

VHS Fans Take the Opportunity to Rewind

Nostalgia for the 1980s and a vast library of available titles are alluring to a certain group.

By HANNAH SELINGER

The last VCR, according to Dave Rodriguez, 33, a digital repository librarian at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla., was produced in 2016, by the Funai Electric in Osaka, Japan.

But the VHS tape itself may be immortal. Today, a robust marketplace exists for this ephemera.

On Instagram, sellers promote videos for sale, like the 2003 Jerry Bruckheimer film “Kangaroo Jack,” a comedy involving a beauty salon owner — played by Jerry O’Connell — and a kangaroo.

Asking price? One hundred ninety dollars. (Mr. O’Connell commented on the post from his personal account, writing, “Hold steady. Price seems fair. It is a Classic.”)

If \$190 feels outrageous for a film about a kangaroo accidentally coming into money, consider the price of a limited-edition copy of the 1989 Disney film “The Little Mermaid,” which is listed on Etsy for \$45,000. The cover art for this hard-to-find copy is said to contain a male anatomical part drawn into a sea castle.

There is, it turns out, much demand for these old VHS tapes, prices notwithstanding, and despite post-2006 advancements in technology. Driving the passionate collection of this form of media is the belief that VHS offers something that other types cannot.

“The general perception that people can essentially order whatever movie they want from home is flat-out wrong,” said Matthew Booth, 47, the owner of Videodrome in Atlanta, which sells VHS tapes in addition to its Blu-ray and DVD rental business.

Streaming, Mr. Booth said, was “promised as a giant video store on the internet, where a customer was only one click away from the exact film they were looking for.”

But the reality, he said, is that new releases are prohibitively expensive, content is “fractured” between subscription services, and movies operate in cycles, often disappearing before people have the chance to watch them.

In that sense, the VHS tape offers something the current market cannot: a vast library of moving images that are unavailable anywhere else.

“Anything that you can think of is on VHS tape, because, you’ve got to think, it was a revolutionary piece of the media,” said Josh Schafer, 35, of Raleigh, N.C., a founder and the editor in chief of Lunchmeat Magazine and LunchmeatVHS.com, which are dedicated to the appreciation and preservation



VINCENT TULLO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

of VHS. “It was a way for everyone to capture something and then put it out there.”

There is, Mr. Schafer said, “just so much culture packed into VHS,” from reels depicting family gatherings to movies that just never made it to DVD. Mr. Schafer owns a few thousand tapes and his collection, he said, includes “a little bit of everything,” including other people’s home videos.

Michael Myerz, 29, an experimental hip-hop artist in Atlanta, who has a modest collection of VHS tapes, finds the medium inspirational. Some of what Mr. Myerz seeks in his work, he said, is to replicate the sounds from “some weird, obscure movie on VHS I would have seen at my friend’s house, late at night, after his parents were asleep.” He described his work as “mid-lo-fi.” “The quality feels raw but warm and full of flavor,” he said of VHS.

For collectors like April Bleakney, 35, the owner and artist of Ape Made, a fine art and screen-printing company in Cleveland, nostalgia plays a significant role in collecting.

Ms. Bleakney, who has around 2,400 to 2,500 VHS tapes, views them as a byway connecting her with the past. She inherited some of them from her grandmother, a children’s librarian with a vast collection.

Ms. Bleakney’s VHS tapes are “huge nostalgia,” she said, for a child of the 1980s. “I think we were the last to grow up without the internet, cellphones or social media,”

and clinging to the “old analog ways,” she said, feels “very natural.”

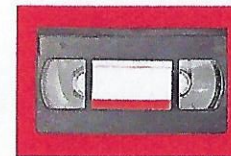
Thomas Allen Harris, 53, a creator of the television series “Family Pictures USA” and a senior lecturer in African-American studies and film and media studies at Yale University, said: “I think that people are nostalgic for the aura of the VHS era. So many cultural touch points are rooted there” in the 1980s.

The VHS tape had a life span. Developed in Japan in 1976, brought to the United States in 1977, and essentially discontinued in 2006 when films stopped converting to tape, this medium brought all kinds of entertainment home.

Not only could film connoisseurs peruse the aisles of video stores on Friday nights, but they could also compose home movies, from the artful to the inane. In an era that preceded DVR technology, they could tape episodes of television with the record function of the now-defunct VCR.

“In its heyday, it was mass-produced and widely adopted,” Mr. Rodriguez said of the VHS tape. “So if anyone — a movie studio, an independent filmmaker, a parent shooting their kid’s first steps, etc. — wanted a way to make moving images cheaply, easily, and show them to the world, VHS had you covered.”

The tapes, said James Chapman, 53, a professor of film studies at the University of



Top, a collection of original VHS boxes on display in the mezzanine at Nitehawk Prospect Park, Brooklyn. Above, a VHS cassette ready for use.

“It was a way for everyone to capture something and then put it out there.”

Leicester in Britain and the editor of the Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, were “the first technology that allowed mass, large-scale home media access to films.” For many, that singular contribution is not easily forgotten.

This access often offered a window into a specific moment in time, said Kevin Arrow, 53, an artist and museum professional in Miami who helped found Obsolete Media Miami, a grant-funded project that gave visual artists access to forms of arcane media, like 35-millimeter slides, film cameras and VHS tapes.

Mr. Arrow said that home videos captured on VHS, or taped television programs that contain old commercials and snippets from the news, were particularly insightful in diving into cultural history. “Sometimes you’ll be lucky,” he said. “There’ll be a news break, and you’ll see, like, oh my god, O. J.’s still in the Bronco, and it’s on the news, and then it’ll cut back to ‘Mission Impossible’ or something.”

Mr. Arrow also noted the importance of the video store, itself a somewhat obsolete idea. The Blockbuster video rental chain, which once owned more than 9,000 stores worldwide, now has one remaining store, in Bend, Ore.

“It was like going to a supermarket,” Mr. Arrow said. “You were browsing. You might look on the wall for new releases, or you might look on the wall for the video store employees’ pick of the week.”

The tactile sensation of selecting a movie, he said, no longer exists in the current landscape of Netflix, Amazon and other on-demand rental providers.

The VHS tape brings more than variety and nostalgia to the table, though. Marginalized communities, Mr. Harris said, who were not well represented in media in the 1980s, benefited from VHS technology, which allowed them to create an archival system that now brings to life people and communities that were otherwise absent from the screen.

The nature of VHS, Mr. Harris said, made self-documentation “readily available,” so that people who lacked representation could “begin to build a library, an archive, to affirm their existence and that of their community.”

Some who are rooted in the world of VHS hope that what is currently an underground culture will become mainstream again.

Record players, Mr. Schafer pointed out have enjoyed a surge in popularity, and it’s possible that consumers can expect the same from the humble VCR.

But whether or not the VCR makes a complete comeback, VHS enthusiasts agree that these tapes occupy an irreplaceable place in culture. “It’s like a time capsule,” Mr. Myerz said. “The medium is like no other.”