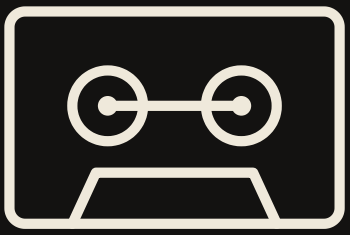
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SIGNAL TO NOISE: A PRIMER ON TAPE CULTURE

Wolfram Aske

APOCALYPSE CULT

READING COPY AC-0127

SIGNAL TO NOISE: A PRIMER ON TAPE CULTURE

Wolfram Aske, 1988

THE MACHINE ON THE KITCHEN TABLE

The most important musical instrument of the last ten years has no strings, keys or reeds. It is a domestic cassette deck with two wells. You put a recorded tape in one side and a blank in the other and press two buttons, and in the time it takes to play, you have a second copy. With that, the entire apparatus of the record industry, the pressing plant, the distributor, the shop, the contract, becomes optional.

It is hard to convey to anyone who came later what this meant. Before the twin deck, to make a recording that another person could hear required capital and permission. You had to persuade someone with a factory. Afterwards you needed a blank tape and the price of a stamp.

Nobody planned this. The machine was sold for copying records one already owned, and was denounced on those grounds. Its real effect was not on the buying of music but on the making of it. It put the means of reproduction on the kitchen table, and a certain kind of person looked at it and understood that they had been handed a press.

HOW THE NETWORK WORKS

You have this tape because you wrote to someone, or someone wrote to you. That is the whole of the mechanism, but it bears setting out.

A person makes a recording. He copies it twenty times, or fifty. He draws a cover, folds it, and writes his address on it. He sends copies to the addresses he has found on the covers of other people's tapes. Some of them send theirs back. Each of those carries further addresses. In a year he is in correspondence with people in a dozen countries, none of whom he will ever meet, and has a shelf of music that exists in editions smaller than a village.

There are customs, and they are firmer than they look.

- **Everything is answered.** If someone sends you a tape, you send something back. It need not be good. It must be something.
- **Trade is preferred to sale.** Where money changes hands it covers the blank and the postage. Anyone seen to be making a profit is not refused, but he is talked about.
- **Addresses are passed on.** Every cover, every letter, every list carries the contacts of others. To hoard a contact is the one real offence.
- **Nobody is turned away.** There is no audition. A first tape by a fifteen-year-old sits in the same list as the fortieth release of a veteran, in the same typeface.

The result is an economy that runs almost entirely on obligation. It is slow, it is inefficient, and it is the only arrangement I have encountered in which an unknown person with no money can be heard on another continent within a month.

THE SOUND OF THE WORKS

A great deal of what travels along these routes is not, by the usual measure, music. It is noise: loops of machinery, feedback, metal struck with metal, a voice so treated that the words are gone, a single tone sustained until it becomes unbearable and then, strangely, restful. The name that has stuck is industrial.

The name is exact, and not only because it sounds like a factory. Consider where it comes from. It comes, overwhelmingly, from towns that had heavy industry and are losing it. The people who make it grew up with the noise of the works as the ground of their days: the hammers, the sirens, the compressor that never stopped. That sound meant employment. It meant that things were as they should be.

Then it ceased. I think that what we are doing with our scrap metal and our tape loops is, in part, putting it back. We are the first generation to find a silent town unnatural. We make with contact microphones and broken amplifiers the racket our fathers went to work in, and we do it in bedrooms and lock-ups, for nothing, in editions of fifty.

It has been called nihilistic. I find it closer to a memorial. But it is not a sentimental one. The noise does not say the works was good. It says the works was loud, and that the quiet since is not peace.

IN PRAISE OF HISS

Every copy of a tape is worse than the one it was made from. The high frequencies go first, and a soft roar rises underneath, which is the

sound of the tape itself. Copy a copy and it rises further. By the fourth or fifth generation the music is heard as if through weather.

Engineers call the relation between what you want and what you get the ratio of signal to noise, and their whole art is to increase it. We have come to feel differently. The hiss is a record of the journey. A tape that reaches you thick with it has passed through many hands, each of whom thought it worth the trouble of copying. A clean recording has no history. It could have come from anywhere, which is to say from a company.

There is a further point. On these tapes it is often impossible to tell where the intended sound stops and the damage begins. A drop-out might be an edit. A distortion might be the performance or the machine. After a while one stops asking. The noise has been admitted into the signal, and the result is a music in which nothing can be called a mistake. I know of no other art so thoroughly protected from perfectionism.

AGAINST THE PROFESSIONAL

We are told that this work is amateur, and it is. The word means one who does a thing for love, and I have never understood why it is an insult.

The professional has skills that we lack. He also has an employer, a market and a reputation, and each of these is a reason not to do something. The amateur, having nothing to lose, may try whatever occurs to him. Most of the results are poor. This is true of the professional's results as well, but his failures are suppressed before release, whereas ours are posted to Belgium.

What the tape network has shown, and I think it is a discovery of some consequence, is that a culture does not need an industry. It needs a means of copying, a means of delivery, and enough people prepared to reply to their letters. Given those, it will organise itself, without a centre and without anyone's leave.

A WARNING

I do not expect this to last in its present form. The tape is fragile. It stretches, it sheds, it is wiped by a careless magnet. Half of what is being made now will be unplayable in thirty years, and no library is keeping it, because no library knows it exists.

There will be new machines. They will make copying easier still, and I suppose the copies will be perfect, with no hiss to show where they have been. I hope whoever uses them remembers what the hiss was for. It was the proof that a person had handled this. A culture in which every copy is flawless will have to find some other way of knowing that.

Until then: make something. Copy it. Put your address on the cover. Answer your post.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Signal to Noise: A Primer on Tape Culture
AUTHOR	Wolfram Aske
DATE	1988
TYPE	Essay
PUBLISHER	Issued with a cassette compilation of the same name
EXTENT	12-page booklet folded to fit a cassette case
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Transcribed from the booklet. The accompanying cassette is not held by the archive.

This essay was written to be folded into a cassette case. It accompanied a compilation tape, put together by Wolfram Aske from recordings sent to him by strangers, and it was meant to explain to those strangers what they were all part of. The type in the original is extremely small.

It is the best short account we know of how the cassette underground worked: a network with no center, no gatekeepers and almost no money, held together by the postal service and by the convention that anyone who wrote to you deserved a reply. Aske is equally good on the music itself, the harsh, repetitive, machine-derived sound that was then called industrial, and on why it came out of the places it did.

Readers who know only the later history of home-made media will recognize a great deal here. The arguments about access, permanence and the value of the unprofessional were all made first on ferric tape. The parallel with the zines elsewhere in this library, and especially with Hermes

at the Photocopier, is close. So is the connection to mail art, documented in Dead Letter Office.

COLOPHON

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