

RESEARCH REPORT

Auto-audio Ethnography; or, Pre-teen Girls' Capturing their Popular Musical Practices on Tape

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Rosa: Tape 1, Side B

The recording begins in a delicatessen. Rosa is with her mother and twin brother. Over the noise of cars passing the shop, Rosa's mother can be heard ordering some Cabanas while Rosa sings a song by her favourite pop group 5ive. As they leave the shop, Rosa says goodbye to the shopkeeper who had given the twins a free meat pie each. Their mother asks them to wait until they get home to eat because, 'I don't want crumbs in the car.' On the drive home, Rosa is misbehaving and gets told by her mother to 'stop being stupid' and 'Don't Rosa.' The radio is on in the car. The song 'Steal My Sunshine' begins playing and Rosa sings along, changing the words:

If you steal my sunshine
All truth in the house
Old house, Old house
If you've got an old house
If you've got a new house
If you've got an old house
If you've got an old house
If you've got an ugly old house
If you steal my sunshine

The next song, Bananarama's 'Venus,' is a flashback. As the car pulls into the driveway the radio is turned off and Rosa sings a line from the song, 'Yeah baby she's got it.' The car doors slam, and the family makes its way inside the house. The tape continues to roll, and all that can be heard for a time is crackling and other indistinguishable noises. But then Rosa is heard again, this time changing the words to 'Venus' as she sings, 'I'm from your anus, I'm from penis.' She giggles and the recording ends.

The above extract comes from a research tape produced by nine-year-old Rosa, a participant in my doctoral project exploring pre-teen girls' negotiations of popular music and identity in Adelaide, South Australia. A deliberate and central aspect of this research involved providing a still camera and tape recorder (standard note-taker) to each of the seven girls involved in the project. Over the course of six months, the girls were given an opportunity to capture aspects of their worlds with these methodological tools. My utilisation of still cameras and tape recorders, combined with participant observation, moves beyond the previous ways that children have been studied in Western cultural contexts. Having the methodological tools under the control of my young participants opened up the possibilities of capturing the importance of popular music in the everyday experiences of pre-teen girls' self-making. In this paper, I focus on the place of the tape recorder in the research process and how auto-audio ethnography can provide glimpses into girls' everyday musical practices.¹

Researching Popular Music

There are many methodological approaches to the study of popular music. Increasingly, however, the ethnographic approach is being called upon as a method with the potential to 'emphasise that popular music is something created, used and interpreted by different individuals and groups.'² Ethnography is concerned with questions of how culture is *lived*. It demands a move beyond the text into an exploration of lived cultural practices and identities. As Keil and Feld state, academics cannot

fully understand the power of the participation idea without ethnography, without dealing with the grounded realities that are the social life of those 'codes' and 'texts' everyone wants to 'read.'³

They suggest that it is far from satisfactory research practise merely to declare the textual 'meanings' rather than examining the meanings, the texts, as they are lived and experienced in everyday life. Rather than being centred on texts, then, the ethnographic approach involves spending a prolonged period of time with a group of people, observing their activities and interactions and participating in their everyday lives.⁴

The important place of ethnography in popular music research with young people is stressed by Andy Bennett who believes that ethnography is necessary if we are to fully grasp the place of popular music in their everyday lives. In Bennett's research, the ethnographic approach provided 'crucial insights into the cultural relevance of music and style within the contextual frame of those localised experiences that collectively inform[ed] the everyday lives of his young participants.'⁵ So, as Cohen has suggested, it is by way of ethnography that popular music researchers can increase their 'knowledge of popular music processes and practices', and, further, 'challenge preconceived notions or "ungrounded" assumptions' about such processes and practices.⁶

¹ For a discussion of the camera in the research process, see Gerry Bloustein and Sarah Baker, 'On Not Talking to Strangers: Researching the Micro Worlds of Girls through Visual Auto-ethnographic Practices,' *Social Analysis* 47.3 (2003).

² Sara Cohen, 'Ethnography and Popular Music Studies,' *Popular Music* 12.2 (1993): 127.

³ Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1994) 20.

⁴ Cohen, 'Ethnography' 123-38.

⁵ Andy Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000) 2.

⁶ Cohen, 'Ethnography' 135.

This last point is particularly relevant to my own research into the musical practices of pre-teen girls. Circulating notions and assumptions situate girls' consumption (never production) of popular music as trivial, undiscerning and passive. As such, their musical practices fall within the realm of the ordinary, the banal, firmly lodged in the 'everyday.' Everyday life is the 'place where routine praxis occurs.'⁷ Thus as Gardiner states, the everyday lifeworld may appear to 'exhibit ... tendencies towards passive consumerism and an inward-looking unreflective and routinized form.'⁸ But such homogenising of the everyday leads to 'an "emptying out" of the richness and complexity of daily experience.'⁹ Rather than being linked to notions of the ordinary, the everyday needs to be reconceptualised as the realm of the extraordinary. As Willis puts it, it is the 'extraordinary in the ordinary, which is extraordinary, which makes both into culture, common culture.'¹⁰ The question, then, becomes one of how the ethnographer can capture the extraordinariness of the everyday. I contend that in ethnographic research concerning pre-teen girls' musical practices, it is the tape recorder that can fully activate 'the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it [the everyday].'¹¹

Tape Recorders as Methodological Tools

Tape recorders do not appear to be commonly used by ethnographers in the form in which they were utilised in my research, that is, under the complete control of the participants. I do not doubt that this neglect is partly a result of the

impact of the visual ... [being] so overwhelming that we sometimes forget it has been accompanied by a cultural revolution almost as ubiquitous. This is the revolution in *sound*.¹²

Indeed, apart from its use to make sound recordings in ethnomusicology the tape recorder remains an almost invisible (or perhaps that should be inaudible!) tool in ethnographic research. The book *Reflexive Ethnography*, for example, devotes an entire chapter to using visual media in ethnographic research but makes no mention of audio recording.¹³ However, over the course of my fieldwork I discovered that sound recordings made by research participants had the potential to be as useful as still photography and other visual methodologies 'for probing the hidden arena' of pre-teen girls' everyday lives.¹⁴

The tape recorders used in the research were note-takers (compact cassette recorders) that took standard sized audio-cassette tapes. The standard note-takers were chosen as methodological tools because, unlike those that use micro-cassettes, the resulting standard

⁷ Michael. E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000) 11.

⁸ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* 13.

⁹ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* 13.

¹⁰ Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) 2.

¹¹ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life* 6.

¹² Paul du Gay, et al., *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage, 1999) 19.

¹³ Charlotte A. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁴ Judith A. Cook and Mary M. Fonow, 'Knowledge and Women's Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research,' in Joyce McCarl Nielson, ed., *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) 82.

tapes could be used subsequently by the girls outside the research process. For example, the tapes were compatible with other audio equipment, such as personal cassette players and other stereo systems. The tape recorders were not particularly sophisticated, being at the lower end of a wide range of recording and replay technology that were available. They consisted of play, stop, record, pause, rewind, and fast-forward modes of operation, the sound was mono, the speaker and microphone were built-in rather than external, and there was an ear phone socket to accommodate private listening. With these small portable tape recorders the user is not confined to taping music alone. Sounds, voices and music, recorded from various sources, 'can be edited, mixed and recombined' by the user in order to produce a personalised audio montage.¹⁵ Not only is this cassette technology easy to use, it is also low cost, and these are both essential factors for research with pre-teen girls.

The employment of tape recorders as an integral component of my research was influenced by reports of their usefulness in studies conducted by the British researchers Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke and Craig.¹⁶ In their studies examining child care and the Child Support Act, Mahon and colleagues taped numerous interviews with children. However, during the interviews it was the children who had the control of the tape recorder. It was found that giving the children the control to turn the recorder on and off when they liked aided 'not only the willingness to be taped but also the rapport between researcher and respondent.'¹⁷ The issue of control in such research is of vital importance. Giving the children control of the device is a (tacit) means of providing these young participants with authority in the research process. In operating the recorders they are able to regulate and direct the material that will be taped. In this way the children can keep the recording 'in check.'

With the issue of control in mind, I anticipated that the tape recorder had much potential outside of the interview room. Participants' authority could be extended upon in an ethnographic project by actually providing the girls with a tape recorder for an extended period and ultimately relinquishing all control over what was recorded and deleted. I call this approach auto-audio ethnography. The prefix 'auto-' is being used here in the broadest of contexts. The participants were provided with a tape recorder and given the opportunity to record anything they wanted (not restricted to their popular music practices). When they finished recording each tape, the girls would return it to me, I would make a copy, and then return the original to the girl. The tapes were therefore the girls' own recordings, made for themselves, with research often appearing as a secondary objective in the tapes' compilation. However, the girls were not involved in the final analysis of the material. Although the girls had opportunities to discuss their recordings with me (indeed, many an afternoon in the fieldwork site of after school care was spent hearing recordings and being told the story of how and why they came into being) they were not responsible for the final interpretation and the writing up of the research. While certainly this audio ethnographic approach increases participants' input in the research process, and is an important facilitator of reciprocity, the degree to which this participation enabled the girls to understand how their 'personal history'

¹⁵ Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience* (London: Routledge, 1990) 120–22.

¹⁶ Ann Mahon, Caroline Glendinning, Karen Clarke and Gary Craig, 'Researching Children: Methods and Ethics,' *Children and Society* 10 (1996): 145–54.

¹⁷ Mahon, et al., 'Researching Children' 152.

is 'implicated in larger social functions and historical processes'—a defining element in auto-ethnography—is questionable.¹⁸

Yet, the utilisation of the tape recorders in this research was certainly important. With the recorders in the girls' hands the young participants become 'intrinsic to the research process itself,' making this research not so much *on* girls as subjects but *with* girls as participants.¹⁹ Especially in terms of the issue of agency, this methodological tool provided the young girls with a 'voice' in the research process, enabling them to represent *their* experiences and to have their voices heard. With complete control over such things as subject matter, style and frequency of use, as well as the ability to record over material which they did not wish to keep, the girls had an opportunity to represent themselves and their popular musical practices in ways that were not available to them previously—at least not to the extent offered by my research.

With the tape recorders under the girls control I was given access to aspects of the girls' musical practices that I would not have otherwise been privy to if the research had been restricted to participant observation in the after school care centre. Unlike participant observation, auto-audio ethnography was a strategy that was not dependent on my being present. As such, the tape recorders could be taken by the girls into spaces which as an adult researcher I may not have been able to readily access, for example classrooms, school camps, and in some cases the girls' homes. Rosa's family outing to the shops, caught on tape, is a perfect example of what has been described as 'ethnography by proxy.'²⁰ This recording provides me with access to everyday musical practices which, as a researcher (and stranger), I would not normally have been privy too. What we have then, is an audio snapshot of the ordinary (a Saturday morning shopping trip) which offers the absent researcher insights into such things as the place of the radio in car journeys, the preferred station in the car, the movement in and out of singing along to the radio, the changing of lyrics in such a situation, and the continuation of a song beyond the radio being turned off.

A final important point to be made here concerns the suitability of the tape recorders as methodological tools in research with Western children. My female participants were familiar with, and had prior knowledge of, this audio technology. Most of the girls had access to cassette decks in their home so their use of audio technology was in no way dependent on their being part of my research. In particular, the girls were familiar with making compilation tapes which they filled with their favourite music. In many ways the research tapes produced by the girls in this project were extensions of this common practice.

Compilation Tapes

As the motion picture *High Fidelity* (2000) suggests, tape compilations are important cultural sites through which music choice becomes a clear statement of identity. The declaration of musical tastes in the compilation tape can be integral to the simultaneous representation and

¹⁸ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (London: Duke UP, 1999) 276. See Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, for further discussion of participants increasing their input in the research process.

¹⁹ Gerry Bloustien and Margaret Peters, 'Playing for life: New approaches to researching youth and their youth practices,' *Youth Studies Australia* 22.2 (2003): 36.

²⁰ Sandra Wallman, et al., 'Ethnography by Proxy: Strategies for Research in the Inner City,' *Ethnos* 1-2 (1980): 5–38.

constitution of cultural identity. It is interesting to note that in the past it was females, rather than males, who purchased the bulk of blank audiocassette tapes.²¹ A significant part of female consumption of popular music is said to consist of recording compilations of favourite songs—especially off the radio.²² Although girls under the age of fourteen now account for at least half of all recording purchases,²³ recent research by Einerson and Minks, for example, suggests that many pre-teens do not have the means to purchase pop music.²⁴ They found that pre-teens could not afford to buy singles or albums regularly so instead they would record songs off the radio in order to make 'greatest hits' tapes. This was evident in my own research where the girls had many self-recorded tapes, all of which they labelled 'mega-mix.' Often the format of the girls' research tapes mirrored that of the mega-mix compilations. Indeed, in ten year old Kylie's case, the research tape only consisted of songs she had taped from her favourite radio station, SA-FM.

Making the mega-mix tapes involved long sessions by the radio waiting for songs to be played which were desirable additions to the compilation. When the girls taped music from the radio they usually made an attempt not to capture the radio presenter's commentary at the start and end of each song. The ideal was for a tape that had smooth transitions between songs without the intrusive voice of the radio host. Of course, this often resulted in their missing the very beginning of each song, and sometimes the song's conclusion as well. In addition, on the research tapes returned by eleven year old Clare the radio announcer's voice initially became replaced by her own commentary as she named the title and artist of each song. For example, 'The next song is "What's a girl to do" by Sister 2 Sister.' However in Clare's case the attempts to both exclude the presenter's voice and add her own announcements did not last for many songs. Eventually Clare remained silent and the tape was allowed to run on through both the presenter's commentary and also the advertisements. Near the end of the tape Clare's voice was heard again:

And that last song was by Abba, 'Dancing Queen.' We hope that you, well I hope that you enjoyed this tape I made. The last couple of songs were mixed. I did not do the names of them 'cause I couldn't be bothered.

Here, Clare succinctly states the reason why the radio presenter's voice eventually remained on the recording and why she remained silent. For Clare and the other participants it was simply too tedious an exercise to continue stopping and starting the tape recorder in order to exclude it.

What this taping activity enables young girls like Clare to do is produce a 'personal' compilation of songs which have meanings for them at the time.²⁵ In their editing out and by placing themselves in the role of announcer, young girls regain some control over the radio

²¹ Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Penguin, 1995) 437.

²² O'Brien, *She Bop* 437.

²³ Larissa Dubecki, 'The Knowledge: Five Things you Didn't Know about ... Young People and Music,' *The Age*, Today, 16 August 2000; Christie Eliezer, 'Pre-teens Rule the Pop World,' *Business Review Weekly* 23.2 (2001): 2.

²⁴ Martha J. Einerson, "'Do ya Wanna Dance?'" Collaborating with and Empowering Preadolescent Girls in Feminist Interpretative Research,' *Frontiers* 19.3 (1998); Amanda Minks, 'Growing and Grooving to a Steady Beat: Pop Music in Fifth Graders' Social Lives,' *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 31 (1999): 77–101.

²⁵ Willis, *Common Culture* 63.

medium. This is notably evident in nine-year-old Kate's research tapes where she creates her own radio programmes complete with music, DJ banter, advertising, and radio 'call-signs'.²⁶ In this play, the girls are not only music-listeners but also music-makers, carefully constituting their music tastes. The process of 'editing out' was of particular interest to me in terms of the girls' production of their research tapes. It was in these tapes that the hard work of representation came to light. The tapes reveal that sometimes it is not so much what is chosen to appear on the tapes as what is *not* recorded that is pertinent to analysis. I consider this below.

Capturing the Hard Work of Representation: Filling the Gaps

During the time I spent with the girls in after school care I observed many of their recordings being carried out. I was therefore often able to see what raw material was captured on the tapes and also what the girls' edited out before the tape was returned to me. What each girl chose to record, and also aspects of their musical practices which were not chosen for inclusion on film and tape, reflected the girls' conscious choices in the ways they wanted to be represented. So, I was interested not only in how my participants represented their popular musical practices on film and tape, but also the *gaps* in this representation—the aspects of their play that I observed but which were not included in their own overt reflections.

As an example of these gaps, I turn again to Rosa's tapes. On her tapes, and in her performances in after school care, Rosa openly flouted her interest in pop groups like 5ive and the singer Christina Aguilera.²⁷ These were musical tastes she had in common with her pre-teen peers. She even stretched the boundaries of such pop listening in these spaces with overt forays into other genres, such as the 'rock' style of the Australian band Custard. But some of her musical tastes remained 'silent' and were omitted altogether when representing her musical identity to the peer group and on the research tapes. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, Rosa never openly displayed her enjoyment of Italian folk song. Indeed her consumption of this music only came to my attention by accident, when Rosa mistakenly handed me a 'personal' mega-mix tape (she had been listening to this in the tape recorder) thinking it was her research tape. When I asked Rosa about this music after I had listened to the tape she realised her mistake and apart from confirming the origin of the music she refused to discuss it with me. Rosa was aware that this was not a valued form of music in her peer group, and as a negative marker of distinction, it was omitted from her public representation of identity.

So my interest was in what each girl chose to record and also aspects of their social worlds that were not captured or were discarded by the girls. It was because I engaged with Rosa and the other girls in their social worlds through participant observation that I was able to understand the significance of the missing moments and gaps in their audio recordings. I anticipated that these audio methodological tools would provide the girls with an opportunity to express, explore and represent their (aged/gendered) selves and their engagement with popular music. On first listening to the girls' tapes perhaps the first thing that one notices is the poor sound quality. Yet clearly the quality of the tape recordings was not the focus of my

²⁶ See Sarah Baker, 'Pop in(to) the Bedroom: Popular Music in Pre-teen Girls' Bedroom Culture,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (February 2004): 75–93.

²⁷ See Sarah Baker, "'Rock on, Baby!': Pre-teen Girls and Popular Music,' *Continuum* 15.3 (2001): 359–71.

research and this was why I did not teach the girls production skills. My interest was in the girls' *play* with these tools and the process of the girls' representation of themselves and their popular musical practices on tape.

For the seven girls in the research playing with representation like this was 'hard work.'²⁸ What the girls chose to appear on the final tapes (and what they deleted) 'reflected their deliberately considered choices in the very construction of their (self) representation.'²⁹ Decisions were made about what was for personal consumption (and therefore deleted or not recorded on the research tapes) and what would be shared with the Researcher and the wider academic audience. The audio recordings therefore offered glimpses into the girls' engagement with popular music and their related struggles over 'self-making.' On tape the girls captured themselves in the process of musical and gendered 'becoming', with auto-audio ethnography offering a space for the questioning, representation and constitution of identity.

Conclusion

The ethnographic strategy of using tape recorders to act as a kind of 'ethnography by proxy' has provided a collection of sound recordings that reflects each girl's conscious attempt to represent and constitute identity. The resulting materials included recordings of favourite songs, discussions of music 'I like,' self-styled radio programmes, and girls singing. But furthermore, using the tape recorders the seven pre-teen girls participating in my research have, in their different ways, produced not only a record of their musical culture but of their everyday lives as they experienced it. In using these methodological tools, the girls wove a rich tapestry of what was occurring in their musical lives within the site of my fieldwork and also outside of it. The sounds captured by the girls as part of the ethnographic project revealed seven identities in process. Although not all aspects of their musical identities were captured using this methodological tool, the tape recorders were often useful for capturing those things which could not be 'said', such as the ordinariness of activities that is so often taken for granted, and therefore not verbalised.

At the end of the research, it was decided that the tape recorders need not be returned to me. The girls had had so much fun using the methodological tools that, much to their delight, they were able to keep not only their research tapes but the tape recorder as well. Thus, despite the fieldwork coming to an end, the girls continued to use these tools independently of the research project. In fact, the very ways each girl used the 'everyday' technology of sound recording during and also beyond the research highlighted the very seriousness of girls' play and its links with cultures of consumption. The girls' creativity, as demonstrated by the resulting materials from the tape recorders, disrupted those pessimistic arguments concerning how new communication media supposedly encourages mindless conformity and dull children's imaginations.³⁰ Examples from the tapes illustrate the ability of the girls in the project to use

²⁸ Willis, *Common Culture*.

²⁹ Gerry Bloustien, 'Striking a Pose!: Girls, Cameras and Deflecting the Gaze,' *Youth Studies Australia* 15.3 (1996): 26–32.

³⁰ See Rex Jory, 'Fantasy out of Fashion,' [Adelaide] *Advertiser* 28 March 2000: 18; Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982); Barry Sanders, *A is For Ox: The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

the tools of their time and accommodate cultural discourses in particularly creative and specifically gendered ways. How the girls used the tape recorders reminded me of a statement made by McKenzie Wark in his preface to the book *Girl Heroes*.³¹ Wark uses the example of the Greek hero Odysseus who, he says, 'was not pure or perfect, but ... was able to use what was near to him as a tool with which to find his way forward.'³² Likewise, the material from the girls' tapes highlighted both the way each girl lived within consumer culture and their creative and productive ways of utilising the commodities and technologies that were available to them as tools to negotiate identity and popular music.

³¹ McKenzie Wark, 'Preface,' in Susan Hopkins, ed., *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2002).

³² Wark, 'Preface' xi–xii.