!

The spool before the compact cassette

The compact cassette, invented in 1963 by Lou Ottens at the Netherlands-based electronics firm Philips, was a miniaturized version of the bulky reel to reel tapes ("spools") that had been available since the 1950s. The large spools never really became a mass commodity outside of the elite Western market, since the players were bulky and not simple to operate. You couldn't, for instance, carry a spool player in a bag slung over your shoulder, or tote it by the hand. If mishandled or moved slightly, the tape could slip and twist, coming loose from the player and sometimes damaging the recording.

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When that tape narrowed and wound itself compactly into two circles that fit into that quarter-inch thick case of the compact cassette, it lost its power to intimidate, just as the player it fit into had parts that invited one to click and snap. And even as the pre-recorded cassette—albums released on this friendly format—made music a commodity that many more could own, the blank cassette made it possible for us to discover new voices within us. That, I believe, changed our relationship to sound.

The blank cassette set in motion two sets of what we now call "media practices": putting ourselves on tape, and curating our own music-mixes, or 'mix tapes'. In both cases, we were laying claim to the space of sound, by participating in its creation, and in curating our experience of it.

The handy medium represented by the compact cassette combined with the portability of the basic playback device (with a built-in speaker and microphone) allowed us to capture and listen to our own voices—in speech, song, oration, or conversation, or any combination of these. We could write and create our own audio, from plays to lectures, to intimate messages to family and friends. We discovered the shock of hearing ourselves, disembodied and strangely unfamiliar—perhaps much like those looking at their own photographic portraits would have felt, asking themselves, "is that really me?" We also experienced the intimacy of voice when heard across time and distance, captured in the physical form of the tape.

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It seems almost pedestrian now to leave voice notes on WhatsApp or send audio messages for those we cannot connect with in real time, but when audio recording on the compact cassette became not only possible but easy and relatively accessible for the first time, it offered a way to traverse geography and time while conveying a sense of presence. When transcontinental telephone rates precluded the long mundane conversations that are the hallmark of familiar relationships, cassette tapes holding children’s messages for grandparents, peppered with snatches of their prattle and song, occupied the space inhabited by absence. Workers in the Gulf and [migrants to the West](#), separated from their families for long months and even years, sent audio-letters home with returning friends, to be played for wives and parents, conveying emotion and experience that their hesitant writing could not.

India’s ‘mixtapes’

And, of course, the mixtape. In the 1980s up to the early 1990s, every neighborhood music shop worth its salt offered not only a large selection of pre-recorded tapes of film and devotional music, but also a service that regular customers knew to ask for. You could go in with a list of songs, a selection of artistes, films, or composers, and, for a fee that combined the price of a blank cassette and a small surcharge, you would walk out with your personalized tape. It might cost anywhere from Rs 35 to Rs 100 to buy a pre-recorded cassette, depending on the genre and provenance. These tapes varied in quality and sometimes contained less than 30 minutes of music—a poor deal for someone who might want quantity. A mixtape, on the other hand, could hold up to 90 minutes of music if you paid for a C90, and just the content you really wanted.

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Some stores allowed you to bring in your own blank cassettes, so if you happened to have access to high quality German or Japanese cassettes, you could take those in and pay just for the taping—a mere Rs 20 or 30. No doubt this was copyright violation, but few were asking, and fewer were paying attention. From time to time, there were inspections and raids, and the shops suspended mixtape-making, but one could always find a small vendor in a busy bylane willing to make a recording for you from his stash of pre-recorded cassettes.

Of course, not all mixtapes were made for money. Using dual-deck players at home, friends put together collections for each other, lovingly curating music that made a statement, or reflected a ‘must-listen’ exhortation. Many of the tapes that still occupy the shelves in my home have sleeves covered in the neat cursive of those I have long lost touch with, holding moments of a shared taste in music, a shared time in life.

Pirate Modernity

Peter Manuel, a music historian whose seminal work on [cassette culture](#) in India attributes its growth to four main factors: the inflow of cassette players from the Gulf with the boom in labour migration, the liberalization policies that eased import restrictions on electronics, the growth of the Indian industry, and the relative increase in purchasing power among the middle classes and the accompanying rise in consumerism. He also notes that copyright laws of the time could not handle the rising cassette piracy, and estimates that by 1985, pirate cassettes accounted for 90 percent of all tape sales.

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Media scholar Ravi Sundaram, commenting on what he terms “[pirate modernity](#)”, observes that cassette piracy turned India into one of the biggest music markets in the world. Cheap and widely available recorded music created an appetite that was fueled both by the legitimate market and the grey zones that made music truly affordable. The launch of the T-series label by entrepreneur Gulshan Kumar in 1983 straddled this boundary between piracy and legitimacy by producing low priced cover recordings of Bollywood music, as well as cheap blank cassettes. Tapes were now available at practically every paan shop and bus-stand kiosk, the most popular ones played on loop in neighbouring tea stalls, as well as on long-haul buses. Much before the “video coach” became the mainstay of district travel, the cassette had a place at the driver’s side.

The revolution in ‘listening’

Even in the pre-recorded space, cassettes brought other forms of audio content into a market with a growing demand particularly among the middle classes for entertainment and education content. Storybooks packaged with audio cassettes, language lessons on tape, and motivational lectures soon found their way into book stores, paving the way for digital technologies to build on these early markets.

We were, in many ways, coached into listening—casually, closely, intimately, itinerantly—by the cassette tape. It made sound available to us beyond broadcast radio, and allowed us to curate our own soundscapes. It foreshadowed the continuing miniaturization of devices that would let us carry that soundscape with us, into our cars, on to the streets, and into spaces of our homes without needing to be tethered to twisted wires and bulky instruments. Just as the pocket transistor radio kept my grandmother company as she rested in the afternoons, the small tape recorder helped her through sleepless nights. It’s a short thread that connects that experience (or “media practice”) to the earphones that bring music and talk to my ears as I potter about my kitchen today.

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