

PAUL MCDERMOTT

HIGH BIAS – THE DISTORTED HISTORY OF THE CASSETTE TAPE

By Marc Masters - University of North Carolina Press

Ger Eaton's *Home Again* is a five track cassette of the singles he has put out to date on streaming services. Eaton's beautiful songs are delicately cloaked in harmonium, trumpet, flute and flugelhorn and bring to mind the lush arrangements on Scott Walker or Colin Blunstone recordings. The cassette format seems tailor-made for Eaton's evocative first physical release.

The format also serves experimental music perfectly. David Donohoe's *'Summon'* (Live at the NCH), recorded at last October's Haunted Dancehall festival, is the latest release from *Fort Evil Fruit*, the Irish cassette label. Donohoe's two twenty minute pieces are based around field recordings: nesting Gannets on Great Saltee, the Atlantic Ocean surging in Poll na bPéist, on Inis Mór and samples from Jonathan Miller's unsettling 1968 BBC ghost drama *Whistle and I'll Come to You*.

"The limitations of the format can have a positive impact on the music," Paul Condon from *Fort Evil Fruit* tells Masters. "It can make for a good framing device and encourage more thought and consideration than a digital-only release might be subject to."

Fort Evil Fruit along with *Constellation Tatsu* (US), *Linear Obsessional* (UK) and many others have released genre-bending electronica, improvised sound-art and ambient drones in limited run cassettes. Tapes haven't gone away you know!

In *High Bias*, Masters tackles their unlikely re-emergence, he posits that nostalgia for the format isn't simply, "a way to avoid the reality of the present by running to comforts of the past." He writes that, "the cassette's best qualities - cheapness, accessibility, compactness, user control - are

traits that no single format has combined in exactly that way since."

Though some contend that the re-emergence of the format is simply "a hipster decoration", Masters maintains that because many new cassettes come with a download code, "this gives fans the opportunity to support an artist at a much higher rate of remuneration than listening to them on streaming services."

These thoughts come towards the end of this wonderful book, whose title is derived from the term for tape quality: "In the technical lingo of cassette tapes, 'high bias' means high quality. The higher the bias, the better the sound."

In 1982 cassette sales overtook LPs in what the *New York Times* described as, "the climax of a Cinderella story in which the lowly triumph against all odds." Sony introduced the Walkman in 1979 and by 2010 when production ended they had sold over 200m players. "The Walkman was revolutionary because it was personal," reasons Masters. "You were no longer bound to what songs came on the radio or an album; whatever you wanted to hear could be put on one small object fixed to your clothes."

High Bias takes us from the origins of the format to the US cassette underground of the 80s. Tape artists, the influence of the 4-Track Portastudio, audio tape magazines, Conrad Schnitzler's *Kassettenorgel* (Cassettes Concerts) and The Flaming Lips' *Boom Box Experiments* are detailed. Musicians associated with the format - Daniel Johnston and Lou Barlow - are discussed and we meet the famed bootleggers, tape traders and concert archivists of Dylan, The Grateful Dead and Can.

I abandoned the format decades ago but as I read *High Bias* I returned to the tapes I've kept.



MY #CASSETTETAPE TOP 5



1. Another Spark (1984)

Tape and a 32 page fanzine featuring Billy Bragg, The Mekons, The Go-Betweens, Microdisney, Five Go Down to the Sea? and more.

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2. This Are Two Tone (1983)

16 tracks from the famed Ska label: The Specials, The Selector, The Beat, Madness and Rhoda Dakar's still astonishing 'The Boiler'.

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3. Microdisney Live (1997)

This live tape came free with the 'Town to Town' 7" single. Could the rest of the gig be in the Virgin Records vaults?

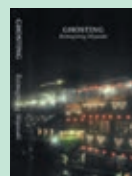
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4. The Peel Sessions - The Sampler (1988)

A French tape of Peel Sessions. Highlights include New Order, The Fall and Young Marble Giants.

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5. Ghosting - Reimagining Miyazaki (2017)

An instrumental mixtape (from Melbourne producer Andrei Eremin) that samples

Joe Hisaishi's minimalist soundtracks to the films of Studio Ghibli's Hayao Miyazaki.