REFRESH THE PAGE

The use of zines in art and activism in the era of blogging

by Kira Cole

In an era where "blogging" can be included on a resume, some writers and activists are seeking relief from the world of blogs, tweets, emails and instant messages. Zines, which is short for "fanzine," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, are making a comeback in some underground scenes.

In the 1930s, fanzines were made by fans of science fiction to compile complaints and thoughts on popular stories. In the 1970s, zines were an integral part of the punk scene, allowing people to discuss and review music and shows as well as distribute their creation for a small fee. In the 1980s, the Factsheet Five was a publication created to catalogue and review zines that were being written and distributed. Finally, in the 1990s, zines were used extensively within the feminist movement and the riot grrrl movement.

Today, zines are still actively being created and distributed at zine fairs, bookstores and concerts. More upscale zines, which are professionally printed, can be found online. It can't be determined how many zines are currently in circulation, but collections in zine libraries across the country are growing every day.

Why create a zine in time where people can blog their thoughts, freeing themselves from a printing fee and a limited audience?

Professor Kristen Schilt of The University of Chicago and author of "I'll Resist With Every Inch and Every Breath: Girls and Zine Making as a Form of Resistance," grew up in Austin, TX, and said everyone was into zine making in college, which introduced her to the riot grrl movement. Since then, she said she's preferred tactile print and books to online writing.

"Radical political movements have always used zine-like things. There can be something really powerful about giving people something to take with them about your views–materials to look at later," she said. "They can be a voice for change, or they can just cover a movement or a scene. They can be apolitical. They can be conservative."

According to Aaron Bloomfield, a 28-year-old sales executive who previously toured with local punk and hardcore bands and worked at Boston-based label, Bridge Nine Records, a zine starts with the thought that your opinion isn't out there or something you're interested in isn't being covered.

"Zine-making is a hobby, but it has potential to actually reach people," Bloomfield said. "The best zines start very personally. You have some perspective that you think isn't being expressed in other zines or through other avenues. In an ideal world, it resonates with people."

Bloomfield made his first zine in 2003 in an attempt to interview bands in the punk and hardcore scene that otherwise weren't being covered, or previous interviews hadn't asked the questions Bloomfield wanted the answers to.

His first zine was free, as are many zines. If not, zines range from $1-$3. More expensive zines, costing upwards of $8, are often found at zine fairs, and include extensive research.

"Each zine probably cost me $1.50 to copy, and I made 100 of each issue, so it cost me $100 or $150 to make, but I just gave them away," Bloomfield said. "I hate when people charge for zines. They're low quality, but they're supposed to be–at least the good ones. Too much production value takes something away–something about what makes a zine a zine, versus going to the store and buying a book. It should be accessible to all."

According to Rachel Atcheson, 20, a Boston student and activist, the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic associated with zines prohibits them from being used

to make profit. The DIY ethic is definitive in zine culture. If you're looking to turn a profit, then you're no longer creating a zine.

Karl St-Pierre, 21, of Montreal, Canada said he recently put out 100 copies of a 60-page zine. It cost him $60, and he sold each for a dollar.

Zines take many forms–books, pamphlets, individual pieces of paper, etc. However, they're always the voice of an individual. Organizations and corporations cannot release a zine, according to Atcheson. The agenda has to be self-expression.

"A zine is anything with content that's unique to the person producing it," Bloomfield said.

Despite their rise within subculture, the subject matter of a zine is in no way limited. Bloomfield said he's seen zines ranging from music to ugly gym shoes.

Recently, Atcheson created a zine with essays of her own and other writers, with topics ranging from veganism, sobriety, prison abolition, feminism, queer theory, music and much more.

"People aren't going to agree with everything, but the knowledge should be out there," Atcheson said.

The purpose of a zine is dependent on the intention of the author. For Bloomfield, zines are the lifeblood of the music scene, and zines have been around as long as bands have been playing.

By nature, zines also take longer to produce than a blog post. However, you don't have to be a writer with an established voice. You can create a narrative of your life, which is powerful if you don't see yourself represented in other media, Schilt said.

"Every zine has its place, it just needs context. A zine that's written by a 30-year-old who's been going to shows for 20 years has just as much value as a zine being written by a 14-year-old kid going to his third show," Bloomfield said. "They're just different perspectives on the same scene. If you want the true picture, you should probably read both."

For others, zines are used solely for self-expression, Atcheson said.

"I don't think all zines have a purpose on a grand scale, but on an individual level, zines are really good for the zine makers," she said. "A lot of time, the zine is a method of self-care. For example, I have friends that write zines as a form of obtaining their mental health because you can get a lot out of it; the process is really fun–you write a zine, copy it, distribute it, have people read it–I think it's sort of a cleansing process."

St-Pierre said zines allow for those without music talent to offer their own contribution.

"They are the most direct form of personal expression," he said. "Not everyone can play instruments or write lyrics."

Often used for activism and spreading new trends, zines are limited in their audience and distribution by nature and definition.

According to Bloomfield, the element of creation is lost within the blogosphere. There's an artistic element and rawness that can't be created by way of HTML and coding.

"You'd get more exposure making a blog in 2013 than you would in a zine," Bloomfield said. "It's still not the same as cutting and pasting onto a piece of paper for hours and then going to photocopy it, hand assembling and putting it together. Nothing on the internet ever gave me the same satisfaction as holding the finished product of a zine in my hand. I can't imagine that sharing a link to my blog would give me the same satisfaction of handing my zine to someone at a show."

Schilt said zines are not always limited by their medium. People traded them or shared them, and because they were photocopied, you could just make a copy for someone.

However, St-Pierre said despite zines having their own purpose, blogs have a necessity in underground scenes, too.

"Blogs are more suited for digging into the past when it comes to those interested in subculture communities–like the punk and hardcore scene–because their format allows for sharing of old videos and extensive galleries of old flyers, pictures and zines," St-Pierre said.

Atcheson said she's not ashamed to admit that zines frequently "preach to a choir."

"Punks don't usually go to blogs. If you even made flyers about an awesome blog and handed them out, punks wouldn't necessarily go. Versus if they pick up a zine, they'll eventually read it," Atcheson said. "[For that audience,] it's more accessible because not everyone has the internet, and overall, if you bring it to a crowd of people who don't read the internet often, the ideas are easier to spread."

Endless in their creative possibilities, but limited in their distribution, zines not only capture culture, but also dictate upcoming trends, determined by the zines' creators and authors.

DECKED OUT

The revival of cassettes. Were they ever gone?

by Kira Cole

There seems to be an affinity for the retro in popular culture, exhibited in pop music, fashion, and television alike. Some of the most popular shows on Netflix are from the 90s, contemporary rap artists are using samples from the 80s, and fashion is recycled decade after decade.

Within some niche music scenes, bands are still recording cassettes, which are distributed either by the band itself or a third party. Despite the technical advances in music recording and distribution, some musicians and fans said they prefer the raw sound of a self-recorded tape, at a price cheaper than a record.

Kriss Stress, 28, created his label Nuts & Bolts, after years of boredom writing blogs, compiling zines, and hosting podcasts. Nuts & Bolts releases tapes in runs of 100 before running the risk of paying $1,200 to release a 7" vinyl record. According to Stress, tapes are the cheapest and most economical way for his label to sell new bands.

"Every kid has had their kick of looking at old bands tapes. We want to emulate what we think is cool," said Neil Patel, 22, who owns a small record label in Philadelphia–Back to Back Records.

However, Stress said collectability isn't the only motive to selling tapes.

"On the surface, it would seem that we cater to a market where collectability is the rule, but that's not the case, really," said Stress.

Flint Beard, 24, of Oklahoma City, who's played bands and been an avid collector throughout the last eight years, said in an email, "In an age of such accessible free music (i.e. illegal downloading or even legal downloading) tangible music memorabilia is becoming more and more rare."

Stress said, "House fires happen, sure. But those are far rarer than a hard drive eating itself."

David Jaycox, a 24-year-old Long Island native, has played in a handful of contemporary punk and hardcore bands, including playing bass in Backtrack. Jaycox said that supporting the music scene goes beyond listening to the music. Album art, layouts, and lyrics are just as important.

"Records are the ultimate form of music in a physical form, but tapes are a close second," said Jaycox. "They're extremely cheap to make and buy, they can take an absolute beating–unlike a cd–and still work, are portable, and when your auxiliary cable bites the dust, you can still rock 'em in your car."

Shortly after the invention of compact cassette tapes in Europe in 1964, sales overtook 8-tracks in the 70s, and then overtook LPs in the early 80s. After their peak in the late 80s, cassette culture was overcome by compact discs in the early 90s.

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"Tapes didn't die in the 2000s when MP3s took over. They just went below ground where folks were using them all along," said Nuts & Bolts creator Stress. "Experimental musicians kept using them, caring less that the country music section at Wal-Mart was being abolished. The cassette revival was in 2009-2010."

In the peak of compact disc distribution, In My Eyes, an influential hardcore band out of Boston, released their demo in 1997 on cassette.

Pete Maher, 44, the band's vocalist, said the band sold over 1,000 tapes to fans all over the world.

"It was funny, as even back then lots of people would say, 'I love tapes, but my car doesn't have a tape player. It's CD only.'" said Maher. "But, we loved tapes."

"With a tape, after so many times through, the sound is going to degrade, and eventually not play anymore. That's cool."

Ben Levy, 21, from Denver has been in bands that distribute tapes, but prefers collecting.

"My dad was in the record industry and just had hundreds and hundreds of tapes. As I got older I really started to like the idea that a tape has a natural lifecycle, which is something no other format of music really has," said Levy. "You can listen to a CD every day forever, and it'd still play the same. With a tape, after so many times through, the sound is going to degrade, and eventually not play anymore. That's cool."

After tapes lost their popular appeal, independent artists kept the art alive as a branch of the do-it-yourself (DIY) movement, which included fanzines and mail art in the 70s and 80s.

While tapes have a unique sound, as Levy explained, they also show their wear. No one is arguing that the quality of tapes is superior.

"Regardless of genre, if there are cheap blank cassettes to be purchased, and shitty music recorded, then there will be crappy demo tapes," said Beard.

Patel has worked with a handful of bands to put out tapes and said it's an exhibit of how much a band loves what they're doing.

"CD's are just so watered down, expensive, and what's the real appeal of having a CD?" asked Patel. "A

tape is more exclusive, and I feel like it shows that the band put effort into doing something different."

Today, bands continue to record and share their music on cassette and fans continue to collect and trade new and old tapes.

Independent artists recording tapes today do so through independent and at-home recording. Oftentimes, bands distribute their tapes at shows, via mail and fanzines, and occasionally incorporating a third-party distributor.

Similar to the aesthetic of a fanzine, cassette packaging is seen to be as collectable as the recording itself. Hand-drawn and packaged by independent artists, cassettes have an artistic appeal unique from the digitally mastered images found on contemporary CDs and online downloads.

Stress said he's seen tape shells with cloth stitching, transparency sheets and other found materials. However, Nuts & Bolts prefers a clean, distinct packaging: black shells with silver imprinting and professionally printed J-cards that are stark black with matching silver font on all spines and backs.

"I think tapes exist—for those who are making them, at least—to help satisfy the more artistic fetishes that all of us hold," said Stress.

Codey Thompson, 20, of the Canadian hardcore band Sabotage, said tapes are also easier to store and make for a quick sale.

"With the money and time you save by putting your music on a tape, it's much easier to direct your efforts towards the look and layout of the insert/cover," said Thompson. "You can afford to go that extra mile with a colored cover, different jewel cases, and colored tapes."

In the same way, tapes have a collectability factor similar to vinyl records, but different in that they are not as mass-produced and are significantly more durable, both in use and packaging. A tape, unlike vinyl, can be knocked around and left out without risk of warping or snapping.

"A band isn't going to be raking in money from tapes, so it's obviously there for the love of it. And a digital download? Forget about it, it's always better to have the physical thing in your hand," said Patel.

Robert C. Borgoño, a 19-year-old Long Island native who now calls Boston home, is an avid collector and dabbled in distribution.

"I prefer cassettes to records because not only are tapes much cheaper to buy and produce and are a

"There will always be those who love tapes, just as there will always be those who feign surprise that they're still being made."

lot more collectible," said Borgoño. "If every band made only LPs, then it would be much more expensive to collect such things, but with cassettes, I save."

In the summer of 2011, Borgoño started a small label called WarTapes. In an effort to spread the music of new, independent bands, Borgoño and a few friends were able to distribute tapes with one tape duplicator. The label and band saved money, and each tape was personally handled.

However, tapes do not produce a substantial profit. In producing and distributing tapes, artists often break even or make a minimal profit.

On average it costs 17 cents for one tape. Tapes can be bought at a low price or found on Craigslist for free. Stress said Nuts & Bolts sells their tapes for $3.25 wholesale and $4.25 retail, but in the end, many are given away as a promotional tool.

"If you do a run of 200 to 300 tapes, the profit generated from selling them all versus producing them is huge," said Borgoño. "We put all the money back into getting more tapes or higher quality materials."

Stress said Nuts & Bolts often breaks even. The more limited and collectible the tape runs are, the more Nuts & Bolts catalog and profile grows.

Bands produce them for the sake of their unique sound and the artistic-opportunity it offers.

"It's hard to lose money of [off tapes]. People love to support up-and-coming bands, and it's an affordable way of putting out your material while still being able to sell them for cheap," said Jaycox. "You won't make an insane profit off them, but hopefully you'll either break even or make enough for the next release if you're a small band."

Tapes benefit the bands and collectors, and are inviting for new fans; rather than download an album at full-price or buy a CD, new-listeners can pick up a tape at a show for less than five dollars.

"When I toured nationally in a relatively unknown band, tapes—sometimes with an accompanying digital download slip—are the best way to sell music," said Beard. "They appeal to the D.I.Y. ethos, especially in the punk and hardcore scene, and are a pretty unique, cheap, and risk free purchase for kids at a show."

As clear as the benefits may be, cassettes are also limited in a time where tape players themselves are a novelty. Searching for cassette players on Amazon.com yields few results, and products that do come up look dated and archaic. Prices range from $ to $60, due to some of them being in used conditions, and others being few of their kind.

But for those with the ability to collect and listen, tapes continue to have their unique aesthetic.

"It's nice to see an internet-age band still trying to put in that physical work for everyone into their music," said Patel.

Sharing the same sentiment, Jaycox said, "Tapes have definitely made a huge resurgence the last couple of years. Maybe it's the nostalgia of it all, maybe it's because some people think it's just the new hype, or maybe it's because it's just plain cheap."

According to Stress, no scene ever goes away.

"There will always be those who love tapes, just as there will always be those who feign surprise that they're still being made," said Stress. "National Audio Company has recently hired on half a dozen more staff to take on the load of orders that they receive daily."

"I find it hard to believe that all of those orders are comprised solely of sermons and religious programs," said Stress.

"Tapes won't die. Period."