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The Analog Geezer That Keeps Working

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By ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN

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Variety recently published an obituary for the VHS format: "VHS, 30, dies of loneliness." If there's a format heaven, you'd expect VHS to be joining audiocassettes there. At age 42, cassettes predate VHS and have been pummeled by CDs and digital downloads.

But the cassette just won't seem to die.

In 2005, cassettes represented just 1 percent of music sales, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. But the cassette format still accounts for 37 percent of audio books' \$871 million in annual sales, according to the Audio Publishers Association.

What could possibly be listeners' attraction to cassettes, which melt in the heat, snap in the cold and hiss in the ear? For listening to a book, cassettes are an oddly elegant medium, analog like a book itself. If you need to hear a paragraph again, rewind for a few seconds rather than jumping back several minutes to where a CD's track began. Older CD players don't resume where you left off, meaning you have to hunt around to find your place.

Plus, said Eileen Hutton, vice president of Brilliance Audio, cassettes "crossplatform bookmark, which CDs don't." Say you drive to the shore and are halfway into Disc 17 of Richard Ford's "Lay of the Land" when you arrive. Eject it from the car's CD player, then transfer it to your compact CD player to take to the beach, and it will -- sorry -- always restart at the beginning. A cassette, on the other hand, would be right where you left it, as sure as the bent-over corner of a page.

A 2005 listener survey in AudioFile, the audio book magazine, revealed that 53 percent of listeners did so in their cars. And plenty of cars still have tape decks. In the 2005 model year, factory installed cassette players -- often in CD-cassette combos -- were in 23 percent of all cars (down from 60 percent in 1996 models), according to Ward's Automotive Yearbook. The median age for a car on the road is 9, says the Department of Transportation, suggesting as many as half of the cars on the road have tape players. The Consumer Electronics Association, meanwhile, projects 628 million portable tape (or tape-radio combo) players will be manufactured in 2007.

Still, most audio book publishers are phasing out the cassette format. "The cassette is dying a slow death," said John McElroy, a Grammy-winning audio book producer who would prefer his work be heard in pristine digital. "But an exceedingly slow death." ANDREW ADAM NEWMAN