

THE FUTURE OF CASSETTE CULTURE

At the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the audiocassette has become the object of a strange anachronous revival in the North American Noise scene. I am handed new cassette releases by Noisicians; tapes are sold at Noise shows, in small stores, and by online distributors; and cassettes are reviewed in fanzines and blogs. Many new Noise recordings are issued on tape only, and several cassette labels have sprung up over the past few years. Dominic Fernow (a.k.a. Prurient) of Hospital Productions argues that cassette tapes are essential to the spirit of Noise: “I can’t imagine ever fully stopping tapes, they are the symbol of the underground. . . . What they represent in terms of availability also ties back into that original Noise ideology. Tapes are precious and sacred items, not disposable. . . . It’s incredibly personal, it’s not something I want to just have anyone pick up because it’s two dollars and they don’t give a fuck” (Fernow 2006). All of this takes place years after the cassette has vanished from music retail and its playback equipment has become technologically obsolescent.¹ Although a very few small independent stores carry newly released cassettes, new Noise tapes are more commonly distributed via mail order or through in-person exchange, most often directly with the artist. Cassettes, too, are

everywhere in contemporary visual arts and fashion, both as nostalgic symbols of 1980s pop culture and as iconic forms of new independent design. But at the end of the new millennium's first decade, many years into a global move toward digital formats and Internet-based systems of distribution, why hold on to the analog cassette?

In this final chapter, I relate the current circulation of Noise cassettes to an earlier mail-based exchange, which its participants named “cassette culture.” In the 1980s, the person-to-person barter of homemade Noise cassettes grew into a participatory network of anonymous but connected users. The cassette culture set the stage for the rise of independent music in the 1990s and framed the possibility of a shared global underground based in decentralized, user-controlled distribution of recordings. But the present-day cassette represents a different goal: to impose technological, social, and aesthetic limits on the omnipresence of new media, which can return Noise to its marginal position at the edge of circulation.

Cassette tapes relocalize Noise by distinguishing interpersonal exchanges of physical media from the ubiquity of online access. The renewed emphasis on social copresence in independent music has strongly impacted the orientation of cassette exchange networks, which have shifted away from transnational connections to stress the reinvention of local scenes. Even as cassettes move Noise's circulation “back” into the realm of a physical medium, they do not remain fixed in place in the analog realm. Cassettes are reduplicated in parallel circuits of digital distribution, peer-to-peer networks of file sharing and crowd-sourced information, which are in turn dubbed back onto local social life. This push-and-pull cycle—between new and old media, and between virtual and physical contexts of exchange—extends the face-to-face encounter of the local scene into online networks. But even as new publics emerge in the open access projects of Internet circulation, the skeletons of cassette culture keep Noise underground.

CASSETTE CULTURE

The cassette culture of Noise, of course, is only one of the listener-circulated social networks that grew up around the audiocassette. The mass introduction of cassette technology in the late 1970s and 1980s changed musical landscapes on a global level. Audiocassettes initiated new social and economic relationships around sound recordings, allowing individual users to reproduce, remix, and distribute their own material. Cassettes also set

the first substantial wave of informal music piracy into motion, radically changing local music industries and further entrenching recorded music in homes, vehicles, and public spaces around the world. As Peter Manuel argues in his influential study of media distribution in North India, the audiocassette offered a “two-way, potentially interactive micro-medium whose low expense [made] it conducive to localized grassroots control and corresponding diversity of content” (Manuel 1993:2). Cassettes enabled new political functions for “small media” in mass communication networks, such as the channels of audiocassette exchange that affected the outcome of the Iranian revolution (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994). New circulations of cassettes changed local music performance contexts of traditional gamelan music in Java, generated new contexts of religious listening in Egypt, and influenced the textual aesthetics of poetry and song in Yemen (Hirschkind 2006; Miller 2007; Sutton 1985). Audio- and videocassette technologies also helped new media publics form, as inexpensive analog reproductions created informal markets for music and film (Greene and Porcello 2005; Larkin 2008).

The global advent of the audiocassette demonstrated how musical cultures could be radically transformed and even reconstructed in circulation. The cassette also generated new discourses of participatory democratic media, in grassroots networks of distribution that offered economic and social independence from state and industrial controls. Nowadays, digital productions possess this radical emancipatory status, whereas analog formats appear limited and archaic. But the newness of new media often hides their continuities with ongoing social values of old media.² From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, the analog cassette tape represented many of the technological attributes now associated with digital files.³ Cassettes offered transportability, mutability of content, and smaller size, but most significant, they created opportunities to produce and share music that enabled an alternative to industrial modes of distribution. Like the MP3, the sound quality of cassette tape was not regarded as an improvement from previous formats, but its ease of use encouraged new possibilities of homemade production, flexible user-controlled distribution, remixing, and the proliferation of marginalized styles. Contemporary narratives about the participatory networks of online digital media, too, follow from older storylines of “independent music,” which developed in the context of analog physical media.

Audiocassettes catalyzed a powerful backlash against media users by

music industries, from international litigation to public and private campaigns against illegal duplication (memorialized in the cassette-and-crossbones logo developed by a British industrial antipiracy group, which famously announced that “Home Taping Is Killing Music”). Amateur home taping became a crucial background for the legal doctrine of fair use in U.S. copyright law, and qualities of analog degeneration and erasure became markers of the “aesthetics of access” that accrued to decentralized exchanges of bootleg audio and videotapes (Hilderbrand 2009). Cassettes helped popularize amateur “lo-fi” recording practices with the introduction of inexpensive cassette recorders in the 1970s, followed by the four-track cassette recorder in the 1980s. Audiocassettes also fostered newly personalized modes of configurable media in the form of the compilation mix tape. Mix tapes are indexes of person-to-person social networks, often as concentrated musical representations of friendships and romantic relationships.⁴ The gift of a mix tape allowed listeners new opportunities to narrate and share their experiences of media by sequencing materials to reflect personal histories and express individual aesthetics. Cassette mixing techniques also provoked new sounds and performance styles, especially in hip-hop, in which the mix tape remains a powerful metaphor of populism.⁵

What extends to the social imaginary of new media from the old media contexts of cassette culture? I have argued that Noise’s inaccessibility was crucial to motivating its circulation between Japan and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. These hard-to-get values might seem incommensurable with a contemporary digital mediascape based in open access. Peer-to-peer file sharing, torrent networks, MP3 blogs, streaming audio, and a growing host of commercial outlets like iTunes, Rhapsody, Last.fm, Spotify, and YouTube have made even the most rare and obscure sound recordings widely available. Websites, blogs, and discussion boards allow participants to pass on information about Noise, post photographs and video clips of live performances, generate collective content about artists and styles, and share, identify, and discuss new recordings almost instantly. Things that were once an enduring mystery, even for the most hardcore collectors, can easily be discovered just by opening a search engine to locate a fan site, blog, stream, or torrent that allows direct access to once-rare material. Previously hidden sounds can be located much more simply, and perhaps more important, historical background about Noise is suddenly available as online networks drag even the most marginalized, sub-subcultural forms of underground media to the surface (and up into

the cloud). If Noise has now become knowable, downloadable, and easily contextualized as a subject through online networks, how can it retain its unclassifiable character and regenerate its valued aesthetics of obscurity? Everything, it seems, has changed.

The revival of the cassette might merely memorialize a lost golden age, rather than a move toward recognizing the radical changes of digital culture. I argue that the contemporary exchange of Noise cassettes is a production of “residual media,” in which old, technologically obsolescent formats continue to influence new media contexts (Acland 2007).⁶ In the 1980s, the cassette facilitated the expansion of Noise into anonymous circuits of mail exchange, which became skeletal frameworks for later retail distributions of independent music recordings in the 1990s. But in the early 2010s, its physical and technical limitations represent Noise’s offline divergence from digital networks. The contemporary production of Noise cassettes, then, is more than nostalgic inertia or Luddite resistance to online culture. It marks a radical attempt to redefine the social independence of independent music, by using the residue of past exchanges to define Noise in emergent contexts of new media. The cassette tape has become a magical object of media circulation. In its physical housing, we hear the echo of older, apparently obsolete social values and aesthetic goals, which “print-through” from the analog cassette culture onto digital distributions of Noise.⁷ The cassette persists, even in its technological obsolescence, as a stubborn reminder of a deep and continuous effort to stay underground.

POSTING NEW MEDIA

Here at the edge of the East Village, I’m sitting on the sidewalk, on a tossed out
sofa letting the cassette tape recorder roll on
the midsummer sun searing
lively chatter of people meld into the salsa rhythms that waft by from somewhere
footsteps cross my vision, somehow familiar
like pressing my ear to her breast, hearing the pulse of her heart
this cumulation of memory, piling up over this city New York
where is it they vanish to, these sounds once emitted?
—Onda Aki, “Cassette Memories”

During the 1980s, the decade in which Noise began to coalesce into a transnational imaginary of popular music, you had to really want it to find it—

and if you found it, you found it on cassette. Mason Jones (author of the influential Noise zine *Ongaku Otaku*, and owner of the label Charnel House) became involved in international cassette exchange while living in Michigan, where mail order seemed like the best opportunity to reach out into the underground. “I discovered the cassette underground through *Sound Choice*, and some other zines dedicated to home recording. Nothing was going on in Ann Arbor in 1985, so I turned to mail order. . . . Eventually I got into the habit of writing to the artists I liked, and they usually responded to me.” For home recordists like Jones, mail-order cassettes created an alternative to retail media distribution, which led to a new social network. Cassettes held out the possibility for a democratic independent media exchange that could leave industrial distribution behind, in a new world of grassroots access and reciprocity. By the mid-1980s, cassettes were included with magazines and sold at performances, and cassette-only programs had become a staple of college and local independent radio around the United States.

The emerging distribution networks of cassette culture provoked a sense of populist liberation from the recording industry. In his edited collection of essays, *Cassette Myths*, Robin James captured the moment of radical democratization offered by cassette technology:

The audiocassette is the perfect vehicle: inexpensive, portable . . . and accessible to anyone and everyone. They can be purchased in a department store or drug store for a dollar or two apiece. So if you have a couple of cassette recorders, you’re ready to record, duplicate, and distribute cassettes of your music (or whatever) to as many or as few people as your desire and pocketbook allow. The cassette is the counterculture’s most dangerous and subversive weapon. It is a threat, an incendiary device, the perfect tool for the cultural anarchist. It’s a letter to your best friend in Wichita, or a record of your secret dream diary. You can use a cassette to make recordings of those new songs you just wrote—just you, your old guitar, a few pots and pans, a microphone, and a 4-track cassette recorder. . . . The mass media and big entertainment companies feel their monopoly on information and its dissemination slipping away—cassettes truly are the most democratic art form! (James 1992:vii–viii)

For James, the cassette was the ideal people’s medium for sound. It was cheap, it was reusable, and its production could be individually controlled.

The cassette allowed its users to escape the role of passive consumption; perhaps most important for Noise, it could contain things beyond the scope of music.

Cassettes embodied the nascent ideologies of independent music, linking the open-ended accessibility of do-it-yourself production to a diversity of musical styles. Although audiotape technology had existed for decades, the spread of the cassette in the 1980s allowed small-scale amateur productions to be distributed as equivalents to commercial musical products. It was easy to make a recording outside of a studio, and recorders and media were inexpensive. Audiotape was a medium that could be under a single producer's control from start to finish, and the durability and size of the cassette made the final product mobile. The cassette culture offered a new world of music that could become practically and aesthetically independent from industrial production. Its social networks were as individualized and personal as its sonic objects were anonymous and obscure. As Robin James writes: "Every time you go to your mailbox you could be picking up little packages that contain impossible sounds: the stage whispers in empty rooms, the sound of echoing oceans, pop-tones—heck, it could be a message from someone you don't know, will never meet, and probably wouldn't know what to do if you met them anyway. Or someone with the key to what you need" (James 1992:ix).

Early cassette culture was socially grounded in a loose network of interpersonal contacts. Almost all cassette traders were musicians—whether primarily as performers or home recordists—and had discovered other experimentalists through print or broadcast media or in their travels. They began to send out cassettes in mail art exchanges, similar to those made famous by Fluxus and New York School of Correspondence artists who used the postal system to distribute their pieces to one another (Friedman 1995). Through these activities, many artists had amassed lists of addresses by direct person-to-person trading of unique homemade cassette recordings, and a few began to use these as a kind of micro-distribution network for new releases. These lists began to be shared in fanzines such as *Sound Choice*, *File 13*, and *Option*, which printed contact indexes for anyone interested in exchanging tapes.⁸ Though composed primarily of North Americans, trading lists in magazines included contacts from Central and South America to Australia to Eastern Europe and, of course, Japan. Despite the rapid growth of the cassette culture in the 1980s through person-to-person contacts, its larger contours remained shadowy and fragmented. Listeners



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 pendent cassette producer. We play all
 styles, the stranger, the better. Contact:
 Frank Pahl, P.O. Box 531, Wyandotte,

7.1. Invisible Music cassette
 label advertisement,
 mid-1980s.

7.2. Sound Choice
 "Unclassifieds,"
 mid-1980s.

received tapes from friends, and also from total strangers, and they usually made sense of these mysterious new sounds in the absence of any background information at all beyond the creator's name and address.

The brief existence of Generator, a retail store and performance space opened by “Gen” Ken Montgomery in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1984, illustrates the newly decentralized context of cassette culture. Generator eventually became a small, mail-order-only distribution company, but it briefly existed as a retail space for the cassette culture, offering the fruits of connections made through Montgomery’s long-running personal trading. Generator’s clientele reflected the density of experimental music listeners in downtown Manhattan, but its wares were not limited to the local scene. The tapes represented a diffused collection of isolated artists from anywhere and everywhere:

It was all from people who lived somewhere by themselves and didn’t have anyone to talk to, that really got into their thing, and sent out a cassette. And I remember at one point, someone came into Generator saying, “this could only happen in New York, New York is so rich [with] all this stuff here.” But most of the stuff—the most interesting things at least—wasn’t from any one place. The experimentation was coming from all over the world. It could be from Kansas or Spain or Long Island—it wasn’t that there were more things from New York, it was just that I was located there.

For musicians who typically received little or no local response for their recordings, linking up with artists from distant countries could be especially motivating. Daniel Menche, based in the Pacific Northwest, told me that the first letter he received after sending out copies of his first recording was from a Japanese tape trader, who turned out to be Tano Koji (MSBR), a well-known Noisician from Tokyo: “I couldn’t believe it. I had barely played any shows, and someone from JAPAN just wrote me! After that, it was just writing back and forth to people all the time—my postal bill got pretty significant each month.”

The flexibility of cassette recorders also encouraged new experimental recording practices, such as collecting “found sounds” encountered in everyday life and creating spontaneous montages by editing directly in handheld machines. Like instant cameras, cassette recorders could capture daily experience in an almost accidental way. As New York City-based cassette sound artist Onda Aki relates, these casual recording practices

could fuse the passing moments of everyday life into a layered sonic juxtaposition:

Going about my life, walking about town, on my travels, I would press the record button whenever I came across a sound that I liked, and magnetically imprinted its memory onto tape. It was like a diary of sound. . . . After a while, the tapes began to pile up. They just piled up and soon storage space became a problem, so I then took these recorded tapes and randomly began layering new sounds onto them. It was fun to simply collect these sounds recklessly, innocently. After repeating this for a while, I realized that I had now wound up with some incredible sonic collages that just invented themselves. (Onda 2002)

With cassettes, one could capture sounds without being a recording artist and create music without inscribing it in a permanent record.

Through the collective anonymity of the mail networks, cassette traders also developed new techniques of mixing that blurred the lines of musical authorship. Using the newly minted technology of four-track cassette machines (first with the Teac 144, followed by the Tascam Porta series a few years later), tapers began to create multisited recordings based in layering individual contributions on top of one another. Recordists circulated tapes through the mail, each creating a track to add to the previous ones in a sort of auditory Exquisite Corpse, erasing sounds and recording again until all tracks were full or someone decided the collaboration was finished. Mail-based concerts, such as Conrad Schnitzler's famous Cassette Concerts series in Berlin, presented a selection of taped music to a remote audience, which was live-mixed by a local tape operator. Other cassette concerts were live-mediated collaborations, in which a performer improvised along with a preprepared recording by a distant contributor.⁹ Cassette-only radio shows represented global "scene reports" as free-form sound mixes. "In 1988," Peter Courtemanche remembers, "I was doing radio, a weekly program of live noise art," which featured

feedback, intense collage, crashing and banging, tape loops, field recordings (found sound), ethereal phone-in manifestations, everything from rough recordings (to be used as components of a larger mix) to finished works and cassette releases. Ron Lessard of RRRRecords used to have an open call for cassette tapes. People from around the world would send him material, and he would use it live on-air and send

out copies of the resulting collages. In response to mail outs, artists sent back a variety of materials: audiotapes, CDs (which were very new back then), poems, books, zines, et cetera. (Courtemanche 2008)

Sometimes different cassettes were remixed into indistinguishable masses of sound. For example, when Sean Wolf Hill solicited cassettes for his *Tape Worm* compilation, he mixed the results freely by layering Noise tapes together with materials he qualified as “Pieces.” Hill describes his spontaneous editing process: “What I got was a mixture of things: some simply-read prose and poetry, some semi-produced prose and poetry (with sounds in the background), some very long noise pieces, some cut-up noise, some multi-track noise, one sampler-derived alteration of an interview, some live readings, some media collages from records, radio, and TV, and one spontaneous alone-in-the-car drunk-driving rave-up. . . . Somewhat at random, I began to record the various submitted chunks of sound (Pieces and Noise) on different tracks . . . [in] kind of a wave effect, with one wave dying and another beginning” (Hill 1992).

Over time, the aesthetics of the cassette culture became iconic with sonic effects of its informal distribution. Copying an analog tape reduces or “rolls off” the treble frequencies. When an analog tape is copied over and over, each successive reproduction becomes increasingly murky and noisy. As cassettes were distributed in a person-to-person chain, the sound gradually degraded in particular ways. Cassettes emphasized midrange frequencies, tape hiss, wow-and-flutter, and effects of cumulative distortion generally described as “lo-fi” sounds. These textures eventually became aesthetic markers of the “classic” Noise recordings of the 1980s, which heavily influenced the sound of contemporary “harsh” Noise.¹⁰ With each copy, the blurry contours of the original sound were further eroded, and the sound of Noise became more embedded within the cassette culture.

A STEREO RAINBOW OF JAPANOISE

In the 1990s, person-to-person mail exchanges ran parallel to a growing range of mail-order catalogs and fanzines, which eventually helped carve out a retail space for Noise in the indie music boom of the 1990s. In the United States, new distribution networks brought long-dormant underground styles to the surface of musical consumption in ways that threatened their integrity; 1991, to borrow the filmmaker Dave Markey’s ironic

phrase, was “the year Punk broke” (Markey 1992). In this context, participants in the cassette culture continued to amplify the value of marginality through linguistic and cultural differences of media circulation. If a cassette could contain anything—as James describes, “almost anything from anybody to anyone else”—the particular aesthetic priorities of the cassette culture grew out of the limitations of its self-reproducing network. As transnational media distribution strengthened in the 1990s, the anonymous networks of the cassette culture came under greater stress.

Thurston Moore (a member of the influential band Sonic Youth and an active cassette trader) reports the conflicted fallout from his 1996 remix of Ono Yoko’s track “Rising,” which incorporated material from Japanese Noise cassettes. Moore has long been an obsessive collector of Noise, and he regularly tours and collaborates with Japanese musicians.¹¹ After several tours of Japan and years of active postal correspondence, he had amassed, to his increasing anxiety, a huge collection of over nine hundred rare Japanese Noise cassettes (much of which, he admitted, he had never had a chance to listen to). When asked to provide a remix of Ono’s song, Moore decided to put the Noise cassette collection to use:

I went to this amazing studio in Manhattan. The Yoko tapes were there, as were two studio engineers prepared for a good two-days-minimum pro-remix. I brought my box of Noise. I pulled out cassettes, some wrapped in homemade gunk, and had the engineer fill up every open track on the song. There were many open tracks. I cranked Yoko’s voice, closed my eyes and listened to the playback. When I yelled, “Go!” the engineer would toggle-switch the stereo rainbow of MSBR, The Gerio-gerigege, Hanatarashi, Masonna, Solmania, Incapacitants, Violent Onsen Geisha, C.C.C.C., Hijokaidan, Aube, Monde Bruits and Keiji Haino into the mix, completely obliterating everything in its path. And when I yelled, “Stop!” he’d toggle it off. (Moore 1995:13)

But Moore’s remix of Japanese Noise into Ono’s song had to be sorted out retroactively with the individual participants: “Only problem: I didn’t ask any of the artists for their permission. I told the record company to get clearance from each artist, and to compensate them fairly. The label received two responses from Japan. One was, ‘Please use my music freely anywhere, anytime, anyplace!’ and the other was, ‘How dare Thurston Moore use our music and tell us afterward?!’ I responded to all who had animosity and everything was ironed out, but I did get called a weird Japanese name

by Hijokaidan” (Moore 1995:13). Moore had tapped into a seemingly endless flow of Japanese Noise as a dedicated participant in the cassette culture and found a creative way to project its anonymous force into a work by Japan’s most famous experimentalist. But in the process of remixing Ono’s song, the cassette culture was compressed into industrial contexts of authorship and intellectual property.

Ron Lessard’s release of a demo cassette by Yamatsuka Eye’s group Hanatarash on his RRR label in 1989 represents another controversial remediation of Japanese Noise cassettes. The story has become legendary gossip among Noise fans, and it reveals the fractures in the transition from the informal cassette culture of the 1980s to the burgeoning independent music circulation of the 1990s. As part of Lessard’s desire to see Noise “graduate” from the cassette culture to vinyl, RRR took existing cassette releases and made them available in retail distribution on LP and CD. As Lessard recalls:

Eye had mailed me a demo on a cassette with a simple hand written note that said “Will you release this as LP.” So I listened to the cassette and said, “Okay, this is great, no problem.” I wrote him back and said, “Okay, I will release this as an LP, please make me a cover.” And he made me a cover, and I put the record out. But I made the record from his cassette, and apparently it was a demo, and he had made a reel-to-reel master and didn’t tell me about it yet. If he had said “Don’t release the cassette, I’m making a master,” I wouldn’t have, but I misunderstood what he was trying to tell me.

Lessard’s story calls attention to the impact of linguistic and cultural differences in the transnational circulation of Noise. It also reflects the confusion between two overlapping contexts of musical distribution, represented by two different media formats. Eye viewed his cassette as an initial phase in the process of releasing an “official” record on an overseas label. He expected the recording would progress toward completion in several stages and presumed that nothing would be done until he sent a proper master on a professional media format (at that time, reel-to-reel tape), designed a cover, and so forth. Lessard, on the other hand, was used to receiving cassettes that were already being informally circulated as completed releases. RRR simply transferred their contents to the retail-ready formats of LP and CD, which enabled the cassettes to enter into a wider distribution to record stores. *Hanatarash 3* was caught between two overlap-

ping media contexts—the participatory democracy of the cassette culture, and the entrepreneurial retail distribution of independent music.

The amorphous anonymity of mail exchange had made it easy to imagine the cassette culture as an open global network that connected individuals through shared experiences of sound. Noise tapes were not integrated into the retail marketplace, and they also avoided or actively deconstructed social identifications based in regional history, individual biography, genre, performance style, and so on. But by the mid-1990s, mail-based tape networks began to be challenged by the introduction of the CD and the growth of transnational retail distribution around the new digital format.¹² Many tapers continued to circulate their work exclusively in person-to-person barter networks of cassettes. But the equanimity of the 1980s cassette culture was threatened by the growing retail distribution of independent music in the 1990s. Small labels began to distribute their products through major labels, and the border between underground and mainstream circulation became increasingly stratified.

Marcel Mauss's notion of the gift economy, as David Graeber has pointed out, showed that barter networks are not merely unsophisticated premodern versions of commodity markets. Rather, they are ethical systems whose subjects emphasize social relations over economic efficiency and refuse to calculate exchange purely in terms of profit (Graeber 2004:21). In the 1980s, the cassette was an ideal object to cultivate independent circulations of Noise though the peculiar "in-between-ness" of barter. But cassettes had to remain separate from other modes of distribution, in a self-enclosed loop within which participants could "exchange things without the constraints of sociality on the one hand, and the complications of money on the other" (Appadurai 1986:9). In a contemporary barter system, objects of exchange must be made equivalent to one another by creating an alternative system of value outside of existing market and social forces. Noise cassettes continued to be traded, one-to-one, in a decentralized participatory network: to get Noise, you had to make Noise. As Noise recordings began to circulate into the rapidly consolidating consumer market for independent music in the 1990s, tape traders closed ranks around their interpersonal contacts.

One of the most active Japanese participants was Kyoto-based Nakajima Akifumi, whose G.R.O.S.S. label distributed his own recordings (as Aube), as well as Noise cassettes from Japanese, North American, and European artists. Nakajima gathered his initial list of contacts from the cover infor-

mation on cassettes he bought through mail order: “During the late 1980s, I wrote a lot of letters to cassette labels, because I wanted to buy Noise cassettes from all around the world. . . . We communicated by letter often, and as we got to know each other, I began to write the artists whose cassettes I bought. I decided to make my own cassettes and sent everyone I knew letters about it, and eventually, through G.R.O.S.S., I turned from a big buyer into a big seller.”

But the terms *buying* and *selling* do not exactly capture how Nakajima distributed G.R.O.S.S. tapes into the cassette culture. He sent most tapes to overseas musicians with whom he had begun to cultivate relationships, and because almost all of these “customers” were producers themselves, direct sales were usually supplanted by a tape-for-tape barter exchange. About 80 percent of his cassettes were distributed outside of Japan—40 percent to North America and 40 percent to Europe, almost all mailed directly to individual Noise artists of Nakajima’s acquaintance. The remaining tapes were given away or traded with local Kansai musicians, and only a few cassettes were made available for purchase beyond the initial circle. Degrees of access were further marked by the quality of cassette tape. G.R.O.S.S. releases were often issued in a limited run of 50 type IV metal tapes, followed by a larger release of about 150 on cheaper type II chrome tapes. The notion of a “limited release” cassette tape seems completely arbitrary, because one obvious advantage of home-duplicated cassettes was the ability to generate new copies on demand. But because there were only two hundred tapes out there, a G.R.O.S.S. cassette was, from the first moment of its release, practically inaccessible to anyone who wasn’t already in the loop.

Mail exchange of cassettes remained a robust context for Noise distribution through the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, even as home-burned CD-Rs, digital audiotapes (DAT), and MiniDiscs began to circulate alongside cassettes. Although physical formats of digital media had become increasingly affordable to produce, cassettes retained an inertial force among those already linked into cassette culture. Compared with CD-Rs, too, tapes simply worked better for international mail. The plastic housing of a cassette tape was more robust and more difficult to damage in transit than a CD, and they were predictably compatible with existing consumer playback equipment. Perhaps most important, the cassette culture had come to “house” Noise in ways that discouraged the adaptation of newer formats of physical media. Tape networks, developed over two

decades, had helped a transnational group of participants create a self-constructed underground that sheltered Noise from the changing forces of the musical marketplace. In the space of only a few years, the cassette culture crashed directly into the social networks of the Internet, and then reformed in the shadow of online discourse.

REELING IN THE INTERNET

By the early 2000s, file sharing and other forms of digital distribution had radically rescaled the boundaries of global media circulation. Separated from physical formats, recordings could potentially be instantly available (to press a well-worn phrase into service) “to anyone with an Internet connection.” Digital networks opened up a range of new possibilities to define and represent independent music in intermediated contexts of websites, blogs, and discussion boards. Most of these networks were developed in North America by young fans who began to make Noise recordings—and even more crucially, information and critical discourse about Noise—newly accessible online. In this context, the resurgence of the cassette culture can be seen as a reaction against the concentration of knowledge production in online networks, which privileged face-to-face contact and live performance to regenerate a social network of Noise outside of the Internet. This meant that cassette trading could become provincialized in local music scenes, even as Noise’s online culture detached from existing contexts of transnational exchange.

By any account, Noise has a robust online presence, which continued to expand through the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Most first-time listeners now discover Noise online. Noisicians in any location can post their releases directly to web boards, MP3 blogs, and file sharing services like uTorrent and Soulseek. One can view video clips of shows on YouTube, read about the personal histories of performers, learn about upcoming performances, buy homemade electronic equipment, and discuss and trade recordings with other listeners on message boards, chat groups, and social networking sites. Curious browsers can find some form of historical information and access a variety of recordings almost immediately, even as the sudden abundance of online resources obviously clashes with underground values that prize obscurity and rarity (as in, for example, the ironic self-description of the MP3 blog *Terror Noise Audio* as “your one stop place for the best/hard-to-find extreme electronic music on the net”).¹³

Japanese participants were relatively isolated from emergent online networks. As Costa Caspary and Wolfram Manzenreiter showed in an early study of Noise's online circulation, the development of Noise websites in the mid- to late 1990s did not immediately contribute to greater communication between Japanese and North Americans (Caspary and Manzenreiter 2003). Furthermore, the rapid growth of online channels had a fragmentary effect on existing contexts of transnational exchange, as North American Internet users increasingly predominated in the circulations and web representations of Noise. North American Noise networks now dwarf the presence of Japanese Noise, which, even in the 1980s and 1990s, was defined more by rumor than anything else. Even when Japanese Noisicians have created websites, they often remain beyond the scope of U.S.-based search engines, and there are few Japanese posters on the most established message boards or online exchanges of recordings.

These intercultural gaps reframe the putatively global scale of an online public sphere. Language difference is a powerful obstacle, both in the early predominance of English-language sites and in the difficulty of representing Japanese characters in HTML.¹⁴ Despite common presumptions of its "ahead-of-the-curve" technological advancement, Japan was also slow to develop online infrastructures, and its Internet services took a different trajectory than that of U.S. networks. It might be expected that the tech-friendly and trend-obsessed Japanese would be early adopters of web-based technologies. But early Japanese Internet providers were stymied by Nippon Telegraph and Telephone's dominance of national telecommunications channels (Coates and Holroyd 2003; Ducke 2007). Even after a major government initiative in 2001 revamped platforms for Internet access over the next several years, Japanese have continued to use online services less than other industrialized publics (Esaki, Sunahara, and Murai 2008). Japanese computer users did not immediately take to online services like email and web browsing, in part because existing mobile phone (*keitai*) technologies were strongly established as resources for messaging and photo sharing (not to mention inspiring a new literary genre, the *ketai shōsetsu* or "phone novel"; Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005). Home computers and laptops remained relatively uncommon into the early 2000s, as Internet access was structured by phone-based platforms for streaming, downloading, and sending media, instead of the computer-based browsing and file sharing tools that developed during the same period in United States. The rapid development of 3G phone technologies also allowed the

Japanese music industry to create resources for phone-based music downloads, which further reduced user migration to online channels of file sharing and web distribution (Condry 2004; Manabe 2009). In addition to linguistic and cultural barriers, these differences of digital media infrastructure further slowed Japanese participation in Internet music circulations, including early peer-to-peer and torrent networks.¹⁵

The online presence of Noise in the early 2000s, then, was defined among North Americans who developed an intermediated network of fan-created web pages, MP3 and video blogs, discussion boards, and social networking sites (i.e., MySpace, Facebook, Bandcamp, Last.fm) and collectively authored representations (e.g., Wikipedia entries). The majority of websites about Noise—harshnoise.com, iheartnoise.com, noisefanatics.com, noiseguide.com, and a few others—have been organized and frequented by North American participants (as are Facebook groups such as Harsh Noise Enthusiasts). Although there are a handful of bilingual Japan-based sites, most are posted in English only.¹⁶ Even by the early 2010s, many well-known Japanese Noisicians do not yet have websites, and only a handful of Japanese labels have developed web-based sales portals to allow their recordings to be downloaded or ordered online. In addition, not many Japanese authors post recordings online or contribute directly to discussion boards about Noise. Individual posters can choose to remain anonymous, of course, and might change their names regularly (or lurk voyeuristically in ways that make their identity and even their presence difficult to register). But regular participants can quickly become known by their pseudonyms, and those who faithfully add or update material and engage in discussion with others rise quickly to the surface of group consciousness. The contributions of frequent posters are often referenced in links by other regular contributors, and frequently asked questions can quickly be resolved by pointing to an archive of earlier discussions about Noise.

Like the cassette culture, the online Noise network was built around the contributions of its most active participants. Whereas the cassette culture grew through barter exchange of recordings between fellow producers, Noise's online communities converged through open access to crowd-sourced knowledge. Individuals could participate in knowledge construction in ways that reflected little or no stake in Noise's complexities. In an especially ironic example, the wiki for the Japanese Noisician Guilty Connector was deleted from Wikipedia in April 2008 (although a dead link still lingers in the "List of Japanese artists" page). The user Jon513, who

nominated the article for deletion, argued that Guilty Connector was not “notable” under the criteria for “musicians” in the guidelines for the Wiki-Project on Music. At this time, the criteria for notability as a musician on Wikipedia included being the subject of “reliable” and “non-trivial” (e.g., non-self-published) articles and books; the production of music that has won awards, been certified gold, placed on national music charts, or received significant rotation on broadcast media; or the release of recordings on a major label or “one of the more important indie labels” that has “a history of more than a few years and with a roster of performers, many of which are notable.” Jon513’s challenge was cited under the tag “Musician fails WP:Music.”¹⁷

Predictably, the backlash against Internet Noise communities was forceful among those invested in earlier contexts of exchange. Even for Japanese participants, the problem was not necessarily the overabundance of North American representatives or their lack of connection to existing social networks of Noise. Few objected to the open exchange of Noise recordings on anonymous file sharing platforms either, and many took advantage of the opportunity to freely distribute their recordings digitally in peer-to-peer and torrent networks.¹⁸ Rather, it was the shift toward the production of discourse about Noise that violated the social and aesthetic values of the cassette culture. Noise recordings circulated online with other information—historical background, discographies, criticism, and other commentary—which predominated over the unmarked exchange of sound content. One Noisician complained bitterly (in the context of requesting anonymity in this book) about the advent of the Internet: “I hate information! Fuck the Internet world! When we were children, there were so many mysteries . . . that was fun for me. I want people to focus on *sounds*, not *information*.”

Despite these protests, Noise was an ideal subject for the “recursive publics” of online culture, which constantly generate, modify, document, and maintain their own infrastructures (Kelty 2008). Active participants construct the network by contributing new materials, correcting and expanding existing knowledge, reiterating common references, and developing open archival structures that can be searched and linked to other bodies of shared information. Community formation also produces conflicts and internal struggles. Working against the consensus of crowd-sourced knowledge are “trolls” and “griefers” who take advantage of the transparent open process of Internet dialogues by posting antagonistic,

irrelevant, and disruptive messages on Noise discussion forums and edit online content by replacing commentary with nonsensical and often prurient responses, “just for the lulz” (just for laughs).¹⁹ For most who came in search of Noise online, this simply meant that a Google search would produce more results. Even if many of these links did not necessarily match up with one another, they formed a breadcrumb trail back into the loops of online discourse.

In this context, the audiocassette returned Noise to the underground with a vengeance. Through its persistent materiality, the cassette helped listeners imagine a participatory network that was not just socially and aesthetically divergent but seemingly incommensurable with online circulation. Even as the contents of Noise cassettes were mediated into open digital networks, the tapes themselves became increasingly inaccessible.

PLAYING HARD TO GET

The cassette is a symbol of everything that independent music once was (but is not), and everything that the Internet could be (but is not): something free from commercial production, and also something not immediately available—a thing that takes effort to find, but that you can hold on to, and that stays in place. In this, the cassette mirrors the cultural authenticity of the vinyl LP, which remains the strongest contemporary icon of analog music and its most tangible fetish object. But unlike cassettes, LPs evoke the face-to-face sociality of the record shop, a public sphere of music consumption that remains a crucial aspect of their continued appeal.²⁰ In contrast to the nostalgic audiophilia of vinyl—often claimed to possess superior “natural” sound and acoustic “warmth” lacking from digital reproductions—the cassette represents sonic degradation and material flimsiness, marking its lesser status as a medium of musical preservation. Because it must be physically traded, transported, and stored, the cassette tape embodies the creative limits and the efforts of exchange that separate Noise from digital circulations. In a context of open digital access, the cassette serves as a reminder of Noise’s aesthetics of inaccessibility.

Noise cassettes are manipulated and reconstructed to represent the “hard-to-get” qualities of their circulation. In their overworked physical forms, they sometimes seem more like conceptual artworks than containers of musical content (figure 7.3). Since the early days of the cassette culture, Noise tape makers have transformed the physical appear-

ance of cassettes by altering or building onto their cases or onto the plastic housing of the cassettes themselves. Cassettes are wrapped in gauze, burned and bent, glued to books or leaves, and hung in spools of wire. Tapes are covered in paint or hardened epoxy, requiring the listener to chip the excess material away and possibly damage the housing beyond repair before it can even be played. By complicating the listener's access to the sound within, the physical design of Noise cassettes symbolizes their separation from the world of musical commodities. Sometimes the sound is literally inaccessible—for example, by encasing a cassette in concrete or melting the housing so it cannot be played at all. In other cases, recorded content is completely absent. *This Is Shaking Box Music / You Are Noisemaker*, a release by Yamanouchi Juntaro's Geriogerigege, consisted of a metal box full of one hundred blank "C-o" tapes; as the title suggests, recipients must make the Noise for themselves.²¹

Other cassettes simply make the listener work harder to access the recorded sound. For one tape on his Soundprobe label, Seth Misterka attached each copy (of twenty in the limited edition of the release) to a small board, screwing the cassette down through the sprocket holes with two large wood screws. ("I felt like it should take a little more effort to hear this," he told me, "since it took so much more effort get it out there.") A few altered cassettes are literally unique, having been issued in an edition of a single copy. Although Noise cassettes can be released as one-off editions and collected as singular pieces, they rarely cross over to be cataloged or sold as artwork. On the other hand, there is not enough critical mass in Noise circulations to standardize the values of cassettes in an independent collectors' market (like that of jazz records, for example). Instead, Noise cassettes remain unintegrated, floating between separated individual encounters. Their appearance in the marketplace is strange and divergent, like a unique personal mix tape that somehow accidentally turned up for sale.

Some Noise labels record new releases over discarded copies of commercial cassettes. The RRR*ecycled* series, for example, was created by dubbing new recordings by Noise artists over random cassettes by pop megastars (e.g., REO Speedwagon). As part of a series of "cheap Noise," RRR*ecycled* tapes are reproduced on misaligned recording decks, and ghostly echoes of the original tracks seep up through the imprinted layers of Noise. Faint traces of Mötley Crüe can be heard beneath the blasts of sound on a Massonna recording, or the tail end of a track by Cher will suddenly pop up at the end of a tape by Burning Star Core. Of course, any Noise recording,



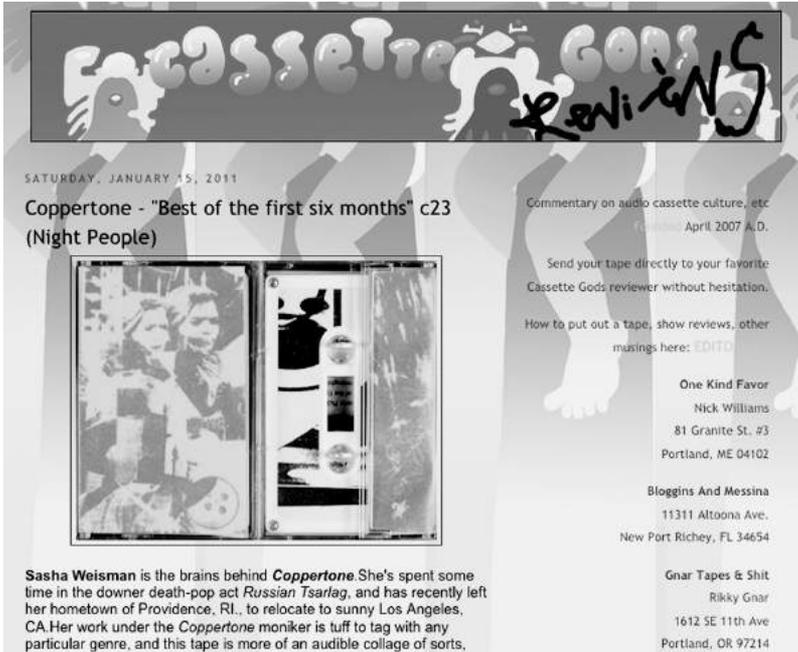
7.3. Cassette tapes from the collection of Generator Sound Art.
Photos by the author.

too, could easily be dubbed over and erased by something else. The cassette calls out to the listener's judgment, to decide whether this particular thing contains something singular and beautiful, or something cheap and disposable. It inspires attention to the ephemeral qualities of musical creativity in a commodity cycle, asking its recipients to recognize the fleeting life of a sound that begins to fade away almost as soon as it has been heard. But the cassette also stresses the personal effort involved in creating something and giving it to someone else. The handicraft of analog reproduction reminds listeners of the need for social reciprocity in participatory networks. If you're going to bother to hold on to Noise, the cassette seems to tell its recipients, make it a handle to something else.

HOME TAPING IS KILLING MUSIC (BUT SAVING NOISE)

Since the end of the first decade of the 2000s, there has been a resurgence of new Noise labels in cities across the United States, including Heavy Tapes, American Tapes, Fuck It Tapes, Baked Tapes, Hanson Records, Hidden Fortress, Gods of Tundra, and many others. Most of these are heavily oriented toward cassettes; many release cassettes exclusively, often focusing on productions of a specific local scene. Prices tend to be particularly low in comparison with other formats—between \$3 and \$7 per cassette—and labels typically trade as many tapes as they sell. Like the 1980s cassette culture, labels often release cassettes in limited editions of fifty to seventy-five tapes, and sometimes as few as ten. One might wonder what kind of public could be formed by such a limited context of exchange, or whether this circulation should be considered public at all. But Noise cassettes are remediated into a parallel world of digital representation on the Internet. Tapes are photographed and described in online reviews, and their sonic contents are digitized and posted for download on Noise web boards, file sharing services, or cassette-oriented MP3 blogs such as *Cassette Gods* (figure 7.4), *Chewed Tapes*, and *Noise Not Music*. Cassette labels post images and sound samples on their websites, and some make the contents of cassettes available for online downloading. Noise cassettes, then, did not remain offline, but fed back into digital circulation.

Mirror Universe Tapes, for example, sells cassette tapes online via mail order but includes free download codes that allow the purchaser to download a digital version (“we ripped the tape so you don’t have to”).²² The majority of Mirror Universe’s tapes are limited to one hundred copies or fewer, and most cassettes are listed as sold out. Many can be hunted down on blogs that repost the cassettes as streaming audio or provide download links hosted at file lockers (RapidShare, MediaFire, MultiUpload, and so on). This does not necessarily constitute a digital archive of Noise recordings, which might be permanently accessed online. Download links go out of date quickly and blog posts—as well as the blogs themselves—disappear. But more important, the physical instability of the cassette reveals its origins in a hidden world of Noise that cannot properly be accessed on the Internet. For example, a post on Patient Sounds’ site announced the availability of a new four-tape package: the cassettes could be ordered via mail for \$25, but they were also freely accessible for immediate download. The poetic blurb for the release contrasts the openness of digital distribu-



7.4. Front page of *Cassette Gods* blogspot site, January 15, 2011.
 Courtesy of George Myers.

tion with the limitations of physical exchange that represent the promise of social connections in the real “scene”:

remember to download for free. . . .
 forever . . .
 and give to your friends
 but remember that we are only making 100 of each of these tapes EVER
 so
 order up friends
 and see you soon²³

Online remediations of cassette culture join two seemingly contradictory movements, which tack differently toward the goal of musical independence. Noise tapes revitalize the person-to-person barter exchange of physical media (“we are only making 100 of each of these tapes EVER”) to renew a self-contained North American independent music scene based in face-to-face social contact (“see you soon”). At the same time, their self-contained limits encourage a profusion of Internet circulations, in which

cassettes are digitized, cataloged, reviewed, discussed, photographed, and redistributed in an unrestricted context (“download for free . . . and give to your friends”). The social copresence of contemporary local Noise scenes is imbued with these ghostly traces of digital circulation. In the new cassette culture, independent media exchange is balanced against “virtual” online formations of knowledge.

The idea of a digital cassette complicates the social mediation of the Internet that Henry Jenkins describes as “convergence culture.” Media convergence broadly describes the concentration of media networks in centralized infrastructures—Internet resources such as blogs, web pages, search engines, and so forth—which generate new audiences and combine different formats in “intermediated” modes of consumption and representation (Higgins 1989 [1966]; Jenkins 2006; van Dijk 1999). As a medium that is, at least in its material form, divergent from digital circulations, the Noise cassette puts pressure on the convergence of online culture in two ways. First, it represents an idealized object of musical creativity that cannot be fully absorbed into new media, even as its contents are remediated for digital exchange. Second, its obstinate material form requires Noise audiences to maintain systems of distribution based in face-to-face encounters. Cassette networks appear to occupy a separate world from the Internet, even as their conditions of circulation cannot fully diverge from those of online access. In this, the contemporary Noise cassette flips the circulatory project of the 1980s cassette culture on its head. Where the cassette was once the anonymous vehicle of global grassroots media, it is now a talisman of the discrete local scene.

Cassettes tapes highlight the coincidental, ephemeral qualities that accrue to social participation in a musical underground. Person-to-person exchanges distinguish individual constructions of Noise from the collective archives of digitally accessible materials. Like many other North American Noisicians, Jessica Rylan (a.k.a. Can’t) rarely buys or downloads recordings but chooses instead to trade cassettes directly with fellow performers in the course of her touring schedule. She described tape trading as a way of restricting her musical consumption to a network of friends: “I guess I’m prejudiced about recordings. It’s so easy to make recordings now that in a way, it’s hard to listen to a recording unless I know something about it and have some personal connection—like I know who made it, or kind of what it’s about, or that a good friend liked it or something.” In an overflowing production of musical objects, cassettes carry the uncommon

virtue of allowing their listeners to reconstruct Noise in a sphere of personal encounter. By limiting her consumption of recordings to tapes made by friends (or friends of friends), Rylan stresses the heightened meanings of a “handmade” social context.

Noise cassettes are distributed through unpredictable person-to-person encounters that undermine standard timetables of media production. Rather than producing tapes as “releases” in a media cycle, Noisicians make tapes available on an ad hoc basis through exchange at shows or on the street. These do not always represent the latest “album” by an individual artist. They can be mix tapes, older solo projects, collaborations or “splits” with other artists, or unique one-offs that are made for a single listener. One Noisician described cassettes as “calling cards” that are given to make people aware of his work in general. As he explained, the gift of a cassette is also imbued with a social force that surpasses its content: “It’s something that I can just give you, that I can hand to you and you can take home and maybe listen to; but even if you don’t, it’s like—here’s something between me and you, that I gave to you.” Playback depends on a technical requirement that further distinguishes participants in the cassette culture by requiring that they own and maintain obsolete hardware. After attending a number of live shows and slowly amassing a collection of tapes given by potential friends and collaborators, an uninitiated new listener must find a way to listen. Tape decks equip the listener to access the hard-to-get sounds of the cassette culture. But they also allow their owners the possibility of further participation by recording their own tapes to trade with others.

Beyond one’s own contacts, it is difficult to keep track of what is going on in the cassette culture. To really know where a tape is coming from, you have to receive it from someone personally or put it into circulation yourself. As the local scene is brought into relief, the horizon of Noise’s larger circuitry becomes increasingly blurry, and distant contacts can easily fade into the background. Of course, this distinction was always the point: to close the loops of participatory media back down to personal experience. Standing on this self-determined ground, a larger world of Noise is built from coincidental encounters and mysterious discoveries. As one Brooklyn-based taper put it, “We know most of the people in our circle, and it’s a big city . . . [but] maybe, on the opposite side of the street, there’s a parallel circle” (Jarnow 2009).

ENJOY IT (WILL YOU HAVE IT)

Social networks, and their objects, change quickly. In less than a decade, the audiocassette was transformed from a standard, taken-for-granted commodity of popular media to a resistant emblem of underground culture. Its visual trace has become increasingly important in contemporary art and design, sometimes as a kitschy, retro item of nostalgic irony. For some, the image of the cassette reflects the superficial innocence of 1980s pop culture and channels a purer, simpler, and more authentic relationship to popular music consumption. But the cassette is also a symbol of populist resistance to copyright law and corporate enforcements of intellectual property ownership, symbolized by a recent flood of ironic appropriations of the famous cassette-and-crossbones logo, originally developed by British record industry groups as part of an antbootlegging campaign in the mid-1980s. In one example, the online advocacy group Downhill Battle used the image in a T-shirt campaign to raise money for the defendants of copyright violation lawsuits, but they changed the famous caption “Home Taping Is Killing Music (and It’s Illegal)” to “Home Taping Is Killing the Music Industry (and It’s Fun)” (figure 7.5).

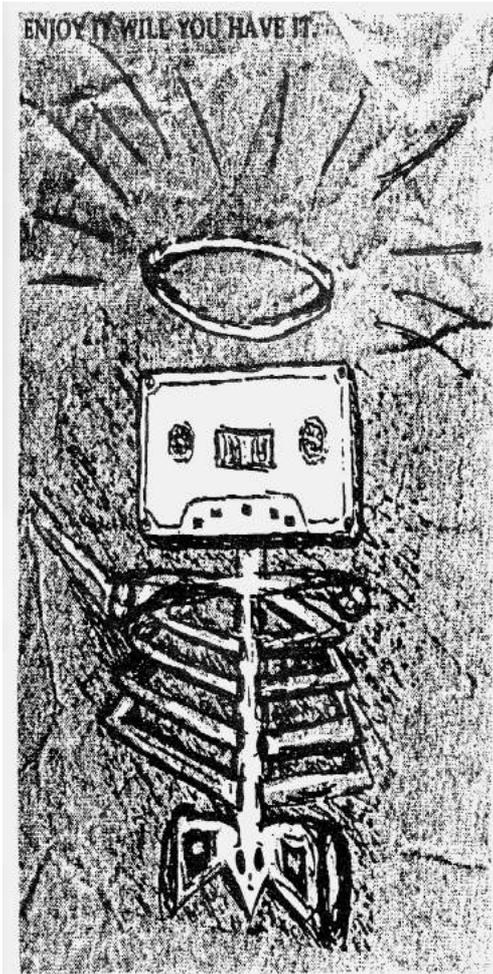
In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the commodity form of music seems increasingly up for grabs. Corporate-driven political anxiety about digital media impacts the growth of online music communities, even as media piracy and access to illegal content become entrenched in everyday life. In January 2012, this was marked by the takedown of file-hosting service MegaUpload, a few days after the public pushback against proposed antipiracy legislation forced the U.S. Congress to reconsider laws that would restrict access to sites and networks accused of copyright infringement.²⁴ National regulations of Internet media have influenced geopolitical developments, as well as impacting the subjectivities of citizens around the world. As musical circulations continue to become concentrated in informal online economies, they also endanger their own continuity, as entire channels of exchange and consumption are made illegal (even if, as in the case of MegaUpload, most content is not illegal). In this context, any circulation that appears to be independent from the extreme freedoms and controls of the Internet can generate a powerful, almost magical context of social remediation.

The cassette returns attention to social values of underground media that have been radically redefined in the context of digital networks. It



7.5. “Home Taping Is Killing the Music Industry” T-shirt.
Courtesy of Nicholas Reville of Downhill Battle.

demonstrates how the marginal, seemingly inconsequential productions of Noise contribute to the cultural imaginaries of participatory media. **Cassette culture shows that participation in a social network is a hard-fought aspect of creative work and not just a given aspect of communication.** Its limitations also show that accessibility and creativity do not always progress in equal measure and reveal how the Internet can overshadow and restrict coterminous forms of offline social exchange. Finally, the cassette has allowed Noise to duck back and forth between contexts of online circulation and the darkness of a different kind of anonymous sociality. Its bearers carry the flame of Noise forward, into the productive mysteries of future undergrounds.



7.6. "Enjoy It Will You Have It," drawing by mR. dAS from Big City Orchestra's *The Four Cassettes of the Apocalypse* (1991; The Subelectrick Institute 1). Courtesy of mR. dAS.