I first learned of the San Francisco Tape Music Center in the late 1990s, when I was a student of one of its early members, Pauline Oliveros, at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In class, Pauline would talk about her first experiments with audio recording in the early '60s—which involved using cardboard tubes and bathtubs to simulate reverbs and filters—or about concerts she played that nearly caused riots. She described a time previously unknown to me, when you couldn’t accomplish everything with a piece of off-the-shelf software, when synthesizers did not exist, and when a simple electronic drone could drive people out of a concert hall and to the edge of sanity. Her stories electrified my interest in the history of technology as it relates to cultural expression.

Oliveros is one of the many artists featured in *The San Francisco Tape Music Center: 1960s Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, edited by David W. Bernstein, professor of music at Mills College in Oakland, California. The book provides the first comprehensive history of the Tape Music Center, a co-op recording studio and public performance space founded in 1962 by Morton Subotnick and Ramon Sender during the heyday of West Coast counterculture. Oliveros, La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich were all graduate students within a few miles of San Francisco in the late '50s and early '60s; their energy came to a boil at the Tape Music Center. It was an environment that could accommodate Luciano Berio and Janis Joplin, a crucible for everything from Minimalism to guitar rock and synth pop. The book rewinds and replays this heady moment in incredible detail.

Through essays and interviews with the artists, engineers, dancers, and promoters involved in and around the center, the picture we get is part acid party, part Happening, part recital, and part science fair. The collision of historically incompatible characters is hard to believe: It is a Kevin Bacon game for the entirety of avant-garde and pop culture in the '60s. The flyer for the 1966 Trips Festival in San Francisco, produced by Sender and Stewart Brand, is reprinted in the book and advertises attractions including members of the Tape Music Center, Big Brother & the Holding Company, the Don Buchla sound-light console, the Merry Pranksters’ “psychedelic symphony,” the Grateful Dead, Allen Ginsberg, the Hells Angels, “many noted outlaws,” and “the unexpected.” From the Hells Angels to Buchla, the inventor of the modular voltage-controlled synthesizer, in one degree of separation. The choreographer Anna Halprin underlines this cultural mix in the book: “What was popular art, what was fine art, what was experimental art all got kind of moved together.” But this mix of pop and avant-garde wasn’t a win-win for all. As Brand recounts, “It was the beginning of the Grateful Dead and the end of everybody else.”

What emerges is a surprising picture of compositions and inventions we think we know well. We learn that Miles Davis played a part in inspiring Terry Riley’s “In C,” 1964. A piece of Riley’s the previous year had featured Chet Baker soloing over Miles Davis’s “So What” through an Echoplex-style tape delay (a sound Riley had first experimented with for his composition *Mescalin Mix*, 1960–61). Riley wanted to reproduce this version of “So What” and tape delay with live instruments—thus “In C.” Bedroom guitarists across the world who have spent hours zoning out by playing through a delay unit can now take comfort in the fact that this sound led to one of the masterpieces of Minimalism. Oliveros had a similarly far-flung eureka moment in 1965. After staring at the Hewlett-Packard oscillators late one night in the Tape Music Center, an aha! lightbulb flashed, and she had the idea to reproduce the “difference tones” she had learned about from her accordion teacher—tones that result from the difference between two pitches—using the studio’s oscillators. This was the start of Oliveros’s first electronic works, her series of recorded improvisations called “Mnemonics.” But perhaps the best instance of discovery in the book is also the most understated. Artist and engineer Buchla had hooked up with Subotnick and Sender in 1963; collaborating on their concept for an “electronic music casel” and, oddly enough, using Pierre Boulez’s *Le Marteau sans maître*, 1953–55, as a case study for the design, Buchla invented the modular voltage-controlled synthesizer in late 1964. When asked how he came up with the idea for this revolutionary device, which made everything from Kraftwerk to Timbaland possible, he simply states: “I don’t know. I just did it.”

When I was eleven, my grandmother took me to a Grateful Dead concert at the eighty-thousand-seat football stadium in Buffalo. I remember watching the half-hour guitar and light solo that happened after sundown. Being a technology and music nerd even back then, I quickly deduced that the guitar solo was produced by playing modal scales through a tape delay. My own eureka moment while reading *The San Francisco Tape Music Center* came when I realized this was the same technique that led Riley to “In C.” After all, the Dead had played the Trips Festival, and their bassist, Phil Lesh, had studied composition with Berio along with Reich. The VW vans in the Buffalo parking lot and the post-Cagean avant-garde all seemed the same—having converged in '60s San Francisco. Next time you use Apple GarageBand software, pay your respects to Boulez. Next time you hear “In C,” consider Miles Davis and the Dead. And the next time you are in a loft in Brooklyn/Vienna/Tokyo watching a band improvise with electronics, thank your lucky stars that Pauline Oliveros took accordion lessons.