

# Format As Vehicle: Victoria Cassette Tape Culture

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## Introduction

In the age of digital supremacy, where an infinite amount of music is available at the click of a button, there has been a resurgence of formerly obsolete musical formats. Vinyl records, a medium thought to have faded into oblivion when CDs were embraced as the industry standard, have since seen a resurgence among underground music labels and their major label counterparts, selling over 4 million units in 2014. Physical audio media in the age of the MP3 is rare, yet both independent and major record labels have embraced the vinyl medium. Interestingly, in tandem with the vinyl revival, cassette tapes have become the medium of choice for independent bands interested in distributing their music and ideas on the cheap, side-stepping the exorbitant production costs and wait times that are increasing due to major label's (re)appropriation of the vinyl record. Interestingly, while many online platforms allow the free and immediate distribution of music, cassette tapes can be found on merchandise tables of independent Victoria bands whose music spans the underground spectrums of folk, punk rock, garage, noise, metal, and indie rock. While digital media is still the go to format for many musicians and consumers, cassette tapes and other physical formats offer artists complete control over how their work is distributed and a cheap vehicle to connect with music consumers and other artists, fostering and maintaining community in the process.

## A Brief History of Cassettes

The first audio cassettes were patented by Phillips in 1964, though from the 1960s to early 1970s several tape based audio media were competing for the North American markets, each advertised as portable options to vinyl records [1; 3; 4]. Cassettes won out due to various factors, chiefly the fact that they were small, cheap, versatile (offering both recording and playback options), and they could simply hold more music than other formats. However, the development of the Sony Walkman and portable stereo systems (boom boxes) in the late 1970s and early 1980s cemented the cassette into North American popular culture, enabling users to control how they experience the world and enrich their environment, all the while affording autonomy as users can create a soundtrack for their lives [5]. The amount of cassettes sold is estimated to be between 50 and 100 billion in their heyday with 900 million units sold at its mid-80s peak, making up 54% of total global music sales [1; 2]. Since the introduction of the CD the format has seen a steady decline in popularity and sales, languishing to obscurity.

**“Care went into the music on it, it connects me to the people I buy it from. It strengthens our connection”**

**“Tapes have limited runs, you have a piece of something that is exclusive”**

**“It's an accessible analog way to get music out”**

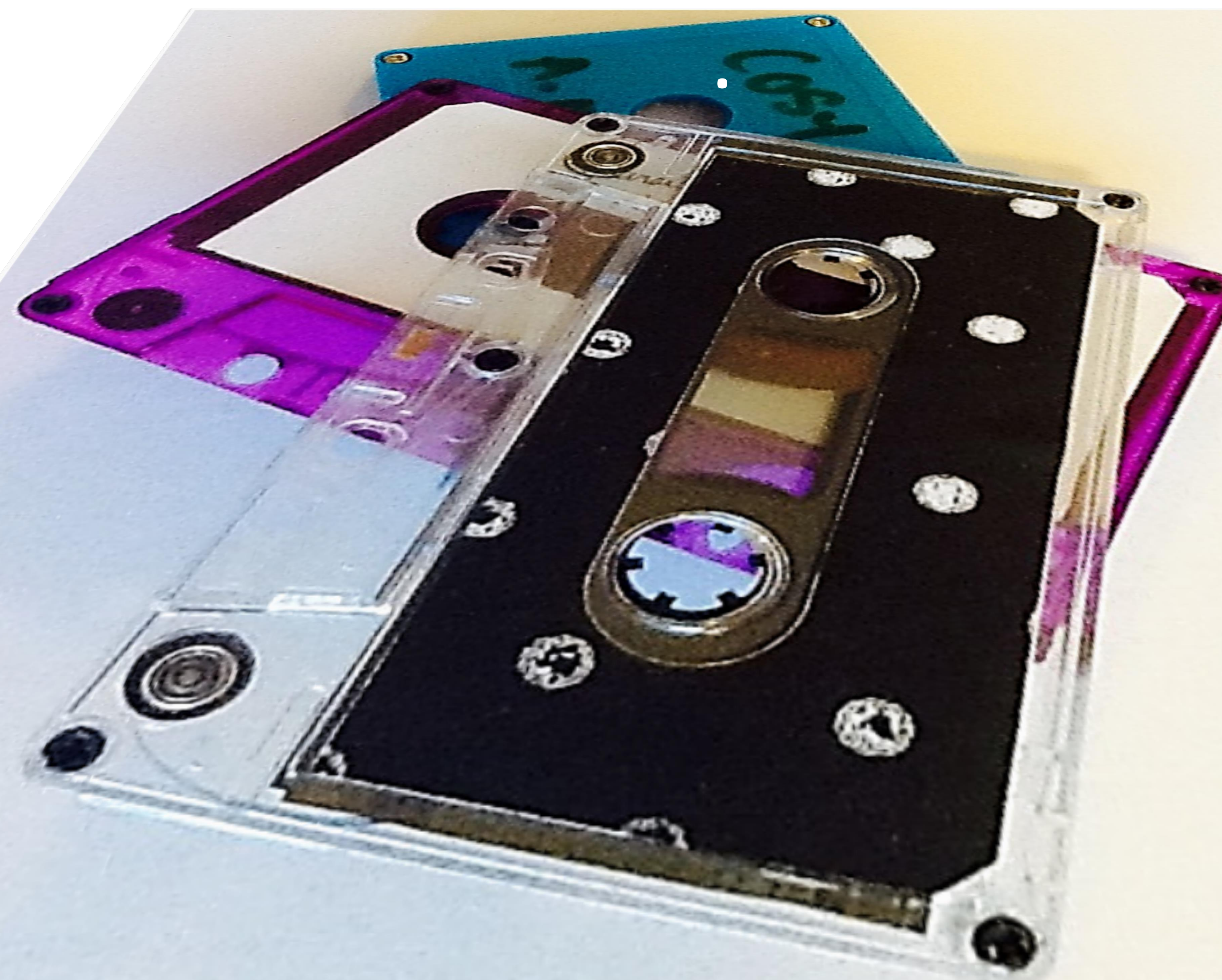
**“It's a quick and dirty way to share your stuff and if someone in the community likes it they'll buy it and support you”**

**“I just like it. It's cool that tapes are still around”**

**“I do think that there is a huge element of the insider thing. You have to be part of something to buy into it”**

**“I like being able to support the artist in a convenient way for all parties involved”**

**“I'm more interested in tapes than CDs. I would rather have the cassette”**



## Methods

All research involving human subjects done through the University of Victoria must obtain ethics approval (University of Victoria 2015), as such I gained approval from UVic's Human Ethics Board in January 2016. I asked participants 20 prepared questions concerning their experiences with cassette tapes. Often the answers to these questions became conversational in tone, which was helpful as it allowed me to ask additional probing questions. These added questions and the interviews' relaxed character permitted participants to open themselves up to me and expand on their thoughts regarding cassette tapes. The sample group of 5 participants ranged between the ages of 21 and 40 and consisted of 3 individuals who identify as female and 2 who identify as male. This near gender parity, while extremely welcome, is a happy accident as I did contact other individuals who for one reason or another could not participate. My research objective for this project was to investigate how and why cassettes are being produced and consumed in Victoria's music scenes, as well as some of the ways in which cassette tapes are used, thought about, attained, promoted, produced, and sold in Victoria. As such, my main research questions concerned the daily use of cassette tapes, where they are acquired, how and where they are used, and in what social settings. Other questions spoke to generational interests and the preferences concerning audio media. In addition to interviews, I also hung out in music venues and record stores where cassettes are bought and sold, even purchasing a cassette from one local musician.

## Why Cassettes?

As my experience with the cassette resurgence was that of an outsider, seeing friends purchase and produce cassette tapes that included MP3 download codes, I initially imagined that cassettes were being used as an inexpensive medium to sell and distribute digital media for a small profit. However, each of my participants indicated that while this phenomenon is occurring, it is not the primary purpose for their use of cassette tapes. Cassettes are being bought and sold in Victoria for a number of reasons. Primarily, it seems that the medium's affordability regarding production plays a large part. Underground cassette releases are generally produced in small runs, usually between 25 and 50 copies and musicians and record labels can spend a few hundred dollars to produce a small run of tapes that they can trade, give away, or sell for as little as \$5, something that cannot be done with more expensive formats. Similarly, fans are more likely to buy a tape from a band because the price involved is not as great as a CD or LP, thus commitment is less extreme. “Musicians are not making much money, so if I can support them I will, and buying a tape for \$5 is an easy way to do that”. Cassette tapes offer musicians and fans a vehicle to connect to foster and maintain music communities that move beyond Victoria and Canada, linking communities through tape trading and sharing. The groups connect with each other at concerts but also online through distribution websites like WeirdCanada.com While some people see cassettes as a means to connect and support community, others just prefer the simplicity and tangibility the medium offers, “holding something in my hand and controlling the playing and having to flip the tape... It just feels more real in these digital times.” For musicians, the cassette is a way to cheaply legitimize their output: as it takes an extra step to produce physical media, these products are often seen as more authentic than their digital counterparts. Interestingly, this also reveals the relationships between different audio technologies, commodity chains, economics, and cultures of everyday practice.

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