



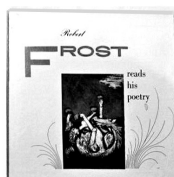
By C.J. Huss

Chapter Eleven

Tape It To The Limit/One More Time

If you are into music—and if you aren't, why are you reading this newsletter, right? Or wandering the aisles of the Pennsylvania Music Expo seeking out yet another (and another, and another...) recording of such?

Or not even music. You may be a collector who is fascinated beyond all reason with, say, the spoken word, perhaps recordings of famous people speaking famous words, or even possibly more beguilingly the spoken words of the far more ordinary man, woman or child.



On a number of occasions now over the past few years, I've transferred into digital form (usually a CD) the spoken, or sung, or otherwise vocalized sounds of a number of people's family members, often children at holiday gatherings or birthday parties, school plays or other events, or perhaps simply engrossed with toys in a bathtub as a parent gazes fondly at the their tiny progeny singing happily as they play.

Or it may be a person himself, playing in a makeshift rock band with some high school friends, smiling widely as they listen to some crazy and joyous times gone by, an aural photograph/film of a personal era now normally existing only in their distant, almost dream-like memories.

Or perhaps not a musician yourself, but deeply enamored of what musicians create, you started out your life of collecting it via the radio, searching out and finding stations that played the music that stirred your soul or simply made you want to dance like nobody was watching. I know that was one way that I got started, and it would not have been possible but for one critical technological innovation that came about not too long before my older sister and I came to join the planet, and being the elder, she got the chance to take advantage of it first.

It was a Christmas, I'm pretty sure. Could have been her birthday, but this gift surely wasn't cheap, so it was more likely to be a year-end variety of event. It was about a foot wide, perhaps 10 inches deep and 8 inches high, wooden, white and green, and when you opened the lid, inside was — a microphone and magnetic magic.



It was my sister's first tape recorder, and to the best of my memory, my family's.

She got it plugged in, spooled up the two five-inch diameter tape reels, picked up the little ivory-white rectangular microphone, pressed "RECORD". Motor whirrs to life, tape flows. I have no idea what was said, probably something like, "Testing? Testing? Are we recording now? Hello? The light is blinking, it must be recording, right?"

Matters not, like I said, magic. You talk into this thing, or sing, or laugh, and the next day you show it to your friends, then your friends do, and you wind back and play the tape and there you are, hearing your voice(s) like others hear you for the first time, a strange and enlightening experience.

Yes, that was then, way back in the late 1950's or way early '60's. Nowadays, I suspect you'd be hard pressed to find someone over the age of one or two even slightly surprised to hear what their own voice sounds like, since contemporary recording and playback technology makes that a very early-on occurrence in our lives. It's normal now, just like people walking on the moon. Technology so old it very nearly creaks. Nothing special, right?

Tell that to those people with the kids singing in the bathtub while by chance their mom had this new-fangled tape-recording gadget running while they did. Play back that tape today, or a copy of same, and tears may start to trickle down. I used these terms just a short while before, but they bear repeating — Tape recordings are aural photography, and of no less artistic and historical value than the photographic arts, and there are millions of them out there.

And they are slowly but surely fading away.

You know, on the technical side of things, the concept itself is pretty simple. Many years before there was tape, some clever soul realized that if electricity and magnetism are always linked together on a quantum physical level, and that one can be transformed into the other, it should be possible to make the electrical signal from a microphone transform into a magnetic version that could be stored on some manner of magnetic material, like, say, iron or steel wire. Would that work? One way to find out, namely try it and see...

...and wire recording was brought into being. Yes, that's right, before tape there was wire. Spools of it,



threading by a motor from one to the other, passing over a critical part called a "head" that could either put the magnetism into the wire, or transfer it back into

electricity again, to be amplified and eventually come out of a loudspeaker. Amazing, but — sound quality was on the mediocre side, plus the friction of the wire as it passed over the head had this tendency to wear a groove into it fairly promptly, necessitating its replacement more often than preferred.

And then... some other genius or collection of them came up with this thought — suppose we grind up iron into really fine dust, mix it with a suitable kind of adhesive and paint it onto a long, thin strip of plastic, you know, a "tape"? It would be flat, so you could fit way more of it onto a reel, and there would be a lot less friction on the head, which would last longer. Annnnd.... Ooo! Ooo! The wider the tape, the more magnetic surface, the stronger the signal we can record on it! Wowzers!! Now how about.....

Whoa, whoa... Wait a minute—stop with the history bit and... what was that about "fading away"?

Hey, who's telling this story anyway? I... oh, oh, okay. I was getting to that, I promise, I just got caught up in the moment. But if one doesn't know history, one may be doomed to... yeah, that one. Anyway, here's the shorter explanation. The more rambly/detailed one will need to wait until next column, and as usual, you have been warned, so plan accordingly.

Tape magnetic formulations got steadily better over the decades from the days my sister and I played with recorders as kids, and those modern tapes hold up much better over time, however... all tape recordings suffer from a common, inherent limitation, which is they tend to slowly self-demagnetize as the years pass. Take a cassette tape, for example, that you recorded back in the 1980's and pop it into your deck and press play.

Brill Building: Home of the Tunes

One of the most legendary addresses in music history, located in New York City, is 1619 Broadway, most affectionately known as THE BRILL BUILDING. During the 'golden age' of rock & roll, in the late 1950s – mid 1960s, this was a mecca where thousands of songs were born, with tunesmiths and publishers trying to create the next 'hit.' Long before Don Kirshner was known for hosting a weekly TV rock concert, he and partner Al Nevins (of 'The Three Suns,' trio), headed up Aldon Music, and signed up some of the greatest songwriters of all time, Gerry Goffin & Carole King, Barry Mann & Cynthia Weil, Neil Sedaka & Howard Greenfield, naming a few. Their songs became standards, as they related to the average teenager, embracing their values, interests, and emotions. In 2015, during a road trip to the 'big apple,' as I stood in front of The Brill Building, I could feel the music, and only imagine the stories, those walls could tell!



What, the deck doesn't work any more, which is why you haven't played any tapes for years? Well, sadly, that's not unusual. Let's pretend, then, 'cause I can pretty much guess what you may hear if it did work. The voices or the music will spring forth from the speakers as usual, but, the sound may be strangely dull, muffled even. Something wrong with the deck? Maybe, but far more likely your tape has been self-erasing. The higher sound frequencies erase themselves first, and then the middle ranges. After enough years pass, especially on cassettes, it will become hard to understand some words. Open reel tapes hold up much better, but they will eventually fade away too.

What to do? Despair ye not, for there is still some time left to rescue many if not most of these pieces of history. More on that in the next issue, along with some information about the variety of critical machines that play tapes back and allow them to be copied in a more permanent form.

Take care, play fair, preserve the air,

-- CJ



A Voice in the Background



She was one of Ray Charles back-up singers 'The Raelettes,' in 1963 recorded the original version of "The Shoop Shoop Song" (later covered by Betty Everett), and she was best known as the wailing voice in The Rolling Stones classic song, "Gimme Shelter." The name of this multi- talented woman, MERRY CLAYTON. As with many vocalists who came to fame behind the shadows of the stars, Merry had her chance to shine in 1972 as actress, starring as the 'acid queen,' in the London version of The Who's "Tommy."

Over the years, her voice was heard on hits such as Ringo Starr's "Oh My, My," and Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama." Finally, in 1987 with the success of the movie "Dirty Dancing," Merry enjoyed success with the single "Yes" charting at #45 on Billboard. In 2013, she was prominently featured in the highly acclaimed documentary "20 feet From Stardom."

Both articles courtesy: Eddie Collins/Mr. Ed's Solid Gold Scrapbook and Boss Jock Radio.