

8-Track Tapes: The Sound That Clicked

A Weekly Sunday Newsletter from Stilson Video Services



My seldom-used, but much appreciated 8-track tape deck

When running a video and audio transfer company, decisions need to be made about where to focus your services. Many companies, for example, decide to just focus on videotapes and/or movie films. This helps streamline their operations and makes them more efficient. That's certainly understandable.

I take a different approach with my company. While I can't work with every type of media out there, I do my best to come through for customers as much as possible—maybe even to a fault. The reason is many times a customer will walk through the door with a box of various media types from their past. If I can only help them with half their items, I don't feel like we are serving them the best way possible.

An example of this is my ability to transfer 8-track tapes. Years ago, a customer brought in a box of 8-track recordings. No one had ever brought me 8-tracks before, and at that time, I had no way of transferring them. In order to complete the order, I decided to purchase a refurbished 8-track player and learn about the format. The order turned out well, and the customer was thrilled.

Since then, sometimes for years at a time, the machine sits idle. Every now and then, I pop in a Chicago tape I found on eBay just to

keep it from sitting idle too long.

Obviously, the 8-track part of my transfer service is not a money-maker.

However, a few weeks ago, I received a call from a customer who had found an 8-track tape she believed contained her late father telling his life story. She couldn't find anyone in her area who could transfer the tape and was willing to drive halfway across the state to give it a try.

Sure enough, the tape was exactly as described, and it played well enough to produce a very good transfer once we finished our audio enhancements. This turned out to be an incredible piece of family history that they had never heard before. The stories he told to his children about his life were incredible, and they will cherish this piece of history forever.

This is why I keep the 8-track deck in the studio. It's not always about the bottom line. Because of experiences like this, I don't think I'll ever regret offering the 8-track service—even if it's never lucrative.

A Brief History of the 8-Track Tape

Surprisingly, it all started in private jets in the early 1960s. Bill Lear, founder of the Lear Jet company, wanted passengers to be able to listen to music while they flew. At that time, heavy, bulky reel-to-reel players were the only option—not practical inside a small jet.

In partnership with Ampex, Ford Motor Company and RCA, the 8-track was born.

The 8-track is a cartridge-based magnetic tape format. It is uniquely designed as a continuous loop, so there is no rewinding. The tape is divided into four programs (each containing two stereo tracks). When the tape reaches the end of a section, you hear a distinctive “click” as it shifts to the next program. Sometimes it even switches in the middle of a song before continuing.

The format was introduced commercially in the mid-1960s and received a major boost when Ford offered 8-track players in their cars starting in 1966.

8-tracks were primarily used as an alternate way for consumers to play commercial music, especially on the go in cars. They were also used in radio stations and as commercial/industrial playback systems. Home recorders did exist, but were expensive and far less common.

Eventually, by the late 1970s, compact cassette tapes overtook 8-tracks for several good reasons:

- They were smaller and more portable
- They were more durable
- They were easier to record on at home

By the early 1980s, the 8-track tape was largely obsolete.

So for now, my 8-track deck sits quietly once again, waiting for the next opportunity to make someone very happy. On paper, I shouldn't even bother offering this service—but I'm glad I do.

Lives are important.

Our mission is to connect them to future generations the best way possible.

Finally, if you have a topic you'd like me to write about, let me know at [**stilson@stilson.com**](mailto:stilson@stilson.com) and I'll add it to the list.

— Bill Stilson
Stilson Video Services

216-595-5155
www.stilson.com

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Stilson Video Services, LLC | 6240 SOM Center Road Suite 140 | Solon, OH 44139 US

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