

PlayTape: a Truly Portable Tape Format

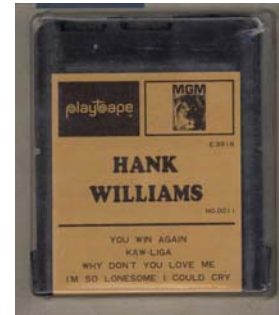
Frank Daniels

The sixties were an amazing decade for the development of audio formats. As the decade began, the only tape format available to consumers was the reel-to-reel (or open-reel) tape. In 1962-3, cartridge and cassette systems were both introduced. With the compact cassette considered largely unsuitable for music until 1966, Earl Muntz's four-track cartridge quickly came to dominate the market. The four-track had been created to use in automobiles, and within a few years the format was widespread. Bill Lear had worked for Muntz but was dissatisfied with the format; his eight-track tape came on the scene in 1965.

That leads us to 1966: the year of *Pet Sounds*, *Revolver*, and the PlayTape. For at least twenty years, Frank Stanton had been determined to make a tape format that was portable. As four tracks and eight tracks gained in popularity, Stanton pitched the idea of a format that was not restricted to homes or automobiles. He marketed portable tapes to Smith Corona as a means of eliminating what they called in advertising "the silent letter." Stanton believed that people would stop writing on paper – instead sending taped messages to one another. Within a year, his idea was regarded as a failure.

The PlayTape, however, was a seasonal success. Stanton and his partners formed PlayTape Inc. and set up offices at the twelve-story 1115 Broadway building in New York City. Together they designed several portable tape players and what they called an improvement in the tape cartridge. The PlayTape had a twin-track design, meaning that it consisted of two (mono) channels, on a one-eighth-inch wide tape. Since the need for rewinding tapes was considered undesirable, all PlayTapes had a continuous-loop design (like their four-track and eight-track counterparts). However, the PlayTape was smaller and slimmer – making it easily portable. With a handheld, battery-operated machine, you could take your music to the beach with you. The size, however, meant that no more than 20 minutes of music could be contained on one tape.

That restriction was recognized by the developers. Rather than compete directly against the formats that packaged complete albums onto single tapes, the PlayTape would typically contain two, four, or eight songs – costing different amounts of money. The two-song tape would correspond to a single; cartridges for these would be red. The four-song PlayTape was recognizable as the equivalent of an extended play (EP) forty-five; these cartridges were black (for popular releases) or light blue (for children's selections). The longer



white-shelled tapes usually contained the majority of songs from a long-playing album. The company planned also to market tapes with talk rather than music; these would have gray cartridges. However, the format was only popular in the three forms that we commonly find: children's; long play (white); and EP (black). It is not known whether the other two forms were sold commercially. And yes, sometimes you'll find re-used tape shells that are the "wrong" color.

As 1966 rolled along, the company gained the sponsorship of two important entities: Sears, Roebuck, and Co. (who would sell their players) and MGM (who would provide music). The product was officially announced at a meeting of distributors of MGM records that Summer, with artists like the Animals, Hank Williams, Herman's Hermits, and Sam the Sham being chosen to introduce the United States to the new format. Patents for the portable player and the tape cartridge were submitted to the US Patent Office on July 18, 1966; similar submissions in other countries soon followed. These documents show Robert Schreiber of Playtape Inc. as the inventor. Although the PlayTape would not last long, the Schreiber design is referenced by many later documents as the forerunner to most portable tape players.

By early 1967, the format had been picked up by other record companies, including ABC/Dunhill, A&M, Warner/Reprise, and United Artists. Motown and Capitol would soon follow. Columbia and RCA resisted the format, though, never releasing their artists on PlayTapes, but bubble packs containing PlayTapes from other artists were soon available through Sears stores and other retailers everywhere.

As the company expanded, they changed the graphics of their label/cover designs. The earliest tapes (mid-1966) had covers that were all-brown with black print. Later in 1966, the company sought to add contrast to the covers that would make the artist and song selections stand out. Tapes made during this period have brown backgrounds along with white boxes. From Spring, 1967, to about November, 1967, PlayTapes have a simpler black-and-white motif. The first Capitol tapes appeared during this period, and so the first Beach Boys and Beatles PlayTapes have black-and-white covers. Late in 1967, photographs of the artists were added to the labels for the first time. Tapes made from that time until late Spring, 1968, have a colored background (red, orange, rust, beige, yellow, light green, olive green, blue, or magenta) and a picture of the artist.

In mid-1968, PlayTape began using the stereo catalog numbers on their labels; previous issues showed the mono catalog number.



Replacing the larger colored background, a smaller bar of color is commonly found across the middle of the label of this issue. These releases came out as the format was declining in popularity, though, and are less-frequently found by collectors. Finally, PlayTapes made from the beginning of 1969 through about July of that year have graphics on them resembling the LP cover. These are the most artistic and the hardest to find.

The main EP series was numbered from No. 0001 to at least No. 1076. The LP series was numbered in the 3000's, ending at about 3600. Children's tapes belonged to the 7000 series; a popular Disney set exists, containing several of these and a player.

The portability of the format had made it popular in 1967-8. This did not go unnoticed. Almost immediately, sellers of eight-track cartridges began to ask if players were available for them similar to the PlayTape players. When handheld eight-track players began to fly off the shelves, the makers of PlayTapes realized that the unique quality of their format was being taken away. In late 1968, they marketed a PlayTape auto player, but this came too late. Plans to introduce stereo PlayTapes also fell by the wayside. Meanwhile, Frank Stanton and PlayTape Inc. moved on to develop video cartridges. In 1969, they partnered with Avco/Embassy to form Cartridge Television Inc. (CTI) and to work on the Cartrivision system: the first videotape system that allowed home taping as well as the purchase of prerecorded tapes. Introduced in 1972, the format lasted one year.

In the years that passed, PlayTapes became first a curiosity and then a collectible. Realizing that fewer PlayTapes were made than eight-tracks, four-tracks, or vinyl albums, collectors have placed premiums on the format whenever they hope to assemble a truly complete collection of their favorite artists.

Several models of PlayTape machines are known, most of which were manufactured by PlayTape, Inc. These are:

Disneyland Model 1100

PlayTape Model 1200

PlayTape Model 1310 (available in beige or red; with or without MGM logo)

PlayTape Model 1320

PlayTape Model 1401

PlayTape Model 1441 "Hipster"

PlayTape Model 1604 (wood-grain desktop model)

The VRC Valiant (silver)

Mayfair "Swing a Tune" Model 412

Sapphire Playtape I (player/radio for Volkswagens, 1968-9)

Sapphire Playtape II (player for Volkswagens, 1968-9)

A survey of the more widely collected PlayTapes includes:

The Mothers of Invention, *We're Only in It for the Money*, No. 0882, color bar -- \$300

Jackie Lomax, *Is This What You Want?*, No. 1049, cover graphics -- \$250

The Beatles, *A Hard Day's Night*, No. 3111, black-and-white -- \$150

Mike Nesmith, *The Wichita Train Whistle Sings*, No. 0908, color bar -- \$100

George Harrison, *Wonderwall Music*, No. 0989, cover graphics -- \$100

The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds*, No. 0537, black-and-white -- \$75

Jimi Hendrix Experience, (*Axis*) *Bold as Love*, No. 0829, colored background -- \$75

As with any format, though, there are plenty of these tapes that still sell for under \$10 each. Prices vary widely, depending on condition, with “still-sealed” copies in Near Mint bubble packs commanding a premium.

Together with Perry Cox, Frank Daniels is co-author of the current edition of the *Beatles Price Guide for American Records*. They are currently working together on the first edition of the *Beach Boys Price Guide* series. Frank has been collecting prerecorded tapes since 1981 and found his first PlayTape at a Salvation Army store in 1983. Much of this information is previously unpublished. Contents of this article are © 2008 Frank Daniels.