



Tape vs. Discs: War or Coexistence?

NOW that magnetic tape, having consolidated its sensational conquests of all fields of recording, has launched its first large-scale invasion of home listeners' recorded music libraries, I trust that my colleague on the other side of the lines, Robert Oakes Jordan, won't begrudge sharing communication facilities with a veteran record "war" correspondent who'd like to report on the current "front" from a discophile's point of view.

It's a frankly biased report. Although I'm fascinated myself with the fabulous new medium and have devoted a lot of study and experimentation to tape techniques, I gag over the wild claims of its more extravagant partisans, few of whom emulate Mr. Jordan's objectivity. At the very least these claims demand qualification, particularly insofar as they concern listeners to more-or-less serious music rather than recording hobbyists. For, granting that magnetic tape at its best can provide reproduced music of far higher technical "fidelity" than any discs now available, to realize that "best" in actual living room practice is something else again. Anyway, I've seen discs rise phoenix-like from too many "deaths" in the past to share the current delusion of tape fanatics who exultantly boast (in the June issue of *Tape Recording* magazine) that "We are beginning to see the end of the phonograph record!"

With the significant proviso that my remarks apply to commercial pre-recorded tapes exclusively, my counter-assertion is that whatever success these may win (and it well may be considerable) will be gained largely *outside* the present record-buying public, and that, however valuably they may supplement discs, they'll never supersede them in any foreseeable future. To think otherwise is to ignore certain stubborn "facts" of human nature, which may not always be strictly justified technologically, but which—for the typical discophile at least—are valid psychologically. Warned both by instinct and experience, the discophile is repelled by what seem to him to be three decisive disadvantages of pre-recorded tapes:

1. *Their practical inconveniences for the layman.* While no problem to the amateur technician, the means of loading, handling, and filing tapes can't approach the foolproof simplicity

with which unskilled, impatient laymen can use discs. The variety of speeds is the same in either case, but 33.3 and 45 rpm do not involve technical quality differences as do 15 and 7.5 ips, and with discs the problem is not complicated by a further single vs. twin-track choice. The latter cannot be played on single-track machines unless additional playback heads are obtained and installed when necessary, and twin-track tapes seldom can be satisfactorily spliced, while single-track recordings of equivalent playing time demand exactly twice as much tape. And all tape's superior freedom from wear is offset, in practical home use, by its susceptibilities to accidental erasure, snarl, breakage, and the effects of humidity.

2. *Their higher cost for equivalent quality.* Tape's finest potentialities can be exploited only by the best (and most expensive) reproducing equipment. Top-notch 15-ips recordings demand transport mechanisms and playback heads which are far costlier and trickier to maintain in optimum operation than completely satisfactory turntables and pickups. With 7.5-ips tapes, LP-disc durations are matched only if twin tracks are used, and their technical qualities are not normally superior to those of microgroove discs (except perhaps in background-noise reduction)—yet they cost between two and three times as much! Of course, this price differential will shrink when (and if) pre-recorded tapes win any mass-market acceptance, but it is not likely ever to disappear entirely. Meanwhile, their reproduction on the popular types of comparatively inexpensive tape players not only callously garbles their genuine merits, but dangerously subverts the aural education of their habitual listeners and the great campaign to promote an appreciation of true wide-range, undistorted, wow-less and flutterless sound.

3. *Their basically different "temperamental" appeal.* The serious home listener is primarily intent on gaining the maximum of rewarding musical experience with the minimum consciousness of electromechanical intermediaries. He wants to hear what he wants (and nothing else) the moment he wants it—a demand which LP's and 45's, whatever their deficiencies, have convincingly established their ability to satisfy. Even with special

indexing devices, the right tape and right passage cannot be located, played, and repeated at will as easily as a particular band on a particular disc.

For short pieces, especially of vocal or popular music, EP 45's surpass tapes as clearly as they have proved to excel LP's, and surely will continue to command those great segments of the listening public accustomed to relatively brief "selections" either by long 78-side training or by their own inherent incapacity to maintain interest in uninterrupted larger works. Very long works, like complete operas, demand at least as many (and more awkward) reel as LP-disc changes, and in music of standard symphonic length tape offers no important advantages over LP's.

Even more significantly, the typical tape fan is generally a person of radically different tastes and temperament from those of the common garden variety of disc collector. He seldom is capable of sustained attention to meaningful musical contexts and often relishes best the divertissements of Maestro Hack Swain and his ilk. If he does turn to more serious fare, he tends to gulp it indiscriminately in doses too big to chew or digest. Usually he is happiest credulously listening to his own irrationally finagled home recordings or those of his fellow fanatics (with whom he loves to swap "sound letters" closely akin to the gab-fests of adolescent radio "hams"). At heart he is a hobbyist rather than a music lover. (And before you accuse me of gross caricature, make sure you've examined his candid self-portrait as exposed in the pages, and especially the correspondence columns, of *Tape Recording*!)

MUCH in this admittedly biased, but I hope not essentially exaggerated, picture is likely to change, of course, with time. At least some tapeophiles may outgrow their present juvenile idiosyncrasies; but I am highly skeptical whether the basic pattern can be altered. For engineers and mature audio connoisseurs, tape and discs complement each other in forming one world of sound; there need be no real conflict between them. For the general public, however, they are likely to remain largely separate—if not necessarily antagonistic—coexisting domains which command entirely different allegiances. And to my mind there is no question of which domain offers the more profound and lasting satisfactions to those for whom serious music—to be intimately lived with and enjoyed with the minimum of inconvenience, cost, and distraction—is the prime consideration.

—R. D. DARRELL.

THE ENDURING ELSIE HOUSTON



—Wide World.

"She was mistress of her talent."

By DAVIDSON TAYLOR

IF YOU knew her, we agree that we can never forget Elsie Houston. If you did not know her, buy this record* and begin to know her. I commend to you particularly the song about Bahia, so delicious, so sunny, and so innocent.

She sings on this disc with piano, not the best instrument to accompany her unless others were unavailable. Pablo Miguel plays superbly, but he must have wished to be percussion and orchestra for her.

The first time I saw her was during this country's early passionate courtship of Latin America. The Department of State had assembled a group interested in cultural exchange with Latin America, before Nelson Rockefeller became our distinguished coordinator. After our briefings, Mrs. Bliss invited the delegates (or whatever we were) to her house, and the performer chosen to entertain was Elsie Houston, "who is appearing in a New York night club." It was a large party.

Elsie Houston entered this great drawing room like an African queen. Like a priestess, like the reigning

hetaera, in short, like an artist. She carried some small drums and was tugging two huge candlesticks, because she wanted to sing in the dark. I was drawn to her like a moth. I helped her get the waist-high candlesticks into place (nobody else was helping), lit the candles, and sat on the floor enslaved.

She sang a Macumba ritual song, warming her drums over a smaller candle to tighten and tune the membranes, peering out at us over the flame with inquisitive calm to see whether we could possibly understand. And sweating a little.

Beating with her hand on a little drum, she sang of the sacrifice of a chicken, first "O Cayti," in high, rapt nasal invocation, and then, in a guttural, rapid dance rhythm, "Manguaran." The god Xangô was present in Mrs. Bliss's drawing room. You will not find this spirit on any of her records.

In addition to her great skill as a folk singer, Elsie Houston (great grandniece of Sam Houston) was a beloved performer of Brazilian art music, Villa Lobos's for example. Some of his instrumental music is on the other side of this disc.

But Miss Houston is our subject. What was she like? She seemed tall. Her features were rather Mayan: arched nose, proud eyes, black hair,

Or so I remember. Her appearance changed from time to time. She moved beautifully. Her skin was oily and watery, in fact, a bit swarthy.

One night at Dorle Jarmel's apartment, Dorle asked Elsie to sing. Elsie borrowed a man's hat and took a collection. "I sing for money," she said. "No silver, please." Then she turned off the lights, and with a card table substituting for drum created an incantation.

Carmen Miranda was popular at the time. I am vague about the year, but it was toward the end of Elsie Houston's day. She took her own life in 1943, and that is close enough for the purpose of admiration and sorrow. Elsie lunched with me at the Barberry Room. She had constructed a truncated conical hat of artificial fruit which outrivalled Miranda; it was chic. I was conspicuous merely by being with her, but not because of the hat. It was because of her collected force of character and her darting intelligence. She talked of Brazil and told me how an air force officer had drawn a ring with his forefinger on their country's map, saying, "Here is an area larger than France, and no man has yet flown over it."

The capital of Rio is Paris, as the capital of Hollywood is New York. To Paris Elsie Houston went, and there she wrote a book on Brazilian music and loved a Surrealist poet. Then she turned back to her hemisphere, not wholly home.

ONE night my wife and I went to the Rainbow Room to see Elsie and Charles Weidman dance the "Frog Song" (which you can hear on this record). Afterwards she came to our table and assailed me because CBS, then my employer, was broadcasting another Brazilian, Olga Coelho. She had nothing against Olga, except that Coelho was not Houston. Elsie regarded herself as *sui generis*.

Elsie Houston, lovely as her voice was, had even greater skill as a diseuse than as a singer. She was too highly seasoned for the popular American taste. Her flavor was like a secret of *la grande cuisine*. She was mistress of her talent. She could manipulate her voice to evoke a witch doctor, in the praise of elegance, in tenderness toward a child, in pride for the rich Brazilian landscape with all its flowering trees.

If ever we come to understand the Americas for what they really are, we shall become aware of our debt to Elsie Houston. Meanwhile, Carmen Miranda and I should take off our hats and say a prayer for Elsie Houston, whenever we hear this record.

*ELSIE HOUSTON SINGS BRAZILIAN SONGS; also VILLA-LOBOS; "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1" and Nonetto. (RCA Victor LCT 1143, \$5.72.)