

# It Was You I Was Thinking Of: Looking at Audience through the Genre of Mixtapes

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Whether we're compiling songs on tape, CD, or digital playlist, a mix is a composition that addresses some of the same features as many written genres. Looking at questions about audience in particular, this article examines the way that mixes imply or attempt to establish a relationship with another person and the process an author may go through to meet those audience expectations. From a CHAT perspective, it explores the areas of representation, reception, and distribution. Finally, the article acts as a kind of meta-mixtape, with songs about mixtapes fitted to each section of the text in place of headers. Now, press "Play!"

## 1. The Gaslight Anthem – "45"

In thinking about genres, it's important to realize that not all composition directly involves written words on paper. People communicate in a lot of different ways: through social media, through images, and through music, to name just a few. It is this last medium, not just through songs but through the compilation of them, that led me to the genre of the mixtape. A mix involves the careful consideration of content, organization, and audience that is characteristic of most written genres. If a picture is worth a thousand words, what are sixteen ordered songs and hand-drawn cover art worth? As a medium that not only tries to send a message to the reader (or listener), but also implies or attempts to build some kind of relationship with him or her, the mixtape addresses audience in interesting ways. This article will examine the way elements such as purpose, audience, and trajectory in the composition of a mixtape work together to send that message, not with words, but with songs.



Figure 1: Metamixtape: It Was You I Was Thinking Of

## 2. Bow Wow Wow – “C30, C60, C90, Go!”

In thinking about mixtapes, it may be helpful to define terms. What exactly do we mean when we talk about a mix? The classic definition of the mixtape includes the self-made punk and hip-hop albums that helped spread music without the help of major labels, or even what a producer does when he or she is organizing tracks for a mass-produced album. For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the homemade mix in its many incarnations. In the hands of the consumer, the possibilities of this genre are limitless. The cassette tape first gave ordinary listeners, in their homes or in their cars, the power to listen to any tracks they wanted. As Bow Wow Wow sings, “I don’t buy records in your shop, now I tape them all.” From there, the mix takes on a life of its own. Songs can be put together for just about any purpose—a mix of favorite songs by a favorite artist, a mix made for a friend or significant other, or a mix with a theme like traveling or going through a breakup. As with all writing, the medium matters. Questions of audience are inseparable from questions of purpose and medium. In CHAT terms, I have to think about how a mix will be distributed.<sup>1</sup> For example, I might make a mix on cassette tape for my dad or Jeff Higgins, a creative writer in the graduate program, because I know they have the technology to listen to them, but I would use a CD or a playlist for my ex-boyfriend, Carson, who lives several states away and doesn’t own a cassette player. If I want to share a mix with a much larger audience (say, whoever happens to read this article), I might organize a playlist on a website like Tumblr or 8tracks. Whether a mix is composed on a cassette tape, a CD, or a digital playlist, questions of what we’re trying to say and who we’re trying to reach will come into play. One of the most important distinctions is the matter of intention; the mix is a careful selection and ordering of songs for a specific purpose and audience. As DJ Jen Long, co-founder of Cassette Tape Day, says, “Tapes involve effort, you know? They always have” (Rogers).

### 3. The Bouncing Souls – “Private Radio”

While many mixtapes are made to be given away, perhaps one of the most frequent audiences for a mix is one’s self. I have dozens of finished and half-finished playlists for going to the gym (“Gym Class Hero,” “Zombies, Run!”), for falling asleep (“Goodnight Moon”), highlighting my favorite tracks from a decade (“That 70’s Song”), or the handful of country songs I can stand to listen to (“Tolerable Country”). Rob Sheffield in *Love is a Mixtape* describes, “Tapes for making out, tapes for dancing, tapes for falling asleep. Tapes for doing the dishes, for walking the dog” (3). The audience element here is easy, since I know what I like better than anyone else. I don’t spend nearly as much time on mixes like this; in fact, I wouldn’t even call these mixes. I distinguish these as playlists (which could possibly be considered a separate genre) for two reasons: 1. They’re never meant to be burned to a disc or recorded on a tape. They’re on-going compilations that might include over a hundred songs. 2. I hardly ever deliberate over song order on a playlist for myself; I just put them on shuffle and let them go. I’m not trying to send a message so much as I’m setting the background music for whatever I happen to be doing at the time. Pat Griffin, in *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, describes it as “constructing my own private radio station, one that could match my teenage psychosis riff for riff, made for no other consumption than mine” (Moore 18).

### 4. Avenue Q – “Mixtape”

Of course, in the very next lines, Griffin describes the realization that mixes could also be made for girls. By far, one of the most popular themes for a mix is the couples tape. Nothing says “I love you” like the perfect song, and *Love is a Mixtape* by Rob Sheffield, *Cassette From My Ex*, edited by Jason Bitner, and *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, edited by Thurston Moore, are filled with anecdotes about love tapes gone well (or horribly, horribly wrong). As Kate Monster sings in *Avenue Q*, “Sometimes when someone has a crush on you, they’ll make you a mixtape to give you a clue.” A couples tape tells “the story of us.” It might signal a potential romance if the mix is good, or it might be a warning sign that you’re not compatible if the mix is problematic. Often, a mixtape sends a message that we may not be comfortable saying out loud. It’s hard to say “I like you” or “I don’t like you,” but music has a way of transcending written or verbal language. I have very little experience with this kind of mix. My friend, Stephen Johnson, and I frequently swap mixes, and we both agreed once that we would never compile a list of love songs for a significant other, since neither of us would be able to listen to it. As an audience, we wouldn’t enjoy that type of mix.

## 5. Los Campesinos! – “It Started With a Mixx”

However, I would closely align this type of mix with what I call personal mixes: a mix that is all about a person. It may include songs I think he would like, songs that remind me of her, or songs we might have listened to together. This is the style my dad used for the cassette tape of my favorite songs when I was a kid and the mix CD he made me for my birthday last year. They were songs that reminded him of me or songs he knew I liked or would like. I have never loved a mix more; he knew his audience (me) better than anyone. The construction of a mix for another person involves a careful consideration of audience. From a CHAT perspective, I’m working specifically on areas of representation. Who is this for? What will this person like? What shouldn’t I say to that person? Language plays just as important of a role in compiling mixtapes as it does in composing. I have to think about what songs my listener does like or could like, and if I want him to listen to it again, I have to avoid songs or musical genres he wouldn’t enjoy. For example, similar to the way that I would never use slang words in a formal essay, I would never put a heavy metal song on a mix for my mother. She wouldn’t like it; it would be a misinterpretation of audience. In the case of close friends or family, this may not be that difficult. If I know them well enough, I’m probably already familiar with some of their music preferences. But what about making a mix for a stranger? If I don’t know my audience very well, the choices become more difficult. I have to rely on a vague sense of what that person likes, along with my own aesthetic judgment on song choice and placement. It may be hit or miss; sometimes I can correctly interpret my audience and other times not.

## 6. Jack’s Mannequin – “The Mixtape”

I want to examine the personal mix more closely. When my ex-boyfriend, Carson, moved out of state for college, I made him two mixes: the first was a themed mix with songs about driving, flying, or otherwise traveling (“Leaving on a Jet Plane”), and the second was songs that were all about him—how I thought and felt about him, songs we had listened to together or that just reminded me of his personality. When I asked him about them later, he said that he liked them both, but that the second one was much better! There is a very personal aspect to that kind of mix; if I considered my audience carefully enough, then there’s no question why he liked it more—it’s all about him, our relationship, and our memories together. Jeff Higgins compiles personal mixes differently, and his approach is unique to his perspective as a creative writer. His mixes often combine the personal with a theme; he may select tracks that remind him of a specific person in a specific time at a

specific place, such as bicycling down Fell Avenue when a leaf breaks off in front of him. All of the songs on a mix like that would be chosen specifically for a certain person, similar to the way I approach personal mixes.

## 7. The Cardigans – “Erase/Rewind”

Here, representation comes into play in another way; everyone who makes mixes will develop his or her own set of genre conventions. The same way no two creative writers will share the same style, anyone who spends time with the mixtape genre will develop his or her own personal way of creating them. Where I agonize over songs that are particularly hard to place (viz. those with abrupt or especially quiet beginnings) because I want each song to flow seamlessly into the next, Jeff makes aesthetic use of these. He prefers jarring transitions between some of his songs to shake up the listener. Carson works with transition in another way by including a musical “intermission,” usually an entirely instrumental song, to signify a change in the pace of the mix. Stephen does something similar by making use of the several minutes worth of “silence” at the end of a track (likely to lead into a hidden track on the album, but is problematic on a mix); he uses the silence to indicate a transition from political songs on his philosophical mix to more theoretical and personal ones. The conventions for each artist will vary. Joe Levy in *Cassette From My Ex* explains, “I had a rule against two songs by the same artist back to back. (If you had two songs by the same artist, one was on side A and the other on side B)” (Bitner). He then goes on to explain why he might break that rule to emphasize an emotion, such as heartache, the way a writer might bend the rules of grammar to illustrate a point. Again, these choices all come back to the purpose and the audience of the mix (or in CHAT terms, the representation).

## 8. Brand New – “Mix Tape”

Of course, there’s the possibility that a personal mix can fail drastically. When I traded mixes with another friend, Matt, our only criteria was to choose songs that we thought the other would like or songs that reminded us of each other. The first time I listened to his mix, I hated nearly every song on it. After listening to it a few times and recovering from my initial shock, I realized what had happened. I had taken a similar route in composing this mix as I did when making my boyfriend’s mix and had chosen songs that were entirely about Matt. The problem was, he had chosen songs that were about him as well, including some of his personal favorites. This mix had

nothing to do with me at all. Not only was my understanding of what we were doing completely different than his, the audience he was appealing to in that mix was himself, not me. While that didn't make it *bad*, I had to readjust my expectations in order to find something that I liked about it. When I attempted to listen to the mix from his perspective and with a better understanding of what he was doing, I was able to appreciate it more. Matt's mix for me ran into some of the problems that writers can have, both in and outside of the classroom. For example, writing an e-mail to a friend is very different from writing an e-mail to a professor. If I were to e-mail a professor using phrases like, "What's up?" or "lol," it may cause problems. Many genre conventions are often set by the readers who consume that writing, as well as by the writers who create in them. When my genre expectations weren't met, I initially didn't like the mix; it didn't accomplish what it set out to do, or what I imagined it should do. In a way, I misread his mix.

## 9. Butch Walker – "Mixtape"

Of course, the audience of a mix, like with any piece of writing, can't always be predicted. When Carson and I decided to just be friends, and he said he was working on a breakup mix, I insisted that he send it to me. The mix started out with five or six sad songs and then, after his customary instrumental intermission, it transitioned into songs about feeling better, moving on, and having a good time. I trusted his mix-making ability to tell me what I needed to know about that point in our lives. In a way, it helped us both to ease some of the remaining tensions of breaking up, and it gave me a way to gauge his feelings about our breakup that our conversations couldn't articulate. After listening to it, I was relieved. I now trusted that he would be okay, that he thought we'd made the right choice, and that we could still manage to be friends. The audience here (me) was unintended. Typically, a breakup mix is probably not shared with the other partner, and the only audience Carson was initially addressing was himself. Like other kinds of writing, a mix can have unintended trajectories.

## 10. The Ataris – "Song for a Mix Tape"

In its physical format, the distribution of a mix tape or mix CD may be limited. Because it's confined to physical space, the likelihood of a mix ending up across the world, for example, is very low. Its trajectory is limited. Again, this connects to the distribution and reception elements of CHAT. If we like it, we may copy it for a friend, but most mixes will probably never

leave our cars or homes except on accident. My nephew and I once found an abandoned mix CD in the parking lot of a restaurant and decided to play it on the way home; after half an hour, it was entirely clear to me why someone threw it out of their car, but my nephew liked it so much that he kept it. (Of course, being fifteen, he never listened to it again or played it for anyone else, but that doesn't mean it won't someday end up in the hands of another entirely unexpected listener). Now, if we like a mix CD, it's possible to upload some or all of the tracks to a computer. With the Internet, the possibilities of where these tracks might be distributed and taken up are endless. A mix may be received in a way its author never intended. Maybe the mix is taken apart and only a few of the songs are shared, or maybe the entire mix is posted on-line for other people to hear. In social media, mixes can be shared and re-shared. It's now possible to make a mix that never leaves the digital world, complete with song order and cover art. DJs might post examples of their playlists online in order to get hired, in which case the audience is crucial. A DJ has to consider all kinds of elements to make a playlist: What kind of music is popular now? What has been popular in the past? What do people at a party want to hear? What kinds of songs can we dance to? They not only have to think about the crowd they're playing for, but about the employers who may or may not decide to hire them based on their playlists.

## 11. All Time Low – “Lost in Stereo”

To get myself paying attention to the process I go through when I make a mix, I decided to create one as I was writing this article. It was a challenge because, while my mixes always have a message, I have never tried to fit songs with actual text before, nor have I ever tried to create a mix in which my audience might be so vast (anyone who happens to read this article). Most mixes are for one person or a few people, but the audience for an article could be many more. My theme was the metamixtape, or songs about mixtapes for a mixtape. In my third or fourth draft of the article, I thought I had a good list of tracks, and I was using them as headers for my paragraphs. Then, I had a conversation with the editor. As it turned out, she didn't understand the headings at all. She wasn't familiar with most of the songs, and she wasn't sure whether or how they were supposed to go with each section of text. I can imagine many readers having a similar problem. In the context of this article, the metamixtape completely failed. There was no way to gauge my audience; the span of it was too great, and selecting songs that made sense to everyone who read it would have been impossible. Of course, for myself and the people I know who like mixes, the metamixtape worked just fine as a mix about mixes, whether or not they were familiar with all the songs I selected.<sup>2</sup>

## 12. Damone – “On Your Speakers”

Whether its purpose is a theme or a personal mix, the mixtape is a creative medium of communication. All of the elements of writing, except for the actual written words, go into it. Who am I making this mix for? What am I trying to say? I have to think about my purpose, my audience, my medium, and my trajectory. If I’m working from a CHAT perspective, all of these are part of the representation of the mix. I might be trying to send a message about traveling or falling in love; I might be telling a story about another person or an attempt to capture a single moment in time. All of the aesthetics of a mix, from song choices to medium, and the way we contemplate and arrange these things, contribute to the way we “write” a mix and the message we’re trying to send to our listeners or, in another way, our readers. Our success in this genre and how a mix is used or taken up from there (the reception, in CHAT terms), often depends on how well we interpreted our intended audience.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> CHAT, or Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, is a way of looking at the complex ways in which writing and other activities happen in the world given their specific situations or circumstances (which are affected by their place in history and cultural factors).

<sup>2</sup> To access the metamixtape or any of the other mixes mentioned in this article, you can visit my profile at <http://8tracks.com/sixtiepixie>.

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