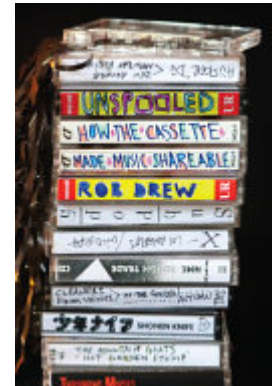




Rob Drew. *Unspooled: How the Cassette Made Music Shareable*. Sign, Storage, Transmission Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. xi + 213 pp. \$102.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4780-2083-7.



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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (May, 2024)

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Right at the beginning of *Unspooled: How the Cassette Made Music Shareable*, author Rob Drew articulates that this book mirrors his own musical inclination, that is, his affection for indie rock and its significance in the rise of the cassette to a dominant audio technology, which, in turn, contributed to practicing musicians establishing the indie culture. The text, therefore, does not consider the non-musical embodiments of the cassette tape broadly and intentionally avoids an exhaustive examination of its influence on such genres as heavy metal and electronic dance music, or its non-Western manifestations in a plethora of world musical traditions. However, it does briefly venture out to demonstrate the role of the mixtape and boom box in the emergence of hip-hop. *Unspooled's* focus on indie artists' love affair with cassette tapes displays the backbone of the book, which can be juxtaposed, for instance, with another recent noteworthy publication, Marc Masters's *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette* (2023), which

primarily concentrates on this medium as a means of communal exchange and protest.

A thread in Drew's book bridges the opening core argument laid out in the introduction and evolving to an essential point in the conclusion. The initial argument, which informs much of the analysis in the following sections, addresses "indie culture's role in cassette's transformation from a symbol of promiscuous and transgressive distribution to one of intimate connection through music" (p. 4). The engaging discussions travel through six chapters to ultimately suggest that, even in the digital age, the cassette tape keeps living on, not only as a symbol for a missed, lively, analog world but also physically in the hands of labels that continue releasing unconventional sound art; in Drew's words, "cassette mania shows no sign of subsiding. It has picked up steam and gone mainstream in terms of symbolism if not sales" (p. 7).

In chapter 1, Drew illustrates how the cassette transformed the home taping culture in the 1960s

when youngsters began recording and exchanging pop music, as much as it facilitated the experimental sound arts by, for instance, Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage or the endeavors of documentarians and folklorists such as Tony Schwartz. As Drew argues, the development of the personal stereo and boom box in the 1970s eventually brought the home taping culture to the fore—a culture that, even before the ascent of the cassette, the record companies had labeled as piracy and unauthorized reproduction. They had already battled for copyright and control by forming the Recording Industry Association of America in 1952. Much to the dismay of record company executives, however, the thriving indie rock music of the 1980s buried such allegations, as Drew explains in chapter 2. This chapter goes on to demonstrate how, in the hands of these independent artists, the cassette evolved to an emblem of cross-gender, -age, and -race community and collaboration, defying the boundaries of commercial music.

While chapter 3 examines the role of patron zines such as *OP* (1979-84), *New Musical Express* (1952-), *New York Rocker* (1976-82), and *Fast Forward* (1980-82) in safeguarding and promoting sovereign cassette labels, chapter 4 delves deeper into the world of outsider post-punk musicians who released their works on cassettes and rose to fame: for example, Marine Girls, Throwing Muses, Posies, Tori Amos, and Einstürzende Neubauten. Referring to the cassette's persistence through vinyl's downturn and the surge of compact discs (CDs), chapter 5 addresses the global obsession with home taping that continued until the 1990s when CD burners entered the scene. Most importantly, Drew clarifies the cross-pollination of musical genres that secondhand cassettes propagated. The chapter expounds on secondhand cassettes' contribution to breaking boundaries between genres. In addition, the cassette promoted not only the music and movements of white male artists

but also maverick women's remarkable achievements in punk and indie, for instance, by The Slits.

The palpable presence of mixtapes as affectionate gifts of selected songs is examined in chapter 6. "Cassettes occupied a liminal space between gift, commodity, and contraband," Drew claims, elucidating the assertion of love and friendship that the interpersonal meanings of assorted songs on a mixtape communicated (p. 132). He further examines the magnitude of the mixtape's influence on hip-hop's rise with deejays central to this genre in the 1990s and posits that the act of producing mixtapes was a fertile commitment, in his words, "an act of creative engagement" (p. 146).

The conclusion, with its witty title, "Your Hiss Is What I Miss," finally asserts that, in the present, the cassette has endured as the format of choice for left-field, experimentalist noise musicians and independent indie labels—despite issues with recycling the cassette and sexual offenses that some tape labels and their associated bands have committed, as well as the fragility and decay of the cassette's sound. While in some college towns and coastal cities new cassette labels have emerged, as Drew touches on, the digital media replicate certain qualities of the cassette tape tradition, such as Spotify's "Discover Weekly" auto-recommended, personalized playlist feature that reflects the mixtape culture.

Because it reveals the importance of the cassette in supporting underrepresented and underserved artists and artworks, Drew's book provides a valuable resource for a variety of researchers active in, for example, popular music and gender studies, as well as culture, technology, and media scholars. *Unspooled's* portrayal of the reciprocal impact of the cassette medium and the indie culture situates it as the second recent substantial scholarship of this technology in the context of contemporaneous sociocultural and artistic currents. Interestingly, both studies—*High Bias* (from University of North Carolina Press) and *Un-*

spooled (from Duke University Press)—surfaced in the triangle area of North Carolina. Has this region always been a pole of recording technology research? Should we expect a third volume soon?

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Citation: Navid Bargrizan. Review of Drew, Rob, *Unspooled: How the Cassette Made Music Shareable*. H-Sci-Med-Tech, H-Net Reviews. May, 2024.

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