



By C.J. Huss

Chapter Thirteen

Tape It To The Limit/One More Time Are We There Yet?

Ahh, what a question. See, that's the thing with anything that involves technology—it's always changing, adapting, growing, taking over, falling down, getting up again, getting better, more versatile, saving lives or simply making them better or even just entertaining us so we can get our aching psyches through another day.

But then... another generation passes, and the older one oft laments what it misses, the younger one wishes the older one would stop talking about the "good old days, when..."

~sigh~ Picky, picky picky.

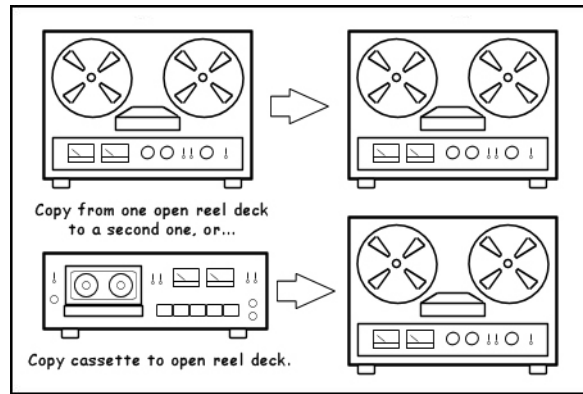
So, no, we aren't there yet. We're never there yet, there's always that road ahead, with it's many forks, or possibly sporks. (Anyone remember sporks? Yes? No? If the latter, simply go to that implement of technology known as "The Google" and type in the word, and all shall be revealed, or at least as much all as is at the moment.)

That road ahead, unfortunately for those of us of a certain generation as regards magnetic tape and recording sound with it, is just about to come to rest in a cul-de-sac. In the previous two chapters, I went into the basic technical reasons why this is the case, and in this concluding (?) chapter I'll try to provide some suggestions into how to make those captured moments of time on those tapes move on into another future.

Many people automatically assume that magnetic tape recording is always "analog", being that the machines most of us are familiar with are very mechanical, like a record player is. Motors whirr, the tape slips past the tape heads, a pinch roller guides the tape onto a second reel or hub, all very visual, very mechanical, very analog. But magnetic recording can also be digital, and that can be achieved in a variety of ways, by a variety of machines. One of those machines is even the one that right at this moment I am using to write these words, and it happens to be one of the best ways to save those old tapes.

Yes, it's a computer, which classically stores its data on a magnetic recording based component called a hard drive. If you own such a machine, then it's normally the top choice out of a few others available to get the transferring job done. Why? Let's first go through the alternate options, noting their benefits and trade-offs.

1. Copy your old tapes onto newer tapes. This will work best if you own a still properly functioning open reel deck, or at bare minimum a high-end, premium cassette deck as the receiving device.



Benefits: You may already own these components, so as long as you have new or erasable tapes available, you can copy from one machine to another, so there's no real monetary investment required.

Trade-offs: You need two machines, one to play back, and one to record. Only a few hardy audiophiles or collectors have more than one deck, and if they do, it's usually one open reel and one cassette deck. Recording from cassette to open reel is the best choice here, and you should use the highest speed available on the open reel machine.

The other trade off is this is an analog-to-analog copy, and so whatever the deck arrangement is, the background noise on the copy will be higher than on the source tape.

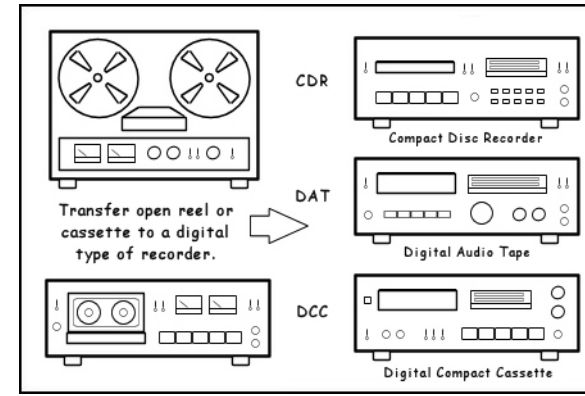
2. Copy to a hardware based CD recorder.

Benefits: Now you'll be recording digitally, so the noise floor of the recorder drops by a huge amount over the older analog technologies. Recordable CDs are inexpensive now, unlike when they were first introduced.

Trade-offs: Once moderately popular, these standalone CD recorders are all-but gone from the marketplace, so unless you own one already, this is no longer a very practical choice. Another issue is that if editing is required, that can be difficult to do easily, since once the CD starts being recorded on, you can't really pause or stop it.

3. Copy to a DAT or DCC recorder. ("Digital Audio Tape" and "Digital Compact Cassette")

Benefits/Trade-offs: Same as the CD recorder just mentioned, but worse, in that neither of these formats hung around for the long term. But if you have one, these are digital recorders, and you can pause or stop them if needed for editing, unlike most CD recorders.



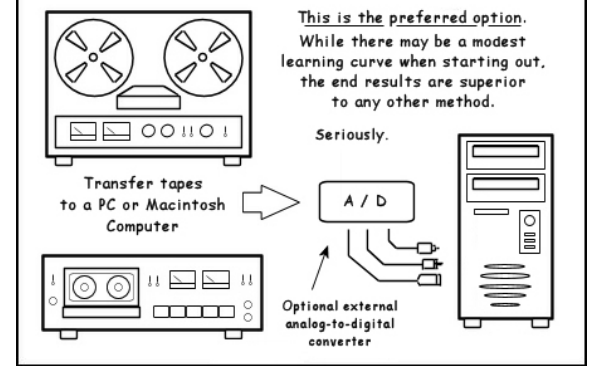
4. Send your tapes out to a commercial service that makes these transfers.

Benefits: They have all the needed equipment. As long as the rates are agreeable to you, this is the easiest way to get the job done.

Trade-offs: Can be expensive if you have a large number of tapes. Also, there is no ability to edit the transfer. If you have a tape where you only want half of what's recorded on it, what you get back is a literal copy of whatever the whole source was. They feed your tape into a machine, a CD or data disc comes out, que sera.

5. Use a conventional PC or MAC computer that you own to perform the transfer.

Benefits: You have near-complete control over the transfer process, including easy editing with software and other possible software-based processing that may be able to provide some audio restoration if needed. The end results can be very good to excellent quality-wise.



Oh, dear, these all sound—involved. Are they really? Maybe I should just do #4, if it doesn't cost too much? Well, you'll need to ponder a bit and decide, but don't automatically rule out the best choice, #5. The key thing is to already have the computer, or obtain one. The neat thing is that to transfer audio does not require you own the latest/greatest/most powerful machine available. Why?

Remember the road ahead I started this column out with? Technology moving relentlessly on, and all that? Audio is, technologically, simple for even an old PC to do. I do my own transfers with an XP-based desktop that is over ten years old, using software that is of about the same age. No, I'm not kidding, and the transfer quality is excellent. The machine does need a good quality audio input board, or external A-to-D converter, plus a good CD recorder drive. But other than that, once the input audio is changed into digital form—everything after is using software that with some free time and a little patience you can get the hang of.

And—oh, dear redux—this was to be the last column in this tape series, but—

I'll be back! Until then, watch out for those wily sporks, folks! -- CJ

Pictures from Lancaster Roots & Blues Sunday, October 17



Clockwise, from left: Dillweed, North Mississippi Allstars, The Ogham Stones and Shemekia Copeland.

(All photos, courtesy Karen Hostetter)

More coverage, see the Flip Side