My first compact cassette: Home taping and music consumption in 1970s Finland

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Abstract
The launching of compact cassettes is closely related to issues of democratization of music production and creativity in developing countries and in the post-communist Eastern Europe. On the one hand, this included increased freedom of musical expression and the emergence of new popular music, but on the other, large-scale piracy. In Western Europe and Finland, cassettes have been neglected in research, although music consuming and listening were transformed there as well by the mobility and easy usability of the new medium. This paper seeks to describe the individual and social changes in music consumption in 1970s Finland influenced by the use of the compact cassette and how the cassette served as a trailblazer to contemporary ubiquitous music culture. Special attention will be paid to home taping and possible differences from other countries in Western Europe. The questions will be answered mainly by research literature and the results of an Internet questionnaire started in April 2010 on cassette culture and music technology.

Keywords: compact cassette; cassette culture; music consumption; radio music; ubiquitous music; home taping; mobility.

Introduction
The cassette tape was introduced in 1963 by Philips. Through its portability and recordability it became a major format in producing, duplicating and disseminating
local music, thus decentralising not only production but also consumption of music (Garofalo 1999, pp. 340–341). Simon Frith argues that technological changes transform the power relations between the corporate control of popular music and the artist. Regarding the compact cassette, the choices of the consumers were transformed as well: home taping gave fans a new means of control over sound. They could compile music from LPs and radio shows and carry it around with them (Frith 1986, pp. 272–274).

This paper is part of the Academy of Finland Musiquitous (2009–2012) research project investigating past, present and future mobile and ubiquitous music in Finland. Musiquitous proposes that by creating a multi-disciplinary approach by combining history of technology, human-computer interaction research, and future forecasting through prototyping it will achieve a fresh perspective on how people have enjoyed, and do and will enjoy, music.

The time span for Musiquitous extends from the 1920s to contemporary ways of listening to, consuming and disseminating music. This article deals with compact cassettes, with special emphasis on how they made music mobile and changed the listening culture in Finland, starting in the 1970s. The contemporary and perhaps somewhat marginal uses of cassettes are excluded from this text, although they will be scrutinised later in the ongoing research.

It should be noted, however, that this is a work very much in progress. The preliminary results presented in this paper will be updated and investigated in more detail in spring 2012, when the comprehensive analysis of the research material is scheduled to take place.

**Research questions and data**

The paper seeks to answer the following questions: (1) what was the Finnish cassette culture (including home taping) like in comparison with the cassette culture of other countries; and (2): what were the individual and social changes in music consumption caused by the cassette and home taping?

The question of Finnish cassette culture compared to other countries will be discussed with reference to existing research reports and literature. In order to collect information on the individual and social uses of cassettes, Musiquitous distributed an Internet questionnaire over a period of six months ending on 30 September 2010 (Musiqueuestionnaire 2010). In order not to restrict the questionnaire to Internet users, the project utilized the informant network of Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura (The Finnish Literature Society 2012) as well. The fundamental purpose was to find out what the cassette culture was - and actually still is - and if it had any effect on the listening habits of the music consumers. The themes of the Internet questionnaire dealt with the individual and social changes in music consumption, home taping, various uses of compact cassettes and mix-tapes.

Musiquitous received 958 responses from different age groups, thus providing hundreds of pages of text to be analysed. The preliminary results show that as innovative as the cassette was in paving the way to contemporary listening culture, the
ubiquitous use of the medium was at least to some extent built on already existing ways of acquiring, consuming and listening to music.

**FINNISH CASSETTE CULTURE AND HOME TAPEING**

The launch of the compact cassette occurred at the same time as when European publicly funded radios started to include more popular music in their programmes (Gronow and Saunio 1990, pp. 467-469). The radio music content reform was executed partly because of the demand by the radio listening public, and partly because of legal and illegal stations operating in Luxembourg and close to the British, Danish, and Swedish coastlines (Kemppainen 2010, p. 16).

The music consumers very much welcomed the inexpensive and easy-to-operate new medium, although it must be noted that cassettes were first scorned by some listeners due to their inferior sound quality compared to the phonograph record.

In Finland, cassette players became widespread very fast, even in the remote villages. In the 1970s one out of ten Finns owned a cassette player; seven years later three out of four were able to play cassettes at home. The figure was higher than in the industrialised countries on average, which was two out of three. The main sources for home taping were phonograms and radio. In England, music was copied from records and music cassettes, whereas the Finns recorded music mostly from radio (Gronow 1984, pp. 3,7).

The sales of phonograms were slowly increasing but it was actually cassettes that widened the market for recorded music in Finland. Pekka Gronow (1990, p. 468) argues that the boom of recorded music can be explained by the low price of cassettes and cassette players compared to more expensive vinyl and record players.

The affordable price of blank tapes must have been alluring, especially for young consumers and rock music fans. The publicly funded Finnish Broadcasting Company aired rock music for only seven hours per week in the mid-1970s, and if you wanted to listen to your favourite music, you needed to find practical ways to solve this problem of scarcity of music by yourself.

The change in music consumption would not have been possible without a network for disseminating cassettes and cassette players. Interestingly enough, the rapid growth of record sales of the 1970s in Finland owed a lot to compact cassettes. Although cassettes were first sold in specialist shops, the sales of domestic audio equipment were followed by the demand for records and cassettes. This caused department stores and radio shops to include records, music cassettes and blank tapes in their offering. In 1970, the number of retail outlets was 200, but towards the end of the decade, the number was tenfold. The share of these so-called rack sales was only 3% in 1970 but increased to 38% in 1975 and remained around 35% for the next ten years. Specialist shops sold 50% of the records and cassettes, leaving the remaining 15% share for the post order companies (Muikk 1989, pp. 28-29).

Nordic branches of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry commissioned a survey in January 1980. At that time, taping from radio had slightly declined, but even so, radio was still the most important source of music for 68 %
of respondents. Finnish home recordists outnumbered their neighbours in Sweden, Norway and Denmark with figures of 48, 47 and 55% respectively (Teosto 1980).

**Changes in Individual and Social Music Consumption**

To some extent, the *Musiquitous* questionnaire verifies the facts stated above.

Figure 1: Age groups of the Internet questionnaire.

The respondents of the questionnaire (n=958) were born between 1930 and 1990 with males (53%) and females (47%) almost equally represented. Practically all recorded their own tapes (99%), most of them from the radio (92%) and records (78%). The library collections were utilised by 47%; cassette share, television and CDs were used by 42% of the respondents. 94% of the respondents used cassettes outside the home. The most popular equipment was the Walkman or other portable cassette player with headphones (56%) followed by a car stereo (40%) and radio recorder (33%).

The Internet questionnaire sheds more light on innovative uses leading to new listening cultures. Although the research material will be analysed more thoroughly in the near future, already there are clearly visible themes such as an increase of listening, privacy, mobility, and freedom of choice of music.

The *quantitative* and *qualitative* increase of music listening caused by the cassettes was clearly pointed out: “Huge increase in listening!” and “Doors opened to new musics” (*Musiqueuestionnaire* 2010). The quantitative increase of available music was enabled by mix-tapes, which were compiled of radio music, library collections and so-called recording rings (a group of youngsters bought one LP at a time and made cassette copies for others). Qualitatively the cassette users became familiar with different artists, songs and independent music labels. The re-articulation of time, place and privacy were pointed out in many answers, such as listening to music in your
own room, which was mentioned frequently; also how the Walkman saved the family car trip. This is closely related to issues of independence and freedom to choose the desired music for a mix-tape (“You weren’t tied to radio music anymore”).

**Mobility** (“I listened to music everywhere”) was identified in answers, too. Cars, radio cassette players and especially Walkmans made music - if not ubiquitous - at least detached from one place for good. In addition, “You didn’t need much money to find new music”, which was enabled by inexpensive blank tapes. Another feature increasing music consumption was that music could be replaced or songs arranged in any desired order (“You just erased the songs you didn’t like”). The durability of the medium played an important role as well: when you were “not allowed to touch your father’s record player” you could learn to listen to music at an early age with somewhat more heavy-duty equipment.

Evidently, on the one hand background listening and more focused listening to music increased because “for the first time you could hear you favourite song over and over again”. On the other hand, the record aesthetics in terms of song sequence were respected, not only because the LP and its song sequence were appreciated as a complete work of art but also because of more practical reasons: poor quality of the batteries did not allow rewinding or forwarding.

The change of music consumption was underlined in one response stating that the use of cassettes did not change anything because “I was born to it”. There already was a younger generation, which took compact cassettes for granted and had learned to use them almost as a toddler. Sony Corporation took notice of the durability of the medium and launched their product My First Sony in the mid-1980s targeted at children.

**Concluding remarks**

Finnish cassette culture/home taping differs from that of other European countries such as Sweden and England, in that there was definitely more home taping from the radio. The library collections were heavily utilized as well, however, more information is needed to explore this point in more detail.

The cassettes were not only leading consumers to new ways of listening to music but were also extending the already established uses of music. Home taping made music consumption actually more diverse not only within the new format or in terms of individual listening but also in relation to other forms of consuming music such as going to concerts, buying and sharing records and recording mix-tapes. This, of course, is no news in the age of Facebook, YouTube and music downloading, but was nevertheless clearly stated by our informants.

The compact cassette and related home taping was a democratic, easy-to-use, and affordable medium, thus advancing and trailblazing the contemporary ubiquitous music culture. However, to make music, and especially home-taped music, mobile in the 1970s you actually needed several existing networks such as a VHF network for the radio, and a music library network for the records and music cassettes, not to mention a shop, retailer or mail order network to get the blank tapes. Evidently,
the changes in music consumption were manifest not only by the new medium but also in relation to prevailing economic, cultural, technological and infrastructural factors.

The next stage on the Musiquitous research project is to pay more systematic and detailed attention to research material. The analysis will be followed by collating the results with secondary research data such as statistical information dealing with equipment sales, and the effect of blank tape cassette remuneration (the so-called “cassette fee”), including how these remunerations contributed to the domestic music industry.

References


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