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A Vicarious Incantation: The Love-Letter Mixtape

There are several genres and many subgenres of the mixtape, in the conventional sense of that word—by which I mean: a cassette of a homemade sound collage, usually consisting of songs by various artists. The connotative meaning generally includes: a recording of a painstakingly curated compilation of songs, and possibly also what we might call *non-diegetic adjuncts*, such as sound-bites from movies and miscellaneous other sources. These songs and sounds are dubbed piecemeal onto a cassette tape, which is usually then given to a friend, or to an acquaintance, or a stranger you would like to know better by offering them a sampling of your tastes and sensibilities. In this last example, the mixtape is an epistolary narrative that contains—among many other things—a composite and inferential self-portrait. You make them in order to impress and be understood. These are what I call Introductory Mixtapes.

Other genres and subgenres of mixtape are more occasional, such as the Road-Trip Tape. The Breakup Tape. The Jogging Tape. The tape you leave in the mailbox of the ex who won't return your calls. The tape you make for your little sister, after she gets fired from her job tearing tickets at the multiplex. I have been given mixtapes intended to be played in my Walkman while I ride my bicycle, usually a composite of power-chord punk ballads at 180 bpm, turning a trip to meet a friend for coffee into an attack on the night. I have been given mixtapes specifically to listen to while high, tapes that inevitably include one of those tracks where a pathway of reverb and delay pedals on the concrete floor of somebody's garage is still turning a human and their Telecaster into an unspooling strata of overlapping stereophonic sound, hairy with tendrils that embrace you with warm undulation. (It is important to note the bodily aspect: Tape-givers want you to feel something that they have felt within themselves.) Many tapes are made for personal use, but often they are made to be given. Hearing the words *Here, I made a tape for you*, is both touching and enthralling, and the first private listen can be like a view into another life, like seeing into a stranger's windows at night.

It must be noted that genre classification is not always straightforward. Mixtapes are collages, but they are texts, not works of art *per se*, because form and content are of secondary im-

portance when it comes to categorization. The selected music, other sounds, and the way everything is stitched together, all matter less than the intersection of the author's intention and the recipient's recognition of that intention. Perhaps for this reason, my most beloved genre of mixtape is the platonic, non-occasional tape. The Just Because Tape. Unburdened. The kind you make for a friend, for no particular reason. You just hand it to them with no expectation other than the hope that they listen without prejudice. Such good-faith cassettes—spontaneous and generous, unburdened from the exchange rates of romantic design—unite a tape-maker with their desire to please. To conjure joy. The maker has demonstrated that they were thinking deeply about you while you were not around. Momentarily, the closeness of your friendship is held hostage to fortune, because they have wagered that they understand some of the ways in which you relate to the world, or that there are things they know which you will appreciate. Maybe they just want you to laugh at the throughline of Billy Joel's "Piano Man" following Elliott Smith's "Between the Bars" following "I Never Talk to Strangers" by Bette Midler and Tom Waits. But as far as risks go, such tapes are pretty safe, practically guaranteed to receive a modicum of appreciation, and the joy of discovery.

Which brings us to the elephant in the room: The Love-Letter Mixtape. This genre receives such an outsized measure of attention in popular literature and film, that those unversed in the craft are forgiven for believing it was the dominant species of mixtape in the format's heyday, circa 1985-1995. Admittedly, they were not uncommon. Making a mixtape for the object of your infatuation was a potent and frequently effective strategy. Certain songs, arranged in such-and-such a way, against the subtext and inference generated by clever juxtaposition—and the spooky overworld-underworld binary of a Side A / Side B narrative, with its cosmic promise of the continuous loop—can give shape to that which breath and tongue fail or fear to affirm. To someone who has never made or received one, the Love-Letter Mixtape can seem low-effort, indirect and inauthentic, or even dishonest, like the amorous plagiarism of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. A now gray-templed generation of tape-makers can counter that the labor and thoughtfulness required by the mixtape format are orders of magnitude greater than alternate romantic expressions, such as buying flowers, or cooking a meal. John Cusack's Lloyd Dobler, holding his boombox aloft in *Say Anything*, demonstrates music's power

of—well, of *saying without saying* (anything). No, I did not write or record the music on this tape I made for you, nor did I refine the petroleum for the plastic and the polyester, or fell the trees or manufacture the adhesive for the labels. But is it not enough that I planned the project, and magnetized the medium? Everything we think we own is really borrowed, everything we think we make is a reconstitution of inherited forms. What the maker contributes is time, consciousness, and consideration—and carefully handwritten labels and track lists, and a title for each side—and, sometimes, a surprise hidden within the folded J-card, like a Rollie Fingers Topps card, or a tab of LSD, or a strip of dirty black and white pictures, taken cunningly in the photobooth at the mall.

For the uninitiated, an outline of the process: You lock your bedroom door and peel the cellophane from a 60-minute Memorex, or a 90-minute Maxell. Unwrapped blank tapes feel radioactive with futurity. You load the tape into the deck, already simmering with ideas for the tone and qualities of the endeavor, however you still pause to meditate on the question of Side A, Track One. I enjoy launching Side A with drama, with kettle drums and a soul-purifying wall of brass, whether that means Coltrane or The Berliner Philharmoniker. But sometimes I want an epigraph, so I'll steal a few lines of movie dialogue. (When their exchanges are audio-only, Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in *Before Sunrise* sound like philosophers.) Sometimes you want to start out with well-known songs, like a journey that starts at the recipient's front door. Mostly though, you hesitate, worrying that the success or failure of the entire enterprise rests on this choice. Of course this thinking is superstitious, but Love-Letter tape-making is the apogee of superstition in the analog age. You are attempting to make someone hear a message that you are leaving unsaid. In other words, you hope to achieve a specific effect with no natural, adducible cause. This is witchcraft. This is alchemy. As you prepare to record, a tumultuous feeling buzzes in your stomach. Not butterflies, but something electric. You unsleeve an LP borrowed from your stepfather's record cabinet, and again you pause. You realize that installing The Flamingos' "I Only Have Eyes for You" as the very first song is a terrifyingly forward declaration. *Sh'bop-sh'bop*. And yet: You drop the needle with your right hand and press Play and Record simultaneously with the first two fingers of your left, because you understand, as all tape-makers understand, that there is a quantity of grace and forgivingness inherent to the medium. Installing "I Only Have Eyes for You" on a tape—first, last, or any-

where—is both to say *and not to say* those words. This is the most important element of the mixtape’s bivalent voodoo. You are creating two possible futures, one in which you have boldly Transmitted Your Message, and one in which you have merely Communicated A Sentiment. In the latter, you will have declared nothing. You will have acted as an impersonal conduit, a vessel, in the same sense that the plastic housing of the cassette is not the encoded tape itself, just as the encoded tape is not the sound itself, just as sound is not exactly love. The grammar here is not definitive, declarative, and possessive, but spongy and conditional. It is a kind of palimpsest, when a secondary narrative may emerge to undermine the first. Within these two possibilities lie a plenitude of possible interpretations, any and all of them potentially final and correct. But importantly it is not you, the tape giver, but the tape *givee* who gets to decide your Love-Letter Mixtape’s final meaning. Once the cassette is handed over, or mailed, or left where it will be found, you have surrendered your authority on its signification. The recipient alone possesses the power to accept or reject what you both know you have attempted to imply by dubbing The Flamingos, the Smiths, and Sinéad O’Connor. They may accept or reject what your tape implies and proposes, *just as they may reject the proposition that anything was implied at all*. They may turn a deaf ear to the obvious connotations of Paul McCartney telling us that, despite everything, people have not yet had enough of silly love songs. The recipient is allowed to pretend that your tape is just some good songs from one friend to another. You will ask them later what they thought, and they will steel themselves and say, too simply, “Yeah! It was great ... thanks. Thanks for the *tape*.” You must accept this rejection and its cul-de-sac of ramifications. It is self-evident that the right to reject-without-rejecting is conferred upon anyone given a tape that aspires to say-without-saying. This ritual of politeness is meant to protect your feelings and theirs, and to maintain sociable fraternization in the future. In other words: Walk away. You violate this covenant at the risk of permanent estrangement.

And I want you to know that I understand. You planned that mixtape for days, laboring like a daemon over the manifold subtextual insinuations of every song choice and its situation in the cycle, re-recording songs when you left too much time between intercuts, staying up until two in the morning to play the tape all the way through, to make sure there was not a single hiss or pop, until the cartilage in your ears ached from the long hours of gentle pressure from foam-jacketed headphones. Just because the trans-

mission was not received does not mean that it was a mistake to expend so much time and energy, because the tape was not the only thing that was created. For a few hours you assembled an image of yourself, as you would like to be seen.

It is possible that your tape will be rediscovered, later, that it will spark a chain of reconsiderations, that it will have worked after all, that its incantatory effects were as profound as you'd hoped, just delayed. Tape makers are enchanters in the original sense, trying to speak intention into fact, to connect bodies through sound. There is also the chance that this cassette will be lost, or given away, or recorded over—possibly when the recipient needs to make their own tape, for someone they are as hopelessly infatuated with as you are with them. All outcomes must be accepted as satisfactory. If you get to say, "I Only Have Eyes for You," without actually having to say, "I only have eyes for you," then so too may your listener feign deafness to your subterranean message. This is the price of safety, the cost of comfort. You now know, if you did not already, that while boldness is perilous by definition, cowardice also has its penalties.

Perhaps this is what is to be learned from a mixtape's kaleidoscope of interpretations—and, at times, its consensual misinterpretation. You chose this medium at least partly from your fear that a more direct statement would not work as well as an elliptical, referential overture. This apprehension gets folded into the tape's self-portrait. And it may be exactly what we want to show a person, if what we want to be is understood.