

Marc Masters. *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. 209 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-7598-5.



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The cassette tape ignited an ongoing protest, as Marc Masters argues at the core of his book *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette*, published as paperback by University of North Carolina Press in 2023. This study solidly demonstrates that, since the 1960s when the cassette tape was born, it has granted musicians and music lovers the power to (re)produce and (re)distribute sound art in networks of communal exchange that have protested corporations' exclusive dominance of the record industry. The physicality and the analog nature of this old, reemerged technology has also posed a challenge to digitalized, streaming culture in recent decades, which is similarly governed by monopolizing big businesses.

As the title of the book implies, the sociocultural history of the cassette tape and its metaphorical, political stance against authority is filled with "high bias." The introductory chapter of the text explains that this term refers, on one hand, to the biased hierarchy between producers and con-

sumers in the corporate-governed music industry, and on the other hand, to the technical lingo common in the tape industry, where "high bias" means high quality, high resolution. The second part of the title also reflects a clever double meaning: The "distorted" history is not only the tale of cassette tapes that get distorted as they are continuously replayed or rerecorded on, but also the story of an outsider medium that became much more than merely a sound vehicle; it granted agency in the service of self-realization, free self-expression, and personalization, as, for instance, the mixtape and mail-art subcultures reveal.

Two analytical currents run through the book: first, an analysis using a broad cultural lens, and second, an analysis of cassette tapes as a means of individual, private conversation, a cheap, small, easy-to-use people's format of coding and messaging. The scope of Masters's compelling explorative adventure goes, however, beyond these two interconnected poles; in his journey, he explores

the history of cassette also from the perspective of technological developments, musical consumerism, and underground movements, which positions his text uniquely as the only comprehensive historical-cultural study of this medium as an audio device.[1] For readers born in the last century, whose lives during the 1970s to 1990s may have been filled with their Walkman, tape recorders, and car stereo systems as much as handwritten texts and hand-drawn pictures on the J-cards of the (mix)tapes—whether original or copied, purchased or borrowed, received or given as a gift—he provokes nostalgia and reflection. Reinforcing its research value and timeliness, this nostalgic draw makes Masters’s book an attractive, engaging read.

Chapter 1 of *High Bias* problematizes the intolerance of authoritarian corporations toward the versatile and metamorphic nature of cassette tapes, who labeled disseminating them as synonymous with stealing and shoplifting. These businesses, supported by some endorsing politicians, resorted to all sorts of tactics—including negative advertisement campaigns, court battles, regulations, and taxes—to stop home taping from “killing music” (p. 5). Cassettes committed no murders, and certainly no other kinds of heinous crime; they simply posed an alleged threat to the financial benefits of the industry’s gluttonous overlords, as the chapter illustrates. Masters tells us that within this defamatory context, technologies such as the boom box, personal stereo, PA (public address) system, and four-track recorder, as well as genres such as hip hop, emerged, all on the shoulders of the cassette tape. Chapter 2 elaborates on the evolution of hip hop aided by mixtapes, as well as other musical movements and genres—such as go-go, indie rock, disc jockeys (DJs), and radio jockeys—and bands—including Iron Maiden and Metallica—launched by means of cassettes. In all these streams, the cassette tape provided an indispensable tool for recording, es-

tablishing, and showcasing creative outsider minds.

The discourse in chapter 3 takes us one step further, venturing into the realm of underground artists for whom cassette tapes were more than a transmission tool; they employed the medium as the centerpiece of their artistic experiments and conceptual art projects. This international network of tape artists and tape aficionados founded college radio stations, labels, audio magazines, tape trading webs, and stores dedicated to alternative, noncommercial music on tape in places such as the United States, Japan, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. These media supported, among others, the works of experimental artists such as German composer Conrad Schnitzler, a member of Tangerine Dreams, who used tapes as a music instrument, and noise tapes composed by Japanese artist Nakajima Aki-fumi.

While it primarily deals with tape trading and its power to connect people, chapter 4 draws a distinction between bootlegging, copying tapes for the purpose of making illegal money, and tape trading, the act of recording live music and spreading it by fans merely because they enjoy it. Tape trading subculture, for instance, among Deadheads—fans of the Grateful Dead—has initiated and celebrated communal exchange and communication via cassette tapes. But Masters does not examine the influence of cassette tapes only in the Western world; in chapter 5, he introduces tape hunters such as Marc Gergis in Syria and Alan Bishop in Egypt who have tirelessly collected and uncovered unique local musical traditions, now preserved, published, and circulated on cassette tapes. Returning to mixtapes, chapter 6 epitomizes them as “conduits of personal messages and, at the same time, as catalyst of community building” (p. 146). It shows us how mixtapes have made a range of human interactions—such as romantic communication, sharing musical

knowledge, and boosting friendships by connecting over songs—possible.

Masters's study culminates in chapter 7, where we learn that the cassette tape has made a comeback through the efforts of independent businesses such as the National Audio Company and platforms such as Bandcamp to enable tape labels to reach customers directly. Such recent sources have contributed to the availability and affordability of cassette tapes, most often promoting artists and genres that have found less success in the mainstream market.

In addition to its pleasing content, the visual aspect of this volume, with diverse pictures of cassette tapes on the cover and on the initial page of each chapter, makes it an irresistibly informative and charming book for any reader interested in gaining general knowledge about sound art and musical cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette* is also a valuable research source for scholars who examine underground artistic movements, the social functions of musical traditions, musical mavericks, and sound technologies.

Note

[1]. Most of the available scholarly resources related to the cassette tape, including books and articles, seem to focus on individual musical cultures, or specific angles. Take, for instance, Andrew Simon, *Media of Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). Masters's *High Bias*, however, gives a well-rounded insight into the history and influence of the medium.

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