

Facts & Arguments

Rewind, pause, play, fast-forward

Cassette tapes. Remember those? As we toss them, I become the incidental archivist. **BY IBRAHIM KHIDER**

In this age of MP3 players, CDs, DVDs and whatever-else medium is out there, I grow an audio cassette collection. Nobody wants tapes any more; garage sales and public libraries unload them for a song, friends hand over bags full (happy for the freed-up space); co-workers have literally dumped boxes of them on my desk. The result? I now have access to a library of sound that not even a file-sharing site could afford.

But tape is outdated and unlike its predecessor, the vinyl record, will probably never go through a nostalgic Renaissance — except with eccentrics such as myself. As our culture becomes more predisposed to dispose of them, I become the incidental archivist. Stacks upon stacks of audio cassettes line my shelves, company-recorded and individually compiled. Cassettes are not so much a medium as a mentality about how sound can be experienced.

Part of this is because tapes are too cumbersome to navigate between tracks, one must fast-forward or rewind to favoured moments as opposed to getting to those moments instantaneously, as with a CD. Choosing between digital or analog is where a mentality toward listening comes into play: the reflective “analog” mindset versus the digital “instant gratification” one. It is with the former where one can best appreciate, because of its constraints, hearing the content gradually unfurl like flower petals after rain.

The main objection to tape, however, would be the analog hiss found in playback, especially pronounced between tracks or in silent moments of a recording such as classical music. It is in this field of white noise, caused by the movement of magnetic media over playback heads, the listener hears minute details — a field virtually unnoticeable while a song plays.

It is also this field that gives tape an edge over CDs; studio engineers for CD recordings pare down extraneous noises, particularly from analog-source recordings, to ensure maximum background silence, not unlike trimming a lawn right down to the soil — rendering a recording bare. Sound

on tape is like a lawn growing lushly, yielding frequencies digital is too stingy to afford. Identical recordings on different mediums (one analog, the other digital) reveal a liveliness of the former that the latter has yet to capture.

Home-made mixed compilation tapes are not unlike being handed handwritten letters (remember those?); the tape compiler arranges songs to convey subtle messages to the recipient. There is only so much space to record, so the compiler must carefully select her/his message. In addition, the compiler (even recording studios) had to record content in “real time”, bestowing an organic quality to the final result.

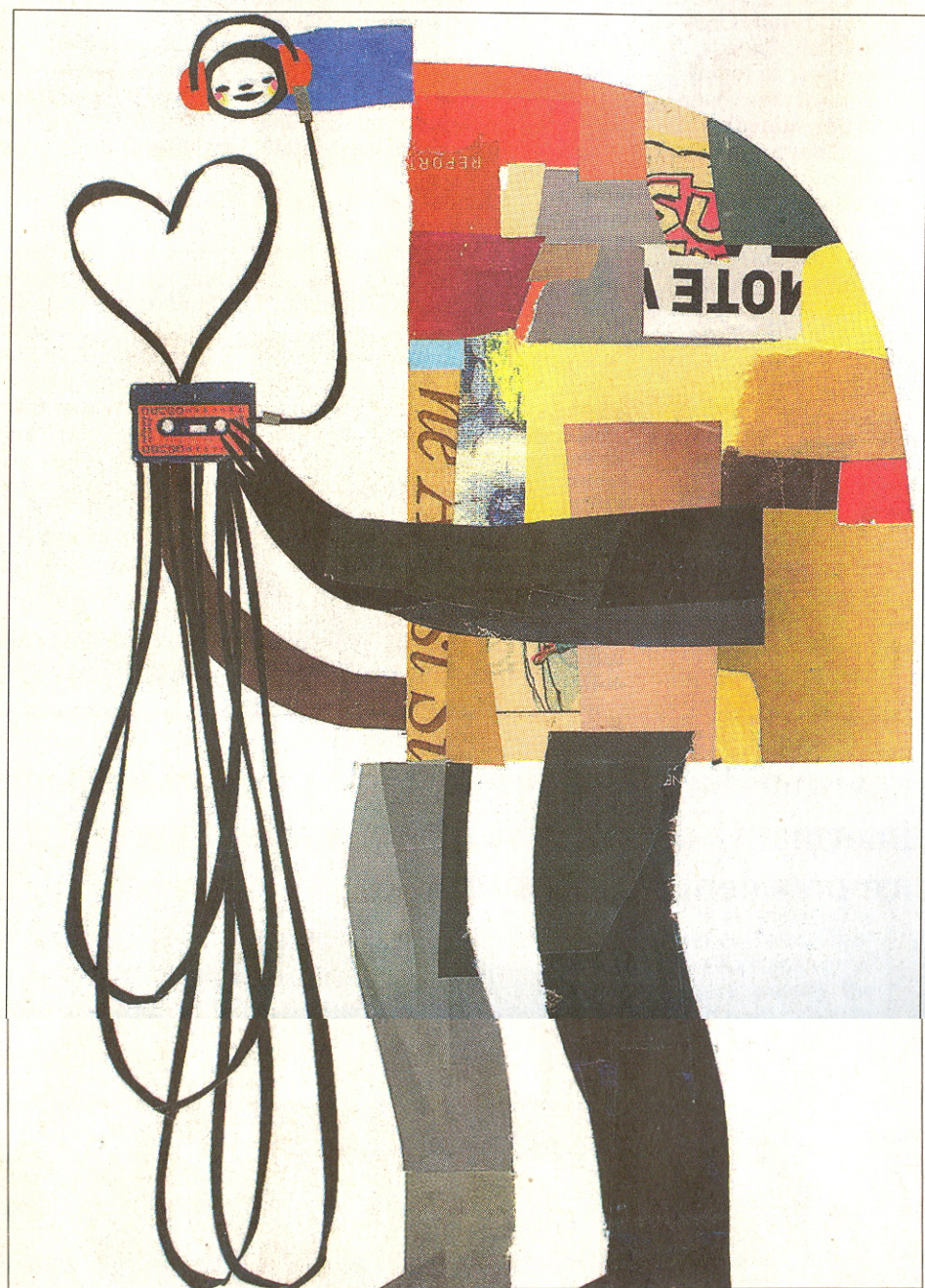
Then there is the packaging. I enjoy reading (sometimes with amusement) often-handwritten liner notes with heartfelt or snide remarks; I marvel at tape covers made of cut-outs from magazines, photocopies or hand-drawn art. The cassette itself often bears inscriptions from the compiler, similarly filled with remarks.

The medium of music is important because it is the difference between a lovingly prepared home-cooked meal and something slid off the conveyor belt of an assembly-line restaurant.

Like fast food, MP3s are disposable. It is simple to delete files from an MP3 player, and once it is gone, it has seemingly vanished, without a trace of it ever having existed. The same cannot be said of tape as it is much more cumbersome to erase and record over — and even then vestiges of past material remain.

The products of the digital medium, by contrast, are compiled near-instantaneously, with little thought afforded to track selection because space constraints are not there. Consequently, like a sprawling buffet, it is possible to eventually consume without tasting. Sending a zip file jammed with MP3 selections does not have the personal touch of a mixed tape, which is more like a specialty restaurant. If you send a mixed tape you either have to give it to a recipient or have it delivered — like sending flowers or a box of chocolates.

Computers date fast; software dates



GORD WIEBE

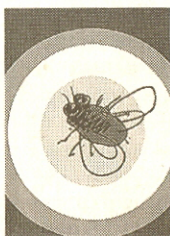
faster. With new computers and software continually redesigned and redeveloped, instead of perfecting what already exists, errors (the digital version of decay) pervade.

Consequently, large hunks of data go missing when moving material from the old to the new medium and, as in deletion, it seems there is no evidence of it ever having existed. Because of this approach to technology and the way information is stored, the choice our society faces is what information will be preserved for the future and what will be allowed to decay into oblivion. Ancient stone and parchment scripts seem to have outlasted attempts to capture them on a more contemporary medium, such as a computer.

I have had the eerie experience of listening to my voice on cassette, recorded when I was a child a quarter-century ago. My then high-pitched voice is still crisp, piercing through the sheen of analog hiss. That cassette still has a way to go before it is rendered useless by time. My tapes will probably kick around long after my computer, long after an MP3 player, and probably long after I am gone; they will be destined for a museum or landfill.

Whatever alien civilization excavates our extravagant culture will probably have an easier time playing back tapes (which will probably still work) than figuring out MP3 players (which probably won't).

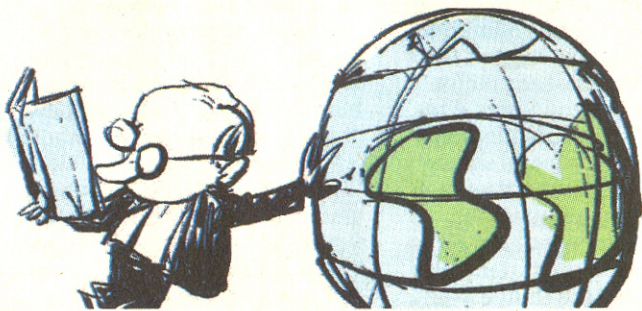
Ibrahim Khider lives in Toronto.



Thwack, thwack

A supermarket in Guangdong province, China, has given its staff a quota of dead flies to hand in at the

end of every working day. To increase awareness of cleanliness, each employee at the store in Dongguan is required to kill 150 flies daily and show them to management, or suffer a fine of 50 yuan (\$7). Some notes:



SOCIAL STUDIES

Howard Hughes said his job for three years had been to catch flies on the orders of that wealthy U.S. recluse. The insects had to be squashed in a Kleenex and presented for inspection. Ron Kistler, 50, wrote a book about his experiences, *I Caught Flies for Howard Hughes* (Playboy Press).

Flies Canada

■ In the fall of 1976, flies attacked Canadian culture when a swarm of the insects knocked a CBC outlet, Toronto radio sta-

usually breed outdoors and look for a way inside by following the aroma from the kitchen."

Dirty and prolific

■ Flies carry more dangerous pathogens than do cockroaches, reported The San Diego Union-Tribune in 2002. A University of Florida scientist found that houseflies feeding at hospital trash bins were picking up drug-resistant strains of some bacteria. The insects can travel 10 miles a day and live for about a month.

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