

## BOOK REVIEW

*Unspooled: how the cassette made music sharable*, by R. Drew, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2024, 216 pp., USD \$26.95 (paperback), USD \$102.95 (hardcover), Paper ISBN: 978-1-4780-2559-7 / Cloth ISBN: 978-1-4780-2083-7 / eISBN: 978-1-4780-2771-3

Social media platforms led the way in actualising and representing the mediated self, and enabled the construction of various personas glossed in cultural capital and sophistication. From now on, whenever some misguided interlocutor tells me these things—be they student, godchild, or learned professor—I will refer them to Drew's book on the cassette tape.

This is a well-written and engaging book, and I highly recommend it. Drew's love of and immersion in the format are told in their summary of the cassette's cultural history. We now think of its place in democratising music production, but like many media technologies, the rise of the cassette was presented as a menace to music. Its distinctive outline was set within a skull and crossbones in the inner sleeves of vinyl LPs of the early 1980s, warning of the cassette's complicity in the expiry of vinyl. Fast forward (a pun also used by Drew) to 2009, and we find that the cassette itself is undone by an alliance of digital delivery formats, along with a resurgent market for vinyl. Yet, through this, the cassette survived as a retro cultural icon, epitomising what Jameson (1991) describes as the nostalgia for memories of empowered consumption.

One of the explanations for the collapse of the cassette was that the recordable CD picked up its utility in collating and ordering individual playlists. Exchange networks, often generated online, facilitated the passing of mixed and recorded CDs and sustained the old displays of taste and know-how. But CDs were always to be unsatisfactory, lacking the investment of time implicit in the cassette – the curation and recording of which is described wonderfully as the full recital of a musical set for “an audience of two – you and the intended receiver of the tape” (p. 6). Already an object of nostalgia, the cassette met a yearning for labour and authenticity. Along with the typewriter, the cassette has become “hipster”.

Drew's account begins with the multi-reel tape, but what the cassette lacked in relative quality, it more than made up for with widespread availability and industry impact. Indeed, commercial efforts to tax and regulate the new form, set in contrast with the realities of its localised appropriation, are the most informative and revealing element of these early stages. Chapters 2 and 3 then look at the role of the cassette in facilitating the distribution of independent music and the paradigmatic challenge that this contingent media form presented for the critical conceptualisation of the materiality and stability of recorded music. As Chapter 4 shows, this ambivalence was also apparent amongst musicians, for whom the accessibility and adaptability of the cassette seemed more appropriate to the promotion of music than for the setting of its final form.

Chapter 5 then looks at the use of the cassette by the music public. Drew writes of the role of the cassette in establishing and maintaining music genres and of recalling and refreshing the music of past performers, many of whom were met with limited success on first release. The benefits for public identities often silenced in conventional promotional discourses are important in Drew's analysis, of which gender is the most prominent. Chapter 6 then turns this to the fertile environment of the mixtape. Much stress is placed on the use of music as an emotional resource, redistributed under a doubly articulated authorship (the musicians and the mixtape curator), at once celebrating and undermining music as a packaged and framed commodity. More than anything,

though, the mixtape was a way of displaying taste and situating music within sub-cultural hierarchies.

In practical terms, the cassette transformed the experience of recorded music. Applying Raymond Williams' (1974) concept of "mobile privatisation" showed how this experience helped constitute the cultural experience of modernity, from the car stereo to the boombox to the Walkman. In the cassette, cultural studies' notions of bricolage and subcultural belonging are given lasting form. The cassette enabled contemporary musical practices of citation and sample, letting a variety of actors inhabit recorded music and use context to lend it fresh exceptionality.

The volume is centred on the United States and, to a large extent, on the place of the cassette as a "medium of distribution and a motif" of postpunk indie rock. For all that, care has been taken to acknowledge the global economics of the technology, including its use in the recording and distribution of localised music, as well as the unfettered copyright piracy in parts of Asia and Africa. Featured too is the cassette's utility in local political struggles, such as the spread of international music in China, "promoting deviancy and hooliganism in young people" (p. 15).

There is also an acknowledgement of the range of genres to benefit from the mixtape (p. 109), including a wonderful anecdote featuring Grandmaster Flash distributing promotion tapes to cab companies (p. 132). Of course, there might have been more the cross-cultural implications of the mix tape: be this the UK Northern Soul sales tapes of the mid-70s that took the sound of Detroit to Doncaster, or the latter international popularisation of sub-genres such as Ethiopian Jazz. But those are books for others to write, and this is a volume that will set your mind racing.

## References

Jameson, Fredric (1991) *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.  
Williams, Raymond (1975) *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana.

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Dr Michael Higgins lectures at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. He has published widely on political communications and culture, with books including *Media and Their Publics* (2008), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Culture* (with John Storey and Clarissa Smith, 2010) and *Belligerent Broadcasting* (with Angela Smith, 2017). He spent much of the 1980s making better mixtapes than all of his friends.