

‘When you use a Walkman all the memories come back’: the people still in love with old tech

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In 1989, jewellery maker Tiffany & Co and electronics company Sony released a silver-plated Walkman (complete with a fitted wooden box) to celebrate 10 years of the portable cassette player. Only 250 were made. Several decades on, and long since the cassette Walkman began its slide into obsolescence – outpaced first by the cumbersome Discman and the vibe-less MiniDisc player, then lapped by the iPod and iPhone – you can still find some of these items selling in auctions for hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds. One of the Tiffany Walkmans, originally presented to the Who, was later sold by the ex-wife of the band’s late bassist John Entwistle on a 2011 episode of the US TV show *Pawn Stars*. After some haggling, the traders at Gold & Silver Pawn in Las Vegas agreed to pay \$1,250 for it. “This is one of those weird things that I think someone’s willing to buy just to say they have it,” reasoned *Pawn Stars*’ Corey Harrison to his father, Rick. But who would spend thousands on a tape player in the age of Spotify and YouTube, when virtually all your entertainment needs can be concentrated into one device in your pocket? “Time can make easy fetishists of us all,” remarked the culture writer Niko Stratis on seeing news stories reporting that branches of Urban Outfitters in the US were selling iPods for \$350 (not far off the price they were on release in the early 2000s). There is plenty of such backward-gazing trading to be found online: eBay seller Retrogadgets-UK offers a “factory-sealed” third-generation iPhone “sold for collectors only” listed at £2,499.99. US brand Retrospekt sells all manner of refurbished old tech. “Our mission is to give you a product with years of history that works like it was made yesterday,” it declares. Elsewhere you can find camcorders and digital cameras, VHS and DVD players, “vintage” Game Boys, clock radios, and everything in between – including the soundtrack to classic teen soap *Beverly Hills 90210* on cassette (yours for £15.39, if that’s your thing). And a surprisingly large number of Walkmans. You never know what treasures may be sitting in your attic. A classic yellow “sports” Walkman, for example, is a popular item among collectors. The WM-F5 from 1983 was the first designed to be “splash-proof” and came with a built-in FM radio. The sharp colour and weather-proofing led to sales soaring, Walkman collector Mark Ip tells me. “I have many of them,” he adds. Walkmans in general are Ip’s thing. He has more than a thousand, and on his Instagram account @boxedwalkman he displays them to more than 16,000 fellow enthusiasts. The important word there is boxed: he focuses his vast collection on pristine Walkmans housed in their original packaging – though he also has several hundred unboxed ones, too. He bills himself as “cassette Walkman collector on a mission to bring back the long-lost memories of the past”. Ip also owns three Tiffany Walkmans, for which he estimates he spent \$10,000. “I’m a little bit OCD,” Ip tells me from his home in Hong Kong. “Because I’m not satisfied with only single units. I want packaging, user manuals, original headphones.” He has about 20 single Walkmans that he keeps out for personal use. The rest are in storage – they have to be kept dry, otherwise Hong Kong’s humid climate will

damage the boxes. "I don't know exactly how many boxes are in my warehouse. When I die, I'll leave it to my son maybe," Ip adds, though he says his son cares more about modern Apple products. He ties his obsession to his youth. "When I was in high school, a classmate had the first model, the TPS-L2. The stereo sounded so good. And it was portable," he says, but his family couldn't afford it at the time (originally the cost was about \$150). Later, he was able to get his hands on a Walkman, but it was only about 15 years ago, when the devices were cheap and essentially obsolete, that he began building his collection. Ip, who is 60, and co-founded an IT and audiovisual company specialising in workplace technologies in 2004, rarely sells anything from his collection. The wider region – Hong Kong, China, Japan, South Korea – remains a hotbed of interest in ageing tech, including boomboxes, component audio systems, old analogue and 2G mobile phones and pagers. There is also a big local trade in old camera lenses, Ip says, from manufacturers such as Leica and Zeiss. Ip buys and swaps with others to fill gaps in his Walkman collection, while also finding some further afield, in the US and Europe. "Like all collectors, you are seeking perfection," he says. "What is perfect is a new box, never touched, no scratches, no dust. It's almost impossible, but I will do my best to patiently wait." Last year, Ip mounted an exhibition in Hong Kong displaying many of his boxed Walkmans. "This is one of my missions in Walkman collecting," he says – to let a new generation experience it. At the exhibition, many young attendees were "seeing a cassette player for the first time", and often had only a vague idea of them from films or their parents. "Most were genuinely curious. They were intrigued by its mechanics." Walkman-collecting, it seems, conforms to most tech-collector stereotypes: men in their 40s, 50s and 60s, recalling their youthful encounters with a then-nascent, exciting technology. As Ip says, "When you have a Walkman, and you have a cassette to play on it, you can go out to the street to listen to the music, and all the memories come back." * * * On Stephen Ho's eBay page, he lists old but pristine Walkmans for up to £2,999. Though, he admits, he rarely expects to sell his most expensive wares. They are largely on the site to display the extent of his vast collection and to signal the quality of what he has on offer. Mainly he sells cheaper ones when he has duplicates. Ho, who is in his late 50s, is also from Hong Kong. He is retired now, but in the 1990s he had a job in Sony's marketing department, working on the launch of the MiniDisc during the great "format war" between that product and Philips's DCC player. "Because I grew up with Sony products and I worked for Sony, I have a passion for their products," he says. Electronic gadgets from his teenage years in the 80s are his poison. "During those years, Sony was like Apple nowadays. I was a normal teenager. I had Sony Walkman, Sony radio, everything Sony." In 2020, he moved to the UK under the BNO visa, allowing Hongkongers to resettle after the Chinese government crackdown on the city's semi-autonomous status. He brought his collection, which includes hundreds of Walkmans, Discmans and MiniDisc players. He rarely pays more than £500 for an item, but he also owns one of the Tiffany special editions, for which he was willing to go higher ("Less than £2,000," he says). But he says he'll never put that up for sale. He claims to be downsizing and shows me a loft room in his home in Reading, Berkshire, with drawers filled with Sony products. And yet, "I'm buying more than I'm selling," he jokes. When we speak, he is shortly due to take a trip to Japan to find more at street markets. There are models that were only sold in Japan, while DIY makers in China are keeping the old products alive. "Since the price of Walkmans has gone so high, people are making spare parts, which makes their lifespan longer." There are curious ways in which older products can outlast newer, more hi-tech ones. "New things use built-in rechargeable batteries," he says. "Once the battery is dead, the machine is dead. For old stuff they use normal batteries." He also likens it to older and classic cars: the mechanics were simpler, more analogue, so it is easier to tinker with and make spare parts for older models. Similarly with complex modern devices, the tech "is so tiny, so small, you can't do it by yourself". But with Walkmans "because of 3D-printing technology, they can print those parts. Which also extends the lifespan." Ho puts potential buyers into two categories. Younger people jumping on to a new trend for something old, and, inevitably, an older group that grew up with the technology. "Before social media, it was limited to older generations," he says. "But since social media – Instagram, Facebook, whatever – teenagers have been exposed to old stuff. Old guys are buying for their memories. Young people are buying to try. They think it's trendy, it's interesting. It's not limited to the Walkman; the prices for CCD [digital] cameras are rocket-high on eBay." James Bradbury, who is 23 and based in Manchester, grew up at a time when streaming was in the ascendancy but still gravitated towards CDs and cassettes, first in the family car and then through his dad's collection. "I found a case of my dad's old cassettes many years ago," he says. "The best tape I found in that box was Reggatta de Blanc by the Police. My dad bought it brand new in 1979 and it's probably one of the most played and worn-out tapes in my collection." Bradbury works as a guitar tech at Johnny Roadhouse Music in the city and plays in two bands, Katz and westsidecowboy. With both projects, they have gravitated to working on tape. As well as being cheap, a lot of the songwriting is done on cassette "as it's a good isolation from the outside world". They have put out cassette releases through Manchester label and promoter Sour Grapes. "Cassettes allow my ADHD brain to focus," he says. "With streaming connected to smartphones you get distracted easily with social media – and eBay deals, in my case." Though Bradbury is drawn to collecting and older formats, he doesn't really see a wider move away from streaming. "It's just a niche thing," he says. "I like to think there's a bit of 'sticking it to the man' but I'm just a bit of a nerd, to be honest. If you are buying tapes from younger bands and putting money in their pocket, then it's a lot more helpful than streaming their song on Spotify or Apple Music." * * * Cassette players and tapes, CDs, video players and VHS seem like relics of a previous analogue era, but on eBay, Etsy or Discogs, among others, there is a brisk trade to be found. As fashion and style has shown us repeatedly, everything and anything will come back into vogue in cycles of 20 and 30 years. The Museum der Dinge in Berlin is an institution that collects things: an archive including 40,000 objects amassed over the

last century. Begun in the 1970s, the museum initially set out to be the archive of the Werkbund, a utopian organisation of German artists, designers and manufacturers that formed in 1907, though its remit stretches beyond that now to chronicle the “product culture of the 20th and 21st centuries” through mass production, consumer goods and industrial manufacturing. Towards the end of its display cabinets, there is a run of more recent technology: stereos, Walkmans, telephones and mobile phones (“handys” as the Germans call them), the iPod, concluding with the arrival of the iPhone, which rendered a previous pile including the once-dominant Nokia, and much else, useless. “If I come here with schools, you have to skip this old shit to get to the new ones, because they are bored,” says Alexander Renz, a curator at the museum. “But the question of when the first smartphone, the first iPhone, is released is amazing for them, that it’s 2007. They think it’s 40 years ago but no, it’s only 17.” The initial purpose of the museum to document and display things from Germany has changed to a wider remit reflecting the globalised nature of consumption: late-20th-/early-21st-century tech tends to come from Apple (US), Sony (Japan) and Nokia (Finland). Meanwhile, recent acquisitions pivot in different consumer directions to include a line of plant-milk cartons from various international brands, as well as a box of Bahlsen biscuits (the German geniuses behind Choco Leibniz). A display of 1950s, 60s and 70s Braun products elegantly designed by Dieter Rams and Herbert Hirche can also point to the cycles of taste: Jonathan Ive paid homage to much of their aesthetic in his smoothed, streamlined designs for Apple during its 2000s imperial era. “Things aren’t always completely utopian,” says Julia Topp, another curator at the museum. “Everything is recurring.” Renz points out that Ikea shelving from the 70s, originally sold at low prices, now goes for high sums. Some of the museum’s early collection was amassed from the streets: in the 70s younger people were throwing out older wooden items in favour of new plastic things, so the museum picked them up. A similar cycle occurred in the early 90s with the fall of the communist world – East Germans got rid of GDR-issued furniture to grab sought-after western products. But furniture from the east was designed to be long-lasting and is now highly desired. A 1960s sideboard desk from the Dresden furniture manufacturer Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau can sell on Facebook Marketplace now for €230. “Why does it come again?” Renz wonders. “Is it because people who design things or collect things are remembering their childhood? I think it’s the same, only maybe with longer periods of repeats, as with clothes; so the 90s are back, of course, and the Y2K style from 2000 is coming back.” A few doors down from the Museum der Dinge is the high-fashion concept shop Voo Store, both providing, as Renz says, a neat summation of “how consumption works”. In among its expensive clothes and blocky Asics and Salomon trainers is a row of 90s-inspired Oakley sunglasses. Few would have predicted their eventual revival – from staples of 90s basketball stars, and on through cycles of golfers and tech bros, finally taking their place as prized signifiers of contemporary cool, selling in Berlin’s trendy Kreuzberg district for more than €200. “You can bring it back,” jokes Topp, “and make it more expensive.” In a further twist of Berlin’s gentrification, the Museum der Dinge closed its doors last November, after its lease was terminated “by an anonymous real estate fund”. It is due to reopen in another location in the city later this year. In the meantime, all 40,000 of its objects have to be packed up, stored and moved. * * *

“The last cassette shop in the UK” is the tagline of Mars Tapes in Manchester, either boosterish or plaintive, depending on your mood. The shop is based in the Afflecks indoor market in the city’s Northern Quarter. Though small, it has upgraded in size twice since opening in 2019. Mars Tapes was started by the couple Borja Regueira and Moira Lorenzo, and soon afterwards Alex Tadros and Giorgio Carbone, who run Sour Grapes, came on board. About 80% of the tapes sold at the shop are secondhand, which they mainly track down at car boot sales and through people coming in to sell old stashes. Prices range from Devo’s 1978 debut (£65) to Michael Bolton’s *The Hunger* (£3). They also sell new stuff from their own label, and imprints further up the food chain, too. “More bands are willing to release on cassette these days,” says Regueira. “Before, we were telling bands, ‘We’re going to release you on cassette’, and some were like, ‘Eh, cassette, what?’ But now everyone is more familiar with it.” Tadros chimes in: “You have huge global artists doing it now ... Adele and Lady Gaga.” For smaller bands, there can be significant benefits from going analogue. “When we chat to artists who print cassettes through us,” says Tadros, “it tends to be due to them being disillusioned by streaming and the difficulty of standing out in such a deep audience. Whereas, having a small batch of tapes can connect to a tight-knit group of people who enjoy similar music and would buy directly from them at a gig or through Bandcamp. Profits from selling a cassette range from £4-10 depending on the batch quantity.” Smaller artists are also drawn to cassettes because of the ease compared with other physical formats. “Vinyl is the gold standard for physical music in people’s eyes, and understandably so,” says Tadros. “But in terms of bands and the DIY communities accessing it, vinyl – especially these last couple of years – takes for ever to print, so you can wait months and months to release an album, and it costs three/four/five times the amount of a cassette run.” Vinyl is, of course, the high-water mark for such revivals. UK vinyl sales in 2021 were the highest since 1990; US sales in the first half of 2023 increased 21.7% on the same period of the previous year. Now, all major artists are rushing to the format, through new material and expensive rereleases. The boom has been so extensive that many blamed Taylor Swift and Adele for vinyl shortages last year – though in truth it may have been more mundane demand and global supply chain issues. At Mars Tapes they also sell hardware: a few stereos and the occasional vintage Sony Walkman (upwards of £100), some cheap compatible headphones. “There’s a split in the market. Obviously there are certain age groups that are fully in nostalgia,” says Tadros. “But a lot come via streaming and social media – and the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films and *Stranger Things* have brought an 80s revival. When the last season of *Stranger Things* came out we had a huge uptick of people aged between 16 and 25 coming in to buy cassettes and cassette players for the first time. And anything by Kate Bush!” They even have a Mars Tapes-branded portable cassette player, made by a company in Taiwan, and selling for £35,

which offers people with a burgeoning interest a cheap way to try it without much commitment. They say they are selling at least one a day at the moment. Though the quality of cheaper players made today isn't as high as Sony originals, getting vintage Walkmans in good condition can prove difficult and costly. But that won't stop the analogue diehards from trying, convinced that an elusive classic might always be lurking somewhere.