

Interview

Cassette Tapes from Morgantown: A Conversation with Dwight and Liz Pavlovic of Crash Symbols

Crash Symbols, Morgantown, West Virginia

cassette label

Since 2010, Dwight and Liz Pavlovic of Morgantown, West Virginia, have been producing albums for local and experimental musicians worldwide. I had the opportunity to speak with them about their record label Crash Symbols (<https://crashsymbols.bandcamp.com/>), their embrace of the cassette tape, and their Appalachian roots.

Ben: I was curious if you could begin by introducing Crash Symbols. When did it begin, and what was the motivation behind the label's creation? And how do you introduce Crash Symbols to people unaware that labels are still producing albums on cassette tape?

Dwight: We started the label in 2010. For me, it was an outgrowth of an older label project. At the time I didn't want to feel like being in West Virginia gave me fewer options. I was just figuring out my identity as a West Virginian, so it was reassuring to have a project that could be an outlet. That's probably how I would respond if someone didn't understand the more pragmatic reasons, like pressing costs or the rigmarole that labels go through releasing on one format vs. another. In many ways, cassettes are as convenient as other formats, and "obsolete" or not, finding a way to listen to them is rarely cost-prohibitive. It's pretty easy to set a high bar with them, particularly when you understand the different types of reels involved.

Liz: For me, the label was exciting because I've always wanted to be involved in releasing music, particularly the art and design that go into it. I've always seen music as a shared experience, so getting to help musicians with their work is really rewarding. My grandpa (along with other relatives) was a bluegrass musician, and was very into audio engineering and recording; he contributed to a radio show in Madison, West Virginia, for a long time. He inspired me to find my own instrument (drums) and to always keep music as a key part of my life. Sometimes

people seem surprised that we release cassettes, but once you talk about format and the choices musicians have, they usually understand.

Ben: In your responses, I get the sense that Crash Symbols was an outgrowth of your upbringings in West Virginia, but at the same time an outlet to leave the confines of the region. I was curious if you could elaborate a little bit on this, the idea that the label is tied to West Virginia, but also an attempt to move beyond it.

Dwight: Growing up, my identity felt very different. I didn't really understand how much my family felt influenced by their connection to Europe. I didn't understand what West Virginia had to do with me until I better understood what it had to do with them. Of my ancestors that have lived in the United States for "very long," a lot are from Pennsylvania, but my dad's parents moved his family from Cleveland and my mom's family is Jewish, from Chicago. I guess in a way, my introduction to tapes was very tied to Morgantown, picking up books on tape—which I've always loved—at the Public Library. I would say tapes as a format dovetail pretty nicely with what's going on in West Virginia, though it will catch on more as local artists build up catalogs on the format. Considering that they're so affordable and offer access to a wider, equally committed audience, it's an easy format for us to recommend to anyone trying to start a label in Appalachia. That's something we'd love to see, more labels with rural Appalachian roots and more collaboration with venues to help focus and channel some of the different threads that link up in-state. More big tents in general to make room for experimentation, like the Electric Dirt Collective and their Queer Appalachia project.

The label is a small success, and we're proud that we can pay people, but really so much is thanks to the Internet. I grew up with a kind of narrow sentiment about music and art because the first encounters I had regarding taste and experience felt confrontational. That was the part of growing up that made me uncomfortable, when I felt like being "different" didn't entitle me to peace as a West Virginian. Coping with prejudice is still a big part of life in the region for a lot of people, and I'm grateful to anyone and anything that works in a positive way to expand horizons in Appalachia . . . particularly when it gives West Virginians an opportunity to stay, experiment, and build near home. For that to happen, West Virginians need options, and they need

them near at hand, so we like to think about holding that door open when we can, particularly in ways that don't gloss over the state's immigrant heritage. I mean, pepperoni rolls aren't super popular in West Virginia because they evolved to grow out of special hillbilly dirt.

Liz: There is definitely an ongoing revolution happening across Appalachia, thanks to the Internet—people with common goals and interests can link up or find solidarity with others so much more easily now, and I'm very excited to see what comes of it.

Ben: Something that really surprised me when I first started my own cassette tape label was that despite being so reliant on the Internet at a commercial level, it remained tied to certain geographic areas. Most of the artists I've produced tapes for come from networks I've been involved with in the past, either here in New York City or back in Arizona and southern California, where I grew up. I am curious if there is a similar case with Crash Symbols. Do you find the artists you produce are representative of particular areas? And if so, are those areas places you have strong personal connections with?

Dwight: I guess we see it as fairly holistic. The Internet opens up infinite options, but it still ties back to your experience. Even if the landscape the label charts is via this or that, that geography is still real. For us that's part of what underscores the fundamental obligations involved in selling people's work and creativity. More and more we're interested in making these things co-exist. To share West Virginia in a positive way, but also to show West Virginians in a variety of situations that they do have an incentive to be themselves. Kamp Krusty in Rivesville, just down the road from Morgantown, is one local venue with diverse shows that we're excited about.

Liz: We also run a disco/boogie-focused label called Easy Bay with our friend Glenn Jackson, a longtime collaborator we first met while living in Oakland, California. The scope is international, but a lot of the artists involved with that label are from the Bay Area, and it's a fun opportunity to stay connected there. As far as Crash Symbols, we've worked with artists from all over. Our upcoming releases are a mix . . . British and French psych, beats from Montreal and Tallinn, experimental noise from Austria and Estonia, and a couple of great synth projects in Pittsburgh, to name a handful . . . though at the moment, we're developing a particularly strong connection to Estonia. We're very psyched

to have a new “spiritual mountain psychedelic gangsta folk” album on the way from Frank Hurricane, who actually hails from Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, originally. We have a specific interest in West Virginia, but building a bigger core of pan-Appalachian projects is a priority.

Ben: While the Internet has broadened its reach, I think cassette culture remains quite domestic. At its core, it is a network of musicians recording from home, label producers designing and even duplicating tapes from home, homemade zines, and home-recorded podcasts. I feel like Crash Symbols has tapped into this idea of domesticity, at least from a design perspective. Household appliances, comfort foods, kids, and delightful couples grace the covers of a lot of the albums you put out, and even the background of your website features a collection of quaint white houses. How do you see domesticity as a part of the label’s aesthetic, and do you feel this aesthetic is at all rooted in Appalachian craft/folk art culture?

Liz: I agree that cassette culture has a domestic feel, more so than other formats. So many tapes are released in small batches, home-recorded and/or home-dubbed, sometimes with handmade artwork or custom cases. Our tapes aren’t dubbed at home, but a lot of the collage work we produce incorporates hand-cut pieces that I scan and then arrange digitally, sometimes altering further with Photoshop. I guess I’ve always been interested in domestic details like cooking utensils and food and vintage ads, which probably does stem from my childhood in the South and Appalachia (I was born in Alabama and lived there until I was twelve). I actually did the cover art for *Hippie Homesteaders*, a book about 1960s West Virginia and the back-to-the-land movement that West Virginia University Press published not too long ago. That goes into a lot of the roots for the modern craft scene in West Virginia, and obviously those stories resonate. Again, thanks to the Internet, it’s been really cool to see work from folks my age and younger who are carrying on older traditions like embroidery, needlework, and watercolors while putting a modern spin on them.

Dwight: Yeah, a lot of our focus is rooted on home. We have the most fun collaging with particular themes in mind, when we have our sense of an album and a few vague ideas about how to make the sound dovetail with the visual. Sourcing materials from artists we’re working with is another fun practice we’ve started recently. My grandma in Morgantown has been an avid

quilter for decades, and how she used that to stay connected and informed prior to the Internet is definitely an inspiration, and certainly one that feels more and more related to our work as we all get older.

Ben Dumbauld, a PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, runs his own record label, *Ephem-Aural*, out of New York City.