

8-tracks untracked

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

Whatever happened to eight-track tapes anyway?

Prerecorded tapes passed vinyl LPs in consumer preference a few years back, but it was cassette tapes that led the way. Eight-tracks are nowhere to be found on industry sales charts.

But if you (and your record collection) came of age in the early 1970s, there probably are a few eight-tracks still sitting in your closet, dust-covered and unplayed for years.

Let's say you dug them out and thought you'd sell them to raise money for a new CD player. Think there's a market? Think again.

There's not much demand for old eight-track tapes in western Wayne County.

"When we first opened up, we sold a lot of them, but we haven't sold any in a long while," said Carol Garbus, owner of Desirable Discs Garden City. "Demand seemed to dry up all at once."

THERE ISN'T much demand in Oakland County either.

"There's no market in this area," said Alan Kovan, owner of Play It Again Records, Southfield. "We get phone calls from time to time, and we usually direct people to the east side or downriver. There's still some folks with eight-track players there."

On the other hand, let's say you finally got your dad to sell you his '74 Dodge Polaris (you know, the road monster with the power plant under the hood), and you'd like nothing better than to pop the new Springsteen album in its eight-track deck while tooling down Telegraph. Think it's available?

"I'd say we stopped stocking eight-tracks around 1984," said Fred DeCoopman, a buyer for the 23-store Harmony House chain, Troy. "Manufacturers stopped making them, and the market just dried up. I guess the same thing will eventually happen to LPs."

Not much chance of having an eight-track player installed in your '87 Audi either.

"I don't think we've even had a request in a year or so," said Pete Constantakis, manager of Curious Stereo Center, Westland. "All the manufacturers we deal with stopped making them. Nowadays, you can get a CD player that will store up to 12 discs at a time for your car. I guess no one wants to bother with eight-track."

EIGHT-TRACKS were supposed to provide the last word in portable, personal stereo. But despite a few years of heavy sales in the early 1970s, the rectangular cartridges never really caught on with the public.

Here's a few reasons people didn't like eight tracks.

- Unlike continuous cassettes, eight-tracks were divided into four programs. Tapes would change programs, often with a loud thud, right in the middle of long pieces of music. "A lot of the problem was that some of the players were noisy," DeCoopman said.

- Worn tapes would "bleed," meaning audible parts of one song would appear at strange and mysterious times in the middle of another song.

- Tapes jammed frequently and were subject to "highway crunch." Upwound eight-tracks once rivaled beer cans as a roadside eyesore. "Eight-tracks had a lot more trouble tracking than cassettes," DeCoopman said.

- Interior bootleg copies of popular tapes appeared at numerous roadside locations with alarming regularity. And bootlegs contributed nothing to artist or record industry coffers. According to industry legend, none other than Jerry Lee Lewis himself once visited a few bootleg-selling truck stops, baseball bat in hand, to let them know what he thought of their sales policy.

Even through a low-budget car stereo system, eight-tracks tended to sound flatter and muddier than cassette tapes. "Cassettes have much better sound quality, much better some range," DeCoopman said. "Plus there's now compact discs as well."

What to do with those old eight-tracks? Keep them. After all, probably they're a part of your past that transcends mere monetary value.

Some classics on 8-track

Another generation had its 78 rpm records; ours has eight-track tapes. Today both forms are more valuable for the memories, not the music, they hold.

Here are a few eight-track tapes I'd listen to today (if only I could find my old player).

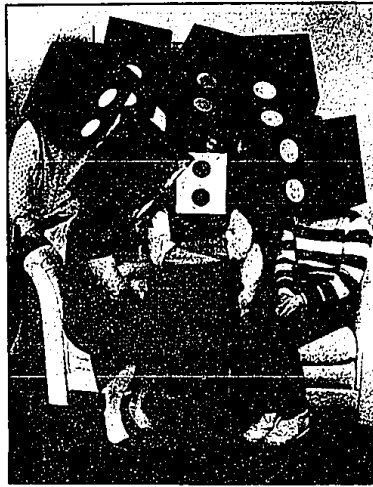
- "Stardust," various artists. — This is the double eight-track soundtrack of a British movie that featured pop star David Essex, Larry "J.R." Hagman and Ringo Starr. Never saw the movie, but the soundtrack is pretty good. Half contains early-'60s U.S. rock, Del Shannon's "Flats Off to Larry" springs to mind; half contains copycat versions by the Stray Cats — not the '80s revival band but a made-for-the-movie group with Essex and Who drummer Keith Moon. Never saw it as an LP, either.

- "In Concert, 1973 Anniversary Show" — Confession time: I bootlegged this one myself. Taped it right off the radio, when it was simulcast with the old late-night TV show. Quite a party too, with the J. Geils Band, turning in a nastier version of "First I Look at the Purse" that graces the "Full House" LP. It also included Mott the Hoople's "All the Way from Memphis," an ad mentioning the Who's just-released "Quadrophenia" and this benediction from host Sly Stone: "I don't know ya, but I'm learnin' to love ya as time passes." Don't bust me, music police, I lost the tape a long time ago.

- "The Sound of Elegance," various artists. — My dad got the brand-new luxury car. This made-for-GM tape was my end of the deal. Duke Ellington's on it, Chet Atkins, too. And there's lots and lots of strings. Great (though sadly unused) make-out music. Dad sold the luxury car just after I got my license.

— Wayne Peal

audio visual DINOS



CAMILLE MCGOT/staff photographer

Beta VCR owners are greatly outnumbered in a VHS world.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Only a few die-hards cling to their eight-track tape systems — an inferior form of audio tape that didn't stand the test of time.

Don't bet on Beta

By Kevin Brown
staff writer

If you own a Beta video recorder, maybe you beta think about switching to a more popular VHS model.

That's what most VCR and tape rental dealers say, as VHS continues to take over the market. Even Beta owners are admitting the format is on its way out.

Still, Beta is the better-quality format, most video fans say. And if you seldom rent movies — now mostly in VHS — your Beta system can survive quite nicely in a VHS world.

Opinions vary on just how long Beta will survive.

Fred Friedman, a buyer for Fretter Superstores based in Livonia, won't say the format is dying out.

"Let me be a little more blunt — it's dead," he said. "We buried it as a company about 12 months ago."

Why?

"There were no sales in it," Friedman said. "Only certain manufacturers like Toshiba, Sanyo and Sony are turning out Beta machines, but only in the high (price) end."

"On top of all that, software (prerecorded video cassettes in Beta) has stopped."

BUT OTHERS say it's premature to report the death of Beta video technology. Because if Beta is deceased, a formidable living-dead legion of Beta VCRs and rental tapes haunts several area rental stores and dealer showrooms.

Still, some larger metro Detroit video rental outlets, including the Blockbuster Video chain, no longer carry Beta tapes.

"We do VHS only," said Steve Eckersley, a Blockbuster Video assistant manager. Beta tapes "are few and far between," he said, adding "about 3 to 4 percent" of his customers ask for Beta.

"It's really a small number," he said, "even though Beta is the better format."

So why is Beta failing? Sony, which developed Beta, charged licensing fees considered too high by other video machine manufacturers and prerecorded movie makers, say several local video dealers. This sparked the development of the VHS format.

Others maintain that rival VCR makers only sought to avoid paying licensing fees to Sony, so they came up with a different system, VHS.

"Sony priced themselves right out of the market," Eckersley said.

"VHS did a better job of marketing," Friedman said, "through ads, and better prices." Yet, he said Beta "really was a good system."

PHYSICALLY, the systems differ in size and how tape travels past playback-record heads. Beta tape passes by heads as audio cassette tape does, while VHS tape passes around heads in a "W" configuration. Beta tape cassettes are also smaller, as are Beta VCRs.

Local video fans differ on the relative quality of the two systems. Some say improvements in VHS technology make it Beta's equal; others maintain Beta is best.

John Watson, owner of Uptown Video in Rochester, said that while most customers choose VHS, "there's a noticeable difference between the two." Beta is the better-quality format, he said, adding it's the format preferred by TV stations.

"That was probably true four years ago but VHS has certainly caught up," said Gerry Derwish, owner of Troy Video. He quit carrying Beta tapes six years ago.

Derwish recalled a dealer demonstration of VHS vs. Beta which he attended.

"Even our Beta expert couldn't tell the difference," he said.

BUT BETA backers beg to differ.

"I'm an electrical engineer," said Joe Case of Rochester Hills, to explain why he prefers Beta.

Why is VHS second best?

"The numbers just aren't there," he said. That is, numbers of lines of resolution that make the Beta video image sharper, better signal-to-noise ratios, and more, he said.

Case, who also owns a VHS machine, said he doesn't rent movies often. "If I do I just play them on my laser disc player and record them on my Beta machine," he said. "The stuff that I go for is high-resolution stuff."

Of the apparent demise of the Beta format, Case said, "The mass market is not concerned with high quality. The market just doesn't care. . . I just don't see it (Beta) living too much longer."

Rene Aquilina, a computer systems analyst with Texas Instruments in Livonia, bought his second Beta recorder two years ago.

"I'm an electrical engineer by trade; I usually like state-of-the-art equipment," he said, especially Beta sound quality.

Aquilina says he mainly uses his Beta VCR to tape TV programs, although he occasionally rents movies.

"You have to be selective in the places you go to," he said. Aquilina said he patronizes a Discount Video chain store in Livonia, which still carries Beta tapes.

AS SOME tape rental stores bail out on Beta, other dealers see an opportunity to fill a void.

"We specialize in Beta; we have more (tapes) now than we ever had," said Joel Savelle, manager of Network Video in Troy. "Forty-five percent of our business is Beta and growing," he said.

Savelle acknowledges that more movies are available in VHS, but said most major films can be found in Beta.

"There's so many people that bought Beta recorders over the last five years. It would be almost insane to stop making them."

"I find it (Beta) to be better quality than any VHS I've had. Most of our customers swear they have better pictures with less problems."

Still, Savelle said "it's hard to say" what the future holds for Beta technology. He predicts Beta will be around for at least the next five years.

Meanwhile, some video fans and retailers predict that eight-millimeter video, used in portable video cameras, could some day succeed VHS as the dominant VCR format.

Stay tuned.