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Recordings roll at 10,000 Lakes Festival

By [Dave Roepke](#), The Forum
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DETROIT LAKES, MINN. – If a live set by a jam band isn't recorded, whether in a forest or not, does it make a sound?

Well, the folks who were in attendance can attest that it did. But that's not nearly good enough for guys like Dean Lambrecht.

The Minneapolis 38-year-old is what's commonly referred to, even in the digital age, as a taper. He's one of those guys standing back by the soundboard with a microphone on a pole. When he's the only taper present at a show, Lambrecht feels extra pressure because he views recordings as historical records.

"I really feel bad if a show goes unrecorded," he says.

It's not a selfish exercise. Recordings are shared with other music fans – years ago by mailing blank tapes to benevolent tapers, now via Internet sites like archive.org.

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While it's a hobby for the tapers, free distribution of live shows is the way most jam bands build nationwide fan bases. Studio recordings of improvisational rock bands are infamously unsatisfying, making recorded concerts vital, says Dave Weismann, press coordinator for the

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10,000 Lakes Festival.

“Bands can create buzz just from their shows. That’s sort of the key to it,” Weismann says. “It’s really flattened out the organizational chart of the music industry.”

At 10,000 Lakes, organizers realize how valuable the recordings are not just for the artists but for the reputation of the festival, says Bill Higgins, an occasional taper himself and the event’s point man for the 20 to 30 tapers working there. Higgins says the festival gives free VIP tickets to 10 tapers and free upgrade from standard tickets to another 10. He shuttles tapers around in a golf cart, and they also have a special camp site with electricity to charge their gear overnight.

“We try to make the tapers as happy as possible,” he says.

For most, the hobby is a natural extension of their fondness for live music. That’s how 20-year-old Joe Rudolf of Fargo got started.

Rudolf grew up in Montana, where he and his father would drive out to the West Coast for jam band shows. “You go to enough shows, and you end up wanting to take them home with you,” he says.

His setup, the smallest of a group of six taping a set by Garaj Mahal on Thursday afternoon, cost him about \$600.

But that figure can quickly skyrocket, says Scott Thornburg, a 36-year-old from St. Louis. Though his gear only cost about \$700, it’s not difficult to drop \$5,000, he says. Tapers are, as one might expect, rather particular about esoteric details like audio cables and the precise position of microphones.

“It’s something you can easily obsess over,” Thornburg says.

For instance, Lambrecht uses a specialized microphone covered with chunks of fleece fabric attached to cut down on wind noise.

“We call them dead rats,” he says.

Phil Lesh, the Grateful Dead bassist whose band played Friday night says he thinks that attention to detail – and the demands of sound mixing – is why the recordings he prefers are often done by tapers instead of recorded straight from the soundboard.

“They actually provide a sense of space,” he says. “You can hear in between the instruments, whereas soundboard recordings are notoriously mono-ized.”

The reasons tapers do what they do are varied. Lambrecht thinks of it as a combination of his love of history and of music. Rudolf loves hanging out with other tapers. “They’re the nicest people,” he says.

Thornburg says, “it keeps me out of trouble.”

But they all take pleasure from kicking back and listening to their work.

“I figure when I’m in my nineties, I’ll have something to listen to,”

Lambrecht says.

Rudolf uses his recordings to reminisce.

“When you listen to a show you’ve been to, you can remember every minute. That’s the best part,” Rudolf says. “It makes all the work worth it.”

Readers can reach Forum reporter Dave Roepke at (701) 241-5535

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