

Pushing Record: Labors of Love, and the iTunes Playlist

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Abstract

Borrowed from allwomentalk.com Last month as my sister and I drove to the store, she started to joke with me. “You’re crazy,” she began, “you’re so high-tech, with your computers, and XBOX. You love music. But, you’ve got a cassette player in your car.” I shot her a look. “So what? I like it.” I said, hoping that she would back off. “So what!” she proclaimed in response, “don’t you want a CD player?”

Keywords

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Last month as my sister and I drove to the store, she started to joke with me. “You’re crazy,” she began, “you’re so high-tech, with your computers, and XBOX. You love music. But, you’ve got a cassette player in your car.” I shot her a look. “So what? I like it.” I said, hoping that she would back off. “So what!” she proclaimed in response, “don’t you want a CD player? Or a jack for your iPod?” I responded, “But how will I play my tapes?” She stared at me. “Who cares? They sound like crud. You’re crazy.”

Here at *Sounding Out!* we’ve featured a number of articles about analog tape. It persists in popular culture ([Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman’s](#) *Play it Again (and Again)*, Sam: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), and [Part 3](#)), underground communities ([Matt Laferty’s](#) *On Hand Made Music*), and even our personal histories ([Gus Stadler’s](#) *Pushing Play*). Even though tape is generally understood to be obsolete, niche, and just plain noisy – I will insist that, despite my sister’s concerns, there is something special (even forgotten) about the medium itself. I had tried to articulate this in last year’s article [What Mixtapes Can Teach Us About Noise](#). But, when I re-read it, I can’t help but think that I somehow missed the point. Let me try again with a new question: What is the difference between a mix on cassette tape and an iTunes playlist?

Care is the difference. The material limitations of the cassette recorder demand that care is taken during the act of inscription. In other words, cassette mixes cannot be automated like an iTunes playlist. The practice of recording a mix on cassette requires, at minimum, that some attention is paid to the moment a song begins (as record is pushed), and the moment a song ends (as stop is pressed). The cassette must be tended, as it were, during the encoding process. It is impossible to program a cassette mix otherwise.

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After tracks have been chosen and messages encoded, frequently cassette mixes are shared, or gifted. If the receiver chooses to listen to the cassette, they must locate, first, a cassette player. This was not a problem in 1990 when cassette players were a more or less ubiquitous technology. But, in the present day, they are notably rare. Furthermore, even if some care has been taken to locate a listening platform, the tape is far more treacherous than the CD to navigate. Awkward transitions governed by the fast-forward and rewind buttons, encouraged listeners to listen through all but the most wretched sequences of a cassette mix. And, let us not forget, how leaving a cassette in the wrong player could result in a mangle of 1/8” tape. Or, how speakers, magnets, and poor weather all eventually erode at the contents of poorly stored tape. Care had to be taken in maintaining and storing a good cassette mix; tapes are a fragile technology and that, for me at least, serves to valorize the labor at stake in their creation.

Am I giving the playlist enough credit? Even though the platform may not limit its listeners, and producers, in the same ways that cassette recorders have, who is to say that any *less* care is taken when producing a playlist? To this point, I must bring up a question of labor. While, the receiver of a cassette mix knows that at least an hour (as cassettes are generally 60 minutes or more) of work has been put into its construction, the receiver of a mix CD, or playlist, cannot be as certain. iTunes playlists can be constructed in five minutes or less. Implicated within this labor divide is both an emerging and ephemeral culture of listening.

As Sterne (2006) has argued in his paper, [The MP3 as Cultural Artifact](#), our bodies respond to MP3s in a way that is fundamentally different than listening to a tape, or record. “[The MP3] represents a liberation of just-in-time sound production, where systems give listeners less and ask their bodies to do more of the work” (p.838). If the very compression algorithms that constitute MP3s make demands on the brains and bodies of listeners, it is interesting to think of the iTunes playlist in parallel. The iTunes playlist makes comparatively few demands on the body of the producer. This, paradoxically, results in a culture that does not valorize the labor of its constituent producers. Most apparent in the [nebulous legal credibility of Mashups](#), the mix exists predominantly within an economy of care. Unfortunately, the digital turn toward playlisting conspires to render the labor of care, in this context, invisible.

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Is there hope for iTunes? Can we trust our playlists to be received with the love that was put into them? Some theorists like Hardt (1999) see an upside to caring labor. As he points out in his essay, [Affective Labor](#), “Caring labor is certainly entirely immersed in the corporeal, the somatic, but the affects it produces are nonetheless immaterial. What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower” (p. 96). Sharing is caring, the accessibility and ease of production that playlisting provides, is, at least, a way to foster community. I am not so optimistic. For caring labor is not adequately valued, at least not in the context of building a playlist. Playlists rely on an audience to value them, they provide no guarantees. The labor at stake in their construction may only become visible to those who listen. The cassette mix, on the other hand, has care inscribed into its magnetic tape. The listener knows that some work has been put into making the mix, even before play is pressed.

Although cassette tapes may have all but disappeared as a way to share music, the caring labor involved in their production might be salvaged in other forms. Taking a page from [Andreas Duus Pape's](#) recent, [Building Intimate Performance Venue's on the Internet](#), podcasts (produced on platforms like Garageband or Audacity), provide a viable alternative. Like cassettes, they subject their listeners to a linear play style. And, there is a certain degree of care taken by the producer when splicing, cross-fading, arranging, and sequencing a set of tracks. It is implicit in the construction of a Podcast that some degree of care was taken during its development. Of course, I will keep the cassette player in my car. I have a special tape adaptor, which lets it play music from my iPod.

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