













**THREE DECADES ON  
BY AKI ONDA**

It still haunts me when I play back those recordings—ghosts appear, as they do in a séance, calling back spirits from the shadow of the past—they take me in and bemuse me.

Since 1988, I have been collecting field recordings with a hand-held compact Walkman. These sound memories are traces of my geographical and psychological voyages. I work with the essence and architecture of memory, treating my collection of sounds altogether as one holistic entity. With the passing of time, specific details, such as what happened to whom and where, slowly fade and individual meanings are erased. By maximizing the potential of forgetting, I loosen the order of memory, mix things up and even change the meaning at times. Although I draw from my personal life, my work does not read like a documentary. In a sense, I do not want to be caught up in my past. In order to be free, I treat my recordings in an impressionistic way. For the sake of moving on and connecting with the world, memories are left behind as relics of days bygone. Yet still, why do spirits haunt me when I play back the recordings today? This is something I have yet to understand.

I first started making music with cassette tapes just after moving to the U.S. from Japan and completed two Cassette Memories albums, *Ancient & Modern* and *Bon Voyage!* in 2001 and 2002 respectively. I remember being holed up in the studio, spending an incredibly long time searching, trying to figure out just how I can make music using cassette tapes. It was an agonizing process. Looking for light at the end of a long tunnel, I was losing my will to see things through when I finally recorded something that gave me a break. During my recording process, 9/11 occurred and that must have also affected the mood I was in.

Musically, I was using Pierre Schaeffer's *L'Oeuvre Musicale*—a tape collage of the concrete sounds—as an underlay for *Ancient & Modern*, and Luc Ferrari's *Presque Rien*—a montage of the field recordings—as foundation for *Bon Voyage!* I was listening obsessively to musique concrète around that time, but I did not want to directly take from their music. So I added and subtracted various elements in my own

way. That is why if you listen to these albums, they do not sound *musique concrète*, nor did I intend them to be. I did not want to be associated with a past genre and be talked about like some heritage revival artist. The thing I was most interested in, and still I am, is not in any particular style but rather the unfathomable power that brings about new artistic revelations; the energy you may sense from early stages of creation. When you listen to recordings by Schaeffer and Ferrari, you can feel the excitement seeping through.

I wanted *Ancient & Modern* to be my expression of hip-hop. I loved early hip-hop and rap back in the 80s and always longed to experience the whirl of excitement that was felt when D.J. Afrika Bambaataa played *Death Mix*. It must have been a miraculous moment—until then nobody had thought that music could be made with just two turntables. I want to chase after these miraculous moments. People may call me naive, but I want to believe that anything is possible, and that still, miracles happen.

For the third album in this series entitled *South of the Border*, I took a very different approach that I call “cinema for the ears”. Working with a clear idea from the beginning, I wanted to create a scene for each piece. It was okay to adopt any musical style, whatever worked for the purpose of the scene. The sounds I used in this album were from my first visit to Mexico in 2005. I went there for a one-night performance but ended up extending my stay by a month and collecting quite an amount of field recordings. Mexico—its highly contemporary culture juxtaposed with archaic traditions; refined lineage of reason and murky superstitions; aristocratic and underprivileged ways of life, all of these seemingly opposing ideologies and lifestyles coexist in a brilliant manner. Amidst the chaos, the line between reality and imagination lost its meaning and anything seemed possible to me.

I love to maximize the elusiveness of sound. Compared to visual material, it is easier to treat sound in an impressionistic way and forge an alternate reality. In one piece, I used recordings made inside a porn film theater in Mexico City. I do not remember the name of the theater, but it was one of those grandiose European cinema palaces that was also terribly rundown. The partition of the projection room was so broken that I could hear the sound of the projector running. Screening 35mm films made in Europe during the 70s and 80s, there was a lot of hardcore content with narrative plotlines and images stylized with a particular, traditional sense of beauty.

The films must have been screened countless times over the decades, as they were scratched all over and a great portion of the film sound distorted into noise. However, I doubt the listener of my album would be able to decipher the specific and concrete locations where the sounds were recorded since I transformed the original sounds into different scenes. This album is a documentary piece of my Mexico, but it is also fictitious. If somebody were to say that all of the scenes are a result of my imagination, I do not think they would be entirely wrong. The line between fiction and nonfiction is, after all, paper-thin.

For the last few years, I have been working on the fourth installment of the series, using materials collected in Morocco in 1988 and 2010. At one point the album was nearly finished but I decided to scrap it completely. Then, a crystal-clear idea emerged, moving the project firmly forward. I like taking my time. I often work at an incredibly slow pace. While each album has a specific focus, the series as a whole responds to the notion of the archive—which in my case, consists of thousands of hours of magnetic memory.

Considering the large volume of amassed recordings, I am physically unable to play back the entire collection in one sitting, and the thematic development of the entire collection is far from a straight line. It detours and entangles, and occasionally, earlier interests return to the storyline and alters its course. As a product of decades of research, my tape collection is like one gigantic aural fudge that generates certain output at times. I hear a fundamental tone frilled with hints of eternity—I hear a disruption of overcast clouds layered with resonances and overtones—so let us begin and see where it goes.







**TAPE, PSYCHE, MONTAGE AND MAGIC:  
THE CASSETTE MEMORIES OF AKI ONDA  
BY DANIEL WILSON**

On April 27th 1931, an unemployed ex-scientist lost his memory. Twenty years' worth of memory simply vanished, and he was suddenly unable to understand why he was walking with blistered feet along an English country village road. With the help of his wife, and later a specialist doctor, he was able to recover and document his experiences in an autobiography titled *I Lost My Memory: The Case as the Patient Saw It*. Mindful of the stigma surrounding such things at this time, he wrote anonymously, and the book was published by Faber & Faber in 1932. It appears to be the first full length first-person account of memory fugue in English.

Fugue is the psychiatric term for such memory loss — a word derived from the Latin *fuga*, meaning flight or escape, hence the word fugitive. In addition to its psychiatric meaning, the term fugue has a meaning in music; it denotes a composition where a theme is polyphonically pursued and re-echoed by a counter-theme.

What relevance does this obscure book have to Aki Onda's *Cassette Memories* project? The act of citing it in relation to *Cassette Memories* mirrors Onda's modus operandi of splicing and mixing between scenes, relativizing different media. Both the 1932 text and *Cassette Memories* take memory as their core theme, and they share the quality of being both the outcome and *the embodiment* of psychotherapeutic processes. The *I Lost My Memory* author personified his fugue as the "Repressor"; he battled his inner *Repressor* using word association, dream analysis, self-hypnosis, and disentangling "mind pictures" to win back fragments of memory, ultimately memorializing all this in his book. By contrast, Onda experienced lost memories to a lesser degree than the 1932 author, and, whilst also prodding the unconscious (via sound), regards memory itself as a potential *Repressor*. For Onda, memory can bind one to the past with its formalisms and traumas; so Onda would rather destabilise memory fragments and perpetuate the void in what could be called *concrète fugues*. Onda's compositional process strips recordings of their wider memory context — assuming they haven't already been divested through the deliberate long-term neglect of the original source audio diary cassettes — resulting

in semi-familiar noises without their personal connotations. The main shared feature between the two different works are their paradoxical presentation of personal material in a depersonalised way. As a result, both arouse curiosity, being completely in and of themselves.

I discovered a copy of *I Lost My Memory* in a library book-sale. Wanting to know more about its anonymous writer, I wrote to Faber's archivist Mr. Brown to see if any records were kept. Mr. Brown flatly refused to disclose any information on the 80-year-old book's author, stating "this really goes too close to medical anonymity for me to disclose this data". It seems that *Repressors* can exist in the outside world as well as in the mind — Mr. Brown becoming a real-world equivalent to the mental *Repressor*. Determined to overcome this knowledge blockade, in-depth cross-checking of autobiographical facts against genealogical databases eventually led to the discovery of the author's identity. I discovered *I Lost My Memory* was written by an ex-WWI soldier and agricultural researcher named Clement Heigham (1890-1979). I was able to contact Heigham's son who confirmed this, and who was amenable to the release of his father's identity. Clement Heigham's fugue was likely triggered by anxiety caused by divorce from his first wife, and unemployment, with PTSD being a possible underlying factor. Here, I reveal the author's identity for the first time, thereby undermining Faber's information *Repressor*, Mr. Brown. Mental constructs similarly interpenetrate the real world in Aki Onda's work, and a persevering insurrectionary spirit — subverting repressive fixity — lurks behind an urbane veneer. The first peep behind this veneer is the "Bon Voyage!" title of *Cassette Memories II*: either a friendly 'godspeed'... or an ironic send-off into very ominous territory.

*Cassette Memories* combines dictaphone-sourced location recordings from different points in time and space to produce a form of musique concrète anarchy where memories of travel, people and places are dismantled, or new memory-perspectives are catalysed. At its most non-linear, it channels the same impulse behind William Burroughs' cut-up techniques, or more disruptively, the illicit "defaced" library books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton who, in the early 1960s, secretly montaged the dustjackets of different library books with clashing effect (then returned them to the library), and also covered the walls of their flat with cut-up illustrations, a sight that actor Kenneth Cranham called "noise for the eyes".

It is fitting to equate music and literature here — sensory translations likewise define Onda's sound montages, who professedly embraces the idea of "cinema for the ears". Onda's subversive power is drawn from the energetic boundaries between disciplines and moreover where discipline vanishes; sensibilities collide and react, ever morphing. The practice owes something to his early exposure to hip-hop where the radical transformative power of audio collage and looping comes to the fore, as seen, for instance, when Warren G sampled the motif from Michael McDonald's 1982 "I Keep Forgettin'", giving it a new value and relevance. This musical example is chosen partly for its apposite title, and also to draw attention to its earlier sampling by Afrika Bambaataa & The Cosmic Force in their 1981 "Cosmic Punk Jam" which doesn't directly sample McDonald's "I Keep Forgettin'" (which hadn't yet been officially released), but instead, the hook is simply sung, memorised from radio airplay: the performers become the 'sample' — the electromechanical sampling process has an anthropomorphic equivalent.

By loosening the distinctions between human and technological processes we can begin to understand *Cassette Memories*, which is interpretable and an artistic representation of the human memory process. Human minds as tape recorders was an analogy favoured by mid-20th century electronic music composer Daphne Oram in her 1972 book *An Individual Note of Music, Sound and Electronics*. For Oram memory function was relational to tape echo. Simply recalling memories, Oram noted, re-colours the reiterative memory echo according to one's state of mind at the moment of recall. An alteration in the "tone" of one's outlook modifies any summoned memory, or even conduces to destroy it — take for instance Afrika Bambaataa current tonal depreciation in our collective memory following recent abuse allegations made against him. Oram also contemplated that, just as early tape recorders reacted to very loud signals, a traumatic experience may constitute an "overloading-into-silence" for our tape-memory, creating a memory fugue.

Turning analogies into literal affinities, collapsing boundaries, diversely referencing/sampling/collaging, and dethroning *Repressors* leads us into an esotericism exceeding metaphysics — towards the nameless unity to which Aki Onda's work adheres. *Cassette Memories'* tapescares are characterised by saturation, grit and hiss, evoking foggy recollection, and perhaps, like stochastic



resonance, brings to the fore something else. A high noisefloor recording medium has hallucinatory potential: historically this is a home for the voices of discarnate spirits — the Electronic Voice Phenomenon — as sought by recorder-wielding parapsychologists. Going further, the stretching of our sound perception past its limits is something I have previously termed *psyphonics*: audio recordings that attempt to capture intangible essences of thought, idea or hypothetical energy. It is a quality discernible in the more ambitious soundscape practices, as exemplified by Luc Ferrari’s ‘listening to listening’ soundscapes, or Chris Watson’s field recordings of historical residue. The idea that magnetic tape can store something *beyond* sound finds its paradigm in the sonic experiments of Oxford’s Delawarr Laboratories (who were also engaged in capturing human thought on photographic plates). In 1958 the laboratories’ co-founder George de la Warr remarked: “when we put this microphone in front of a plant, we can record something on the tape off the plant”. On playback, such energies were said to be intuitively detectable and identifiable by a “sensitive person”. By this logic, *Cassette Memories* is teeming with psychic drama, making Onda an occult samplist: “a cassette recorder is a tool for detecting something: detecting a strong energy or power,” he said in 2019.

Initially, subtle energies weren’t an immediate concern for Onda when purchasing his first cassette dictaphone at Brixton market, London, in 1988. His camera had broken, and being keen to document an imminent trip to Morocco, he chose it as an affordable alternative. He was unconscious of the fact that by using a dictaphone in lieu of a camera he was laying the groundwork for a radical future shift in his artistic practice, and also a personal transformation. There are gaps in Onda’s memories. Blanks. Traumatic episodes in Japan cast shadows over his formative years. He felt cut off from society, but despite this (or due to this), he embarked on a career in photographing experimental musicians, and travelled extensively, later working in high-end recording studios as a producer. All the while, from 1988 onwards, personal tapes of his world travels accumulated, soon reaching a point where he was compelled to re-record over old cassettes to stymie the growth of the archive, thus audio palimpsests evolved mirroring his own memory fragmentation.

Keeping soundscape diaries increasingly became a therapeutic exercise paradoxically serving to memorialise and to detach memories simultaneously.

Although he had been immersed in experimental music from a young age, he didn't consider his decade of cassette recording a music-making exercise. It was in New York, towards the end of the millennium, that Onda became cognisant of a wider artistic value of his tapes — the noisy city's avant-garde spirit, which had itself been born from an unburdening of past traditions, whispered of new and unknown territories. In 2020, when reflecting on his life prior to 2003's release of 'Ancient & Modern' (Cassette Memories Volume One) Onda mused "I feel like another person".

It is significant that Onda manifested his cassette work at this time — at the onset of the digital era — when older analogue technology began to acquire memory-mediating potential and its suchness came sharply into focus in revelatory re-appreciation. Clement Heigham, the newly-identified author of the 1932 memoir *I Lost My Memory* remarked that every anonymous book gives "little peeps [of its author] when he least expects or intends it. [...] The character and essence of the teller will show up in it".

The same could be said for audio works, even those, like *Cassette Memories* that seek to minimise the composer's presence. Beyond the identifiable sounds, the "sensitive person" — the supernatural tape listener as idealised by George de la Warr — might psychically behold a symphony of residual essences embedded in the recordings (and this is perhaps the music of the distant future).

*An orange peel near the microphone... Morning tea... Contemplations of Mexican bus timetables... The heat strengthened glass of a high-rise building... Pigeons... Bean enchiladas... Two beer mats wedged under a table-leg to prevent wobbling... A cat chasing a leaf... Walking with blistered feet along an English country village road...*



