

Ripper tape tests

Earlier this year the British police arrested Peter Sutcliffe and, with astonishing lack of legal tact, made it abundantly plain that they thought he was the Yorkshire Ripper. The mass media, throwing legal caution for contempt of court to the winds, followed suit and publicised the police joy. Then came the inevitable recriminations, and reminders that in Britain even suspected 'Rippers' are innocent until found guilty in court. I had a story for this column written and ready to print before his arrest, but had to tear it up. Subsequently of course Sutcliffe was found guilty of murder when in a victory for common sense the jury threw out the psychiatric evidence that suggested he was mad. Since then the media have picked over the Ripper case and will doubtless continue to pick it over for months and years to come. But curiously, none of them have picked up the story which I tore up.

So here it is, albeit a few months late.

Shortly before June 18, 1979, a taunting cassette tape was posted to the West Yorkshire police by a man with a Geordie accent claiming to be "Jack". This followed three letters, apparently from the same source. The police took the letters and tape seriously. So seriously in fact that they spent the next 18 months ensuring that as many people as possible heard the tape recording. For a year or more anyone dialling a Leeds telephone number was able to hear a 2min excerpt from the tape. It was played on radio and television and over loudspeakers especially in those parts of the country from where the Geordie voice was thought to originate. At the height of the 'catch-the-Ripper' campaign the tape was being played from six centres over the phone to 32,000 callers a week. Curiously the police only forwent one opportunity for free publicity. In July 1979 Jonathan King's British record company, UK Records, pressed a pop single of the Ripper tape and planned to issue it through British record shops. But the single was never released. I tried phoning Jonathan King but was rewarded only by a recording of his rather hysterical voice asking me to leave a message on an answering machine. I did, several times, but never heard back. And the single never reached the shops, or charts. An uncharitable suggestion was that J King Esq received some subtle advice from Britain's boys in blue to the effect that if UK Records went ahead with the release, they would find themselves in the Old Bailey charged with hampering police enquiries, copyright infringement, dumb insolence, and you name it we'll charge you with it.

Despite growing concern, for instance by linguistic experts at Leeds University, that the tape and letters were a hoax, the Yorkshire police clung to their belief that recognition of the Geordie voice would lead them to the Ripper. At least 12 million people heard the tape over the telephone and many more millions heard it in other ways. But no one came forward to identify the voice. Even during Sutcliffe's trial and subsequently, no one has yet identified it.

At the trial, it became clear that Sutcliffe had escaped detection largely because those who suspected him of being the Ripper were reassured by the fact that the voice on tape did not match Sutcliffe's voice. This has prompted *The Sunday People* newspaper to offer a £10,000 reward for anyone who can help track down the Geordie voice that led the police on an expensive and

cruel wild goose chase and, almost certainly, ensured that several women died unnecessarily because the Ripper remained free.

All manner of theories have been put forward. One theory has Sutcliffe working with a Geordie accomplice; another has the Geordie taper responsible for one killing and trying to confuse the issue by claiming others. But none of this alters the all-important question which no one seems to have asked, let alone answered. Irrespective of who the Geordie is, how can it be that no one has recognised his voice?

The human ear-brain combination is remarkably adept at recognising voices, even over the telephone. Although it's possible that the Geordie's relatives are protecting him by remaining silent, or are dead, or deaf, how can it be that no shopkeeper, publican or unemployment officer has recognised that much-publicised voice?

There is good reason to believe that the tape was made on a portable cassette recorder made by Sanyo. This was revealed by the British magazine *HiFi For Pleasure* at the height of the Ripper campaign. The magazine reported that the taunting recording had been made on a Sanyo C30 cassette of a type only available as a give-away with two Sanyo products, a music-centre and a cassette machine. Several machines were involved and a check was made on the distribution pattern of those machines. The police did not take kindly to the *HiFi For Pleasure* disclosure but it did point towards the tape being made on a budget or portable machine. If this had been used with fading batteries, or even the capstan drive deliberately filed down or built up, then the voice heard when the tape was replayed on a normal recorder would be disguised by mis-pitching. The tape played to the public has always been at the same pitch, and if it was the wrong pitch, then the widespread false impression created could help explain why no one recognised the voice. Interestingly the tape appears to vary in pitch between sections, anyway.

This isn't pure fantasy. An exactly similar situation occurred with the tape recording which featured in the Black Panther murder of early 1975. Lesley Whittle was kidnapped and a tape received. Audio tape specialist Angus McKenzie was called in by the media and identified the tape as made on a recorder with partially flat batteries. As a result he advised that it be broadcast by the BBC and IBA at correspondingly modified speed. McKenzie was not called in by the police, or even allowed to help on the Ripper case. In fact it was only through perseverance and the initiative of a local newspaper that he was able to obtain a very poor quality copy. This had been so degraded by noise and multiple copying that it was useless for the tests he had planned; for instance analysis of mains hum breakthrough to establish the original recording speed. After an appearance on a TV news magazine programme another copy was provided by the IBA. This was of better audio quality but had been severely edited to close the spaces between words. So McKenzie, who is blind with very acute hearing, was unable to listen for telltale signs of origin, like room reverberation. In the Panther case he had correctly diagnosed that the tape had been made in a cavernous location. Lesley Whittle's body was found in a 60 foot shaft. Donald Neilsen, the Black Panther,

was arrested in December 1975 and charged with kidnapping and murder.

When I phoned the Yorkshire police before Peter Sutcliffe was caught, they would only confirm their refusal to release the original tape for tests and their refusal to discuss the tests carried out. A police spokesman vaguely claimed to have the original in safe keeping. Fears were at that time growing that the original cassette might have been damaged or destroyed in forensic tests, for instance analysis for finger prints or material traces. Audio engineers feared that the police might have been working on the sadly mistaken belief that a first generation copy would yield as much audio and acoustic evidence as the original cassette.

The question of whether the original tape was still intact was raised in print in *New Scientist* of December 4, 1980. Within half an hour of publication my home telephone line started clicking in exactly the same way that it had clicked when I wrote a piece a few years earlier on letter bomb detection. It's nice to know that someone, somewhere has time to spend on hearing what my children have to say to their friends.

Shortly afterwards and by pure coincidence, a technical seminar organised by BASF confirmed the value of preserving original tapes intact. In a German murder case the victim was strangled by a length of magnetic recording tape. The police then found an incomplete roll of tape at the home of the suspect. BASF, manufacturer of the tape, was called in to analyse the two samples. The company's chemists were able to state categorically that the murder weapon had come from the same production roll as that owned by the suspect.

Just before re-writing this article I phoned the Yorkshire police again. They still flatly refused to discuss what tests have been carried out on the tape. So for all we know, they never did check for residual mains hum or other fixed frequency references, to establish the correct pitch before embarking on their mammoth campaign. The good news is that an official enquiry will probably be held into police handling of the Ripper investigation, for instance the absurdly inadequate use of computers for cross-correlating the mass of evidence collected from statements. The bad news is that the enquiry will almost certainly be conducted by other policemen, who probably won't know enough about tape technology to ask the right questions.

Boxing sound

In a previous column item I suggested that it was about time that the TV crews covering boxing matches used directional mics to pick up the live sound in the ring with more dramatic effect, if necessary riding the faders of a mixing board to track the action round the ring while minimising stray noise. A cry of impossible went up but it is interesting to note that on recent fight transmissions from the US there has been the equivalent of close-miking. This is starting to make the whole thing sound more like a Hollywood fight film with post-dubbed sound effects. This can't be bad because it helps bring home the reality that when men-mountains slug each other for prize money it is no fun whatsoever and a very dangerous game. Boxing isn't a Tom and Jerry cartoon, or TV crime show, where violence doesn't hurt. ■