

THE ROSE MARY WOODS/NIXON TAPES

PERHAPS THE SECOND MOST FAMOUS SILENCE in all of spoken word recordings is the 18 1/2 minute gap on a piece of 1/4", .5 mm magnetic tape recorded in the Nixon White House. The *most* famous silence is probably Jack Benny's, during a skit in which a mugger demands "your money or your life." The notoriously stingy Benny is silent for tens of seconds, and as the audience realizes his dilemma, the laughter grows to fill the silence, until Benny replies, "I'm thinking - I'm *thinking!*" In live performance it was very funny. But when Benny moved the gag to radio, it became not just funny but audacious to use precious broadcast time for silence. Just as audacious is the silence on Woods/Nixon tape, for we anticipate that it holds the key to just what the president knew and when he knew it.

Like his predecessor Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon recorded his telephone conversations and White House meetings, presumably to keep a record of his presidency, but also to keep track of promises made by and to political allies and opponents. White House Tape #342 was recorded on a voice-activated Sony 800B recorder at 15/16 IPS and during the Watergate scandal, the tape, among others, was subpoenaed by special investigators. Nixon's personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, admitted erasing part of this tape "accidentally", on her Uher 5000, on June 20, 1972. Investigators concluded that it could not have been accidental, and that, due to the way the Uher's functions are arranged, accidental erasure would have "required the skills of a contortionist." The 18 1/2 missing minutes, or 86.7 feet of tape, is perhaps the most contemplated, intriguing, and beguiling silence in contemporary American politics. It has been widely believed to contain incriminating information about Nixon's involvement in criminal activities while President.

Tom Stockham, one of the early inventors of digital recording, was a member of a congressional panel charged with trying to restore the contents of the tape. The panel concluded at the time (1974) that it was impossible. Stockham told me in 1990, "We did a very thorough job trying to recover it.

Unfortunately, it was erased by a stenographer's recorder which has a double erase head, and absolutely no human voice sounds were there except in a couple of places where the instrument used was stopped and then started again. But it was obvious, in the final analysis, that the gaps were created by the pushing of a manual button on the recorder. Also obvious was the way in which it was done; without a doubt, it had to have been done by a finger pushing this manual button."

More recently, the National Archives Technical Evaluation Panel was convened in 2001 to revisit the case of the 18 1/2 minute gap. The panel concluded, however, that even current technology was inadequate to restore the missing information, based on tests they made using the original two tape recorders in question and newly recorded material.

That the experts have been unable to restore the missing Nixon speech must cause a great deal of technical frustration. When Rose Mary Woods put the tape in her Uher and pressed record, she wasn't actually erasing the magnetic particles that contained the information, she was merely redistributing them in a random fashion so that their information could not be easily revealed. This is tantamount to taking a Shakespeare sonnet and running it through a paper shredder. All the components of the original message are there on the 1/4" tape, but now hopelessly disordered as a random arrangement of electrons. And the evidence is that the tape was erased seven to nine times, decreasing the likelihood that it will ever be restored to intelligibility. The silence continues to capture our imagination not of course because of what is there, but because of what is not. Picasso said that the most important part of his paintings was space—the space between objects. Miles Davis concurred that during his solos, he was 'playing space' and that the silence between his notes was what contained the real message. As we wonder what evils might have been revealed in those 18 1/2 minutes, we can suppose that were Nixon alive, he would almost certainly respond today with a most meaningful and artful silence.

DANIEL LEVITIN

Thomas G. Stockham Jr. passed away during the production of this project. We would like to dedicate this CD to the memory of his contributions to the field of silence.

<http://ego.psych.mcgill.ca/levitin.html/pubspages/stockham.html>

