Marc Masters is the author of the book "High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape" (University of North Carolina Press, 2023). This interview with the Library of Congress was conducted on March 27, 2024.

Library of Congress: I assume that audio tape arrived was first and then audio cassettes happened after, correct?

Marc Masters: Yes, magnetic tape was invented before [cassettes].

The first cassette that we think of as the cassette now, came out in 1963; it was called the "compact cassette." That was the official name of it, made by Lou Ottens and his team of engineers at Phillips in the Netherlands.

There had been other kinds of cassettes, but nothing that was this small and which could hold this much music and still had a decent amount of quality to it. That's all the things that [Ottens] combined from other formats. Before, there were formats that were good quality, but they were either single reel or they were open reel without a cassette around them. Ottens combined technologies. He didn't really "invent" any specific part of it, but he invented what we use now.

LC: How soon would cassettes begin to be adopted? Was the intent always to be for the consumer market?

MM: Ottens assumed, at first, that cassettes were just going to be for spoken-word and dictation and things like that because they didn't think the sound quality was good enough for professional recording, which it wasn't. But cassettes caught on pretty quickly anyway, because a lot of artists realized they could record music on it themselves, even if it wasn't going to be great quality. And then people realized they could record each other's music and records from each other and things like that.

It took off mostly by the end of the '60s and then really into the '70s.

The main reason that cassettes are now the standard format is, at first, Philips thought, "Well, this is going to be our proprietary cassette [but] like everybody will have different formats." But then Sony came to them and said, "We'd like to use it, but we're not going to pay you a lot for it." And Phillips decided, if we could get Sony to use our design, even if we gave it to them, it's probably going to make this the standard format.

Which is what it did and so, ultimately, in the long run, Philips probably made more money that way than they would have if they charged people to use the design.

LC: How quickly did the use of commercial music come to the cassette?

MM: Probably within a decade or so of it being introduced. I'm not sure of the exact date when labels started putting pre-recorded music on it, but that was a big thing, which they did a little with 8 tracks. That combined with the fact that people started using tape to record each other's music, really took off in the early '70s, I would say.

LC: Was the cassette a hard sell to the record company and the public or were they open to it?

MM: I mean record companies were certainly happy to jump on the idea of reselling music in a new format, which they always are. They'd do that with CDs too. But they also were very panicked about people taping records at home.

In fact, in Britian at the time, there was a whole campaign--"Home Taping is Killing Music." They came up with that.

The funny thing is that these ads that would say that "Home Taping is Killing Music," would say and it's illegal but it never really was. I mean, it was a gray area at the best, but there weren't really laws that said you couldn't do it, especially in the privacy of your own home. I mean, how are they going to enforce that anyway?

But the companies did try a bunch of different things. They tried these campaigns to shame people into not using them. They tried to get taxes passed on the purchase of blank tapes, and that happened in some countries, but it didn't really stick because there were so many other ways that you could use tapes other than just recording music and why should you be taxing the people who aren't recording music or doing anything wrong? They even tried to make versions of tapes that would, if you taped a record onto, there would be this high pitch[ed] sound.

LC: Really?

MM: Yeah. But that didn't catch on either because the manufacturers could easily just make a deck that would surpass that and bypass that stuff. Eventually, I think that the industry kind of realized…

Well, you know, they freaked out about radio in the beginning too. And then it turned out radio was a great promotional tool…. It's arguable whether they lost money. I don't think they did. I think [taping] helped them more than it hurt them….

LC: It's like with video cassettes--all the movie studios were up in arms about them at first then it gave them a whole second arm of revenue.

MM: Oh, absolutely. And it kept their catalogs alive too. I mean I remember when, if you didn't see something in the theater, you'd have to hope it got back to the theater again, or that was it.

LC: What drew you do to this subject?

MM: Well, my formative years were in the '80s, so tapes were pretty big then. I shared tapes with friends, taped records of friends, taped shows, things like that. I always liked tapes and I never really abandoned them even after they kind of dipped down in popularity. That was always interesting to me. And I always thought it was weird that there's nobody's written a full-on book about them. There's been some but nothing really like mine.

Then, I write a lot about experimental music for different websites and I was finding a lot of these small labels—one-person labels, two-person labels--were turning to cassettes because manufacturing their albums on cassette is cheaper and faster. Pressing vinyl's gotten so expensive and the plants are all clogged up.

So that was a pretty exciting to discover. It was pretty neat to see a bunch of people who didn't grow up with cassettes turning to them now. Between those two things I kind of thought it'd be neat to show people who are into it now where it came from and to show people who used to be into it that [cassettes are] actually still a relevant format.

LC: My cassette tapes always squeaked after a while. Was that a common thing or was it just me?

MM: Tapes have so many weird anomalies. That's one of them, sure, and people's tapes have stretched and you could repair them sort of, although that was always kind of hard. But at least you could do it. You can't do it with a record.

LC: How important was the Walkman to the cassette's evolution-revolution?

MM: Very important. Oh, yes, super important. For sure. I mean, well, first, [the Walkman] wouldn't have been able to happen without cassettes, so that was big for cassettes and then it also made people buy more cassettes because that was a way to carry their music around. And it also just this paradigm shift of the way we absorb music and communicate with music and because, before then, you couldn't even take your music outside your house. You were subjected to what was on the radio and that was kind of it. And, then, this whole idea of music as an extension of yourself, like your musical taste being part of your personality, I think that really developed with the Walkman. And you could make a mixtape; you could make your own music to carry around with you. There was this idea of it being your own soundtrack too. And it's funny because, in my book, I have a section where I talk about both the Boombox and the Walkman. And the societal response to both is really funny because the Boombox came out and people were immediately like "Don't subject me to.... Why are these people playing this music so loud in public?" And then the Walkman comes out, it was like, "What are all these antisocial people doing listening to their music?" and so you couldn't really win I guess with some of that. But the Walkman was huge for sure.

LC: Vinyl is coming back now, as you know, but, back in the day, were there any vinyl enthusiasts who fought against the cassette?

MM: I didn't really come across many people like that. I mean, I'm sure there were definitely vinyl audiophiles who would look down on the cassette. But, rightfully so, if the most important thing you care about is audio quality, you probably should look down on the cassette. But, luckily, a lot of people found value in [cassettes] for other reasons. For instance, the fact that it was so easy to use and so accessible and it kind of democratized things in a lot of ways….

LC: That's so interesting what you said about people, individuals, utilizing the cassette. Before, you couldn't really make your own album back in the day, but you could make your own cassette and distribute it that way.

MM: Yes, you could make the music first and then you could also dub it yourself too, so you're like a little production studio.

LC: Was the "cassette single" a success? I remember buying a few back in my day, but I don't know if they ever caught on. Did they?

MM: Probably not. I mean I didn't really delve too much into singles in the book. But I never got the sense that they made much of a dent. I mean some people, some artists sort of tried to use them as interesting things that might not be on the record and stuff like that. But most of the time it was just a way to get people to buy a song if they weren't going to buy the album. But other than that, I don't think because they were so … They weren't even packaged in plastic. They were actually in paper. They were thinner. They had sort of a disposable quality to them and I think, because of that, no one ever really took them seriously. No one was like, "I'm going to build up a collection of cassette singles."

LC: Did the CD then kill the cassette?

MM: Ultimately, yeah, it definitely did. But the cassette never died, per se. I think there's always people using it still either for pragmatic reasons or… maybe not necessarily for nostalgic reasons, but people who would made their music on cassettes for years weren't necessarily interested in changing. I mean, CDR's kind of took the place of some cassettes but it never quite had the cache of a mixtape; making somebody a mixed CDR just wasn't the same thing.

It's like one of the guys that I interviewed in my book said, "When I look at a CD-R, I think of Office Depot."

The CD did replace the cassette in terms of wide popularity for sure, but the cool thing is it never could replace the coolness and individuality of the cassette.

LC: There is a certain charm to it, isn't it? Is there anything in the history of the cassette, especially in the USA, that surprised you or stuck with you didn't know before?

MM: Yes, I have a chapter on genres of music that were boosted a lot by cassettes and, of all of those, even though I knew about some of them--like hip-hop and heavy metal and indie rock--I didn't realize how much of an impact the cassette had on the "go-go" genre. And I grew up in the DC area, so I knew about go-go but I had no idea there was this whole network in DC of tape trading. That was, basically, the way that the music got around and there were actually stores. They called these tapes "PA tapes" and there was a pretty famous store in DC called PA Palace. You could walk into and they'd have these folders with lists of the shows that they had recorded and you could say, "I want this Rare Essence show on side A and I want this Trouble Funk show on side B" or whatever. There weren't that many official go-go releases. One of the bands never even put records out. So this was the way their music got circulated, the way they influenced each other, the way that people kept up with what was happening musically and so that was a surprise. Even though I kind of knew about that, I didn't realize how really prevalent it was. I think, without cassettes, go-go would never have gotten recognition.

LC: Now that vinyl has come back, will cassette come back?

MM: I think it kind of has in terms of these labels that I'm talking about [but] on a very smaller independent label. In terms of like the bigger companies, the mainstream, I don't think so. I mean, I know that Taylor Swift puts her stuff out on cassettes now, but they cost like 25 bucks or something, so it's a little ludicrous. I think they're just sort of curios. They're not really necessarily selling a lot of those. I don't think that's really going to happen.

When any one of these things has a kind of a little resurgence in the underground then the mainstream kind of tries to pick up on it and say, "Well, maybe that'll be hip, we're going to …"

I think there will always be people making music on cassettes and there's been more in the past ten years than there had been in the ten years before that. So, in that sense, it has and will come back some more but I'm sort of hoping, just personally, with my own personal interests, that it stays on mostly on an underground level because that's where people are doing cool and interesting things with it rather than kind of just trying to exploit the nostalgia of it.

LC: But there's nothing wrong with a little nostalgia.

MM: That's true. I like nostalgia as well.