

Mixtapes Without Tape: Materiality and the Object in Digital Music Listening

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In this paper, I engage with the notions of materiality and immateriality and their implication in the consumption of digital music. As an example of this interplay, I will focus on websites designed for the creation and sharing of playlists and mixtapes. These sites are significant not only as avenues for a creative practice of consumption, but for their roles in helping to define the musical object as the music we consume increasingly becomes digital. By looking at the interfaces of these sites and their typical uses, I will reveal their specific approaches to the questions of materiality and object-ness.

The ontology of music in the West has long straddled the dividing line between materiality and immateriality, caught between the performance and the notated score, and, for the majority of the 20th century, between the performance and the recording. For any number of reasons, the recording, and most importantly the material object on or in which the recording is inscribed, has come to serve as the locus of musical existence in the popular consciousness, at least up until these last few years. These reasons include, but are certainly not limited to, the continued rise of the national and international star system wherein purchasing a recording might be the only way to experience a musician's work; the rise of the album in the 1960s as something more than just a handful of songs grouped together, that must be experienced *as* the recording in order to "get it;" the continued sale of most popular music in album form, despite popular protest against the "two hits plus

filler” formula; and possibly a growing tendency among those immersed in “postmodern” processes to value the commodity object as a thing in and of itself.

The widespread acceptance of digital media, including digital music, in the last decade or so has brought the question of materiality squarely into the limelight. Further, this question is relevant to the consumers of popular music in a way, perhaps, that it never has been before. Music is increasingly consumed separately from the album and without being inherently tied to an experience of physicality. In this, the music being consumed undergoes a process of dematerialization. I use the term dematerialization here as defined by Jacob Lillemose based on the work of Lucy Lippard, “as an extensive and fundamental rethinking of the multiplicity of materiality beyond its connection to the entity of the object” (Lillemose 2006, p. 116). That is to say, as the musical object approaches a state of immateriality, object-ness begins to fade and what is left over is musical material. The primary distinction here, of course, is that the musical material is no longer bound up in the object. When we experience recorded music through the physical object, the interaction is with both the music as temporal experience and the music as physical object, or vice versa, the object as music. Without the physical object, our mode of interaction is changed such that the temporal experience is no longer prescribed beyond the song. As such, the listener is free, or alternatively required, to construct their own temporal experience as they see fit. Dematerialization is thus not being used to refer to a process of ephemeralization of music, but rather to the emergence, or perhaps a return, of music as material rather than as something fully contained in “the entity of the object” (ibid). Lillemose uses dematerialization in his discussion of

the emergence of the conceptual trends of process and systems aesthetics in art of the 1960s and 70s. There, dematerialization refers to the move away from art as a practice of objects and toward art as a set of processes dealing with materials. These materials, though still often physical themselves, are not put together to create a physical object of art. The object is what has dematerialized, bringing forth the materiality of, well, the materials.

The song post-digitalization, however, is now the object of commerce. After all it is the thing we pay \$.99 for, in true impulse buy fashion. Yet as we go to listen to that song, we are likely to hear it not by itself but in series with the rest of our digital collection. Similar to the process art of which Lillemose writes, our musical encounters become effectively boundless, ended only by the stop button, not by the end of the object. As I was writing this, iTunes was playing randomly through my music collection, all 40-odd days worth. Occasionally I felt compelled to skip past a song, but not because it was a song I don't like. After all, I have the capability, and the authority, to compose my collection only of music that I find enjoyable. When I skip past a song, it is generally not because that song, as an entity in and of itself, is something I would rather not hear. More often than not, it is because it disrupts the flow of musical material, interrupting the experience with which I am engaged. The experience is similar with most streaming music services. While the term streaming refers to a technological process, it also evokes this sensation of musical flow. Rather than discreet objects being heard, the music is experienced as a stream of material.

Of course, this is not to suggest that such a listening practice is universal, or even necessarily dominant. But it is certainly a prominent one, especially among younger listeners. Based on a collection of informal surveys and interviews that I have conducted with undergraduate students over the last year or so, material-based listening made up a large portion of daily musical experience for many respondents. Even among students who indicated that owning a physical copy of an album was somehow a more valid form of musical consumption than the digital alternative, many admitted that much of their listening was connected to iPods and other digital devices and that they frequently entered into material-based experiences.

Many of these students, and indeed many digital music listeners, engage in playlist construction as a means of organizing their musical experiences in some way. Playlists, generally speaking, are collections of songs of variable length, generally with some kind of organizing principle or theme. Often playlists are geared toward inducing a specific mood in the listener, as with upbeat, potentially aggressive music for helping with exercise. The possibility of constructing and sharing playlists online has been realized in the last few years, largely due to the emergence of freely accessible databases of digital music, legal or otherwise. I have been participating on one such website, Project Playlist (at playlist.com), wherein users search through the site's database for songs with which to construct their own playlists. While many of the users I interacted with said that they made their playlists purely for their own listening experience, Playlist.com and many other playlist sharing websites are built around social networks, both in and outside the

site. Users' playlists are accessed through their profiles, similar to the use of music on MySpace as a brief, sonic signifier of identity. Most playlists on Playlist.com, though, contain well over 50 songs with many butting up against the imposed limit of 200. They indeed often function as musical representations of the user, and many are left with the default title of "User's playlist." But a large number of users create multiple playlists, some as many as 30, based on diverse moods and themes. A common motive for playlist construction on Playlist.com is proving that one is "more punk" than other users. Threads on the message board often pop up asking participants to judge between two punk playlists, with the loser labeled a poseur and shamed for at least the next few hours. The caveat, of course, is that judging takes only seconds – very few people seem to actually listen to these lists for more than a few minutes, except perhaps the users by whom they are made.

Beyond this competitive use of the playlist, most users state that the majority of their playlists are for their own personal use when they know they are going to be at their computers for lengthy spans of time. They load up a particular playlist, press the play button and, usually with the shuffle function on, sit back and listen. This activity seems, again based on informal interactions and personal experience, also to be common with offline playlist use. One student described at length her collection of playlists, most of them mood-based. The majority were quite lengthy, well over 50 songs, and all were listened to on shuffle. When I asked her to think about the object of her attention, or what exactly it was she was focusing on when listening, her response was that the playlist tended to shift her attention away from the individual songs and toward the overall stream of music, but importantly not as

something with boundaries. Rather she described that she was somehow listening in on something that was, and would be, ongoing (Interview, 12/05/08). I responded by asking about the difference between the playlist and the album, even when both were consumed digitally. She answered that, when she had learned a collection of songs through hearing an album, she grew to associate those songs with their contexts such that one song was *supposed* to follow another and precede yet another to the point that listening to just the album on shuffle was an unsettling experience. Conversely, as might be expected, songs that she had downloaded individually had no such contextual associations, and so could be easily inserted into any context. Most interesting to me was that once these songs, both with and without strong album-based associations, were added to a playlist that was to be listened to on random, original context seemed to lose all importance.

Though this particular student rather enjoyed this mode of listening, others who described similar behavior conveyed negative feelings toward it. Many described a feeling of not having control over their listening, as though the digital medium, despite offering unprecedented command over the musical experience, was leading them into an unsatisfying relationship with their music. One response to this apparent problem has been the construction and consumption of online mixtapes. There are several potential meanings of the term “online mixtape:” The most predominant, according to a Google search for the word “mixtape,” refers to websites selling hip-hop mixtapes, whether as physical media or as single-file MP3 downloads, but which can often be listened to, or at least previewed, online (for example, DatPiff.com, mixtapekings.com, Mixtapepass.com). Here, I use the term to

refer specifically to a practice, facilitated by a handful of websites, involving the construction of rather short collections of songs (generally an hour or less) that are then shared with and consumed by other listeners. Probably the best known mixtape site, and one of the first to be shut down under RIAA influence, was Muxtape, which imposed a limit of 12 tracks per mixtape. This was both a technical decision, as the site required users to upload their own music, and an aesthetic one, as it created an almost physical boundary on the size of the resulting mixtapes. Clearly, the aim was to reproduce as fully as possible the experience of the cassette mixtape, from the length limit (somewhere around 40-50 minutes, assuming 12 songs at 3 to 4 minutes per song) to the use of a blank cassette tape as the site's logo.

Several sites have picked up, or at least tried to pick up, where Muxtape left off. Though none have become quite the web media darling that Muxtape was (primarily posthumously), 8tracks.com has amassed a fairly sizeable user base. 8tracks, both referring to the suggested length of mixes (8 songs) and overtly referencing yet another physical medium (the 8-track tape), seems to be the only currently active mixtape site that operates completely legally. Their licensing of music as a "non-interactive internet radio service" has interesting consequences for the user experience (8tracks.com). Listeners are presented with a song listing that expands only as each song is played, songs cannot be replayed without reloading the webpage, and there is an hourly limit to how many times songs can be skipped over. One user I spoke with told me, quite frankly, that these inconveniences reminded her rather convincingly of listening to albums on physical media (Interview,

05/22/09). Clearly, there was some kind of nostalgic appeal at work here. This was a woman who had grown up with both cassettes and CDs, and so for her the online mixtape brings back part of a fond experience from her past, even though that past is only removed by a few years. For her the convenience of digital music consumption had won out over the physicality of the cassette and CD albums she had grown up with, but she said that she often found the digital experience somewhat unsatisfying because it led her quite regularly to hear her music as little more than continuous sound. The nostalgia evoked by the mixtapes on 8tracks is thus not only for the physicality of the CD and cassette, but also for the fairly rigid organization of musical experience that those media imply. Unlike the playlist-based listening practice, the mixtape, in particular those on 8tracks, nudged her focus toward both an organizing structure and the pieces of that structure. By listening to the mixtape and being aware that it is a bounded and effectively fixed entity that is given a name and even album art, she enters into a different mode of consumption. However, it is not that she is hearing *only* the mixtape as an object. Instead, each song begins to take on meaning as a component of that mix, whereby the listener constructs for themselves a web of associations between them. In this, the songs themselves become less material in the sense of being used for the construction of a non-object experience, and more material, or substantive, in the sense of being entities or even objects in their own right. Strangely, just as the dissolution of the album might cause the song to function as material, the rematerialization of the album-like object in the mixtape in turn reinforces the object-ness of the individual song.

Of course, no discussion of these online mixtape sites can be complete without mentioning that, like Muxtape, many have shut down and most of the remaining handful seem to be approaching the same fate. Favtape.com, for instance, went offline only within the last few weeks. Though, as with Muxtape, this closure is largely beyond the control of both site operators and users alike, the future of online mixtapes doesn't seem terribly bright at this point. However, this practice presents an interesting look into the interaction of listeners with digital music. With the control given by digitization and the freeing of the song from the confines of the album, the location of the object becomes confused, often meaning one thing when the music is bought or talked about and another thing entirely when it is listened to. Having a disc or cassette to hold makes it clear: that physical object, and the music which that object represents, is the object of consumption. Without this physicality or boundedness, the musical object becomes dematerialized: transformed into material for the construction of musical experience. It is at this point that many listeners reported a feeling of disengagement with their music, to the point that they feel motivated to reconstruct the experience of boundedness and contextualization, in effect rematerializing the musical object in the form of the mixtape.

Whereas the physical object of the recording serves as a prescriptive tool for the organization of the listening experience, its dematerialization leads to a potentially problematic situation. While for some listeners the digitization of music leads to a positive freedom over the construction of their musical experience, for others this same freedom creates a sort of organizational void. The allure of the online mixtape is in its ability to address this void, to provide a top-down

organization of the musical experience through the creation of a virtual object. Though the closure of these sites indicates that the online mixtape might soon disappear, their popularity demonstrates that, even with the apparently liberatory nature of digital media and the possibility of nearly limitless music collections, many listeners are seeking out rather small, tightly bounded, and often prescribed sets of songs. (Of course, with the interesting twist of using digital technologies to emulate the relatively ancient technology of the cassette tape.) The construction and consumption of these virtual objects seems to be a response to the often awkward and occasionally painful transition away from physicality in popular music, as the identity of the thing being consumed becomes blurred between object and material, materiality and immateriality.

Sources:

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