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## Sound Tracks of Our Lives: Mix Tapes and Playlists in the Young Adult Literature Classroom

While many teenagers, as well as more than a few adults, might ironically summarize the three major preoccupations of adolescence as “sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll,” there is a bit of truth behind that broad generalization. I would like to focus on the third of those hot-button topics, since popular music has become the sound track for the lives of many American teens. Teens in the United States spend a significant amount of time listening to music. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation study *Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*, released in 2010, the typical American teenager spends, on average, seven hours and thirty-eight minutes using entertainment media per day. Factoring in multitasking, teens are actually consuming ten hours and forty-five minutes per day of entertainment (Rideout 2). Given this media activity occurs seven days a week, year-round, it also means adolescents spend more time listening to music and consuming other entertainment media than they spend attending high school and even than most teenagers spend sleeping. According to *Generation M<sup>2</sup>*, listening to music is American teens’ second most popular media activity. They spend, on average, two hours and nineteen minutes listening to music a day (28) compared with the twenty-five minutes a day they spend reading books (30). When it comes to multitasking, four percent

of teens reported that they combine listening to music with another activity most of the time (29).

Music is an essential part of contemporary adolescent culture and ought to be included and examined in the YA literature classroom. Song lyrics are a form of poetry, and students bring a deep knowledge and appreciation of specific songs and bands that are personally meaningful to them. Unlike some texts that instructors assign students to discuss in class and analyze in writing assignments, popular music is a literary art form that many students are willing and eager to examine. While students in my university-level YA literature courses write dutifully and often perceptively on the novels, plays, and poetry assigned in the course, they write passionately and with great insight on the music they know and admire.

Few things evolve as quickly as young adult popular culture. While sex and drugs continue to hold great fascination for teens, instructors ought to consider the increasing number of categories of popular music beyond rock 'n' roll, including indie, country, rap, hip-hop, electronic, and jazz. Because of the influence of films such as *High School Musical* and *Pitch Perfect*, the success of *Hamilton*, and the many Disney films that have been adapted into musicals, Broadway show tunes are extremely popular. Given that musicals, like mix tapes, use a series of songs to construct a longer narrative and employ individual songs to provide insights into characters' emotions, musicals and movie sound tracks are a useful model for mix tapes. Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx's *Avenue Q* even features the song "Mix Tape," in which Princeton gives a mix tape to Kate, who sings that such a gift can mean the giver "[h]as a crush on you. . . ." Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* was originally developed as a mix tape, which he subsequently expanded into his innovative Broadway musical.

In my college-level YA literature courses, I use the construction and analysis of mix tapes in conjunction with the reading of three popular adolescent novels: Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Rachel Cohn and David Levithan's *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, and Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl*. The first two novels feature teens constructing a mix tape as a gift that reveals their personality and helps to establish friendships with other characters. The examples of mix tapes are "One Winter," the mix tape that Charlie creates for Patrick as a Christmas present in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (61–62), and the "(T)rainy/Dreamy" playlist of dreamy songs that feature the word *train* or *rain* that Norah works out in her head for Nick in *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (168). In *Fangirl*, Cath has created an "Emergency Kanye [West] Party"

playlist (109) that she plays whenever she is stressed out, as when her creative writing professor accuses her fan fiction of being a form of plagiarism.

Like youth culture, technology quickly evolves, and most adolescents now produce playlists on and download playlists from MP3 devices such as smartphones and post playlists on such services as *Spotify* or Web sites as *YouTube*. The term *mix tape*, or *mixtape*, is still used when referring to compilations of songs, despite the different formats that are used to create them. Older practitioners of the form, such as Michele Catalano and Thurston Moore, lament the loss of “meticulously recording song after song off of albums and the radio in order to make a perfect musical love letter” (Catalano). I use the terms *mix tapes*, *mixes*, and *playlist* interchangeably, although Chbosky uses the term *mix tape*, Cohen and Levithan use *mixes* and *playlist*, and Rowell uses *playlist*.

A successful mix tape combines and reorders preexisting songs in original and innovative ways to create a new narrative. A well-designed mix tape allows the individual to craft a musical narrative that evokes a specific mood and feeling through the lyrics or music of songs. It becomes a site of memories and it is often intensely personal. The intended audience for a mix tape is usually specific, often just an audience of one, unlike a party mix, which is more public.

For the assignment in my YA literature course, students construct a personal mix tape in the manner of those featured in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist*, and *Fangirl*. While these adolescent novels work well for this assignment, there are other adolescent novels that focus on the importance of music in the lives of teenagers and feature mix tapes, as well as those texts that are referred to by the critic Sophie Brookover and others as “new adult” novels (42), such as Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* and Rob Sheffield's memoir *Love Is a Mix Tape: Life and Loss, One Song at a Time*. Although most college students are familiar with the construction of mix tapes, I encourage them to visit Web sites and services—such as *Art of the Mix*, *8tracks*, and *Spotify*—where individuals post their mix tapes. Mix tapes are no longer the purview of teenagers and college students. In the summer of 2015 President Barack Obama posted his first “Summer Playlist” on *Spotify* (Schulman). These resources show students the immense range of possibilities for mix tapes, with categories as varied as romantic or breakup mixes to motivational or road trip mixes. I ask students to select a specific category and eight to twelve songs (citing the song titles and performers), construct the order

of the playlist, provide a title for the compilation, and design the cover art. Students receive handouts of “The Art of the Mix: 15 Foolproof Rules for Creating the Perfect Mixtape” from the *GetFrank* Web site and Sheffield’s “Top Ten Tape Tips,” which discuss the aesthetic decisions to consider when creating a mix tape. “The Art of the Mix” suggests that creating a mix tape is more art than science. Song selection becomes the vocabulary for a good mix tape. Like effective writing, a good mix requires a rich and varied vocabulary to convey the mood and the message (“Art”).

In addition to curating and designing the mix tape, students are also asked to then write an essay analyzing their mix and explaining how the selected songs and their placement work together to create a cohesive musical narrative. Since many students have already created mix tapes, they are encouraged to use or revise an existing mix tape and bring in information gleaned from Web research to reflect on and analyze their compilation.

This mix tape assignment allows the students to explore the role that music plays in the adolescent novels read in class and, by extension, allows them to reflect on the significance of music in their own lives. As Hornby writes in *High Fidelity*, “To me, making a tape is like writing a letter—there’s a lot of erasing and rethinking and starting again” (88). Students are frequently surprised with the amount of time that goes into creating a mix tape, but they also report the mix tape is the most enjoyable assignment in the YA literature course. The mix tapes create passionate class discussion. The analysis of the mix tape encourages the students to consider their reasons for song selection and placement in the compilation. This creative assignment successfully combines reading, writing, and organization skills and encourages students to build from their own knowledge base.

Given the autobiographical and often self-revealing nature of a mix tape, I offer students the option to create a sound track for one of the novels read in the course rather than creating one based on personal experiences. Students have provided compilations that are insightful musical companions to J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. Rowell, in an interview with *The Hub*, said of her writing process, “I build soundtracks for each book in my head, and I associate each scene with a specific song. The song gives me an emotional anchor for the scene” (“One Thing”). Rowell then posts the playlists for her novels and specific characters on *Spotify*.

The process of creating a mix tape and writing the accompanying essay encourages students to extend their analysis of adolescent novels to the

larger world of adolescent culture and their own lives. The mix tapes have become a creative and analytical assignment that combines aspects of the personal essay with student knowledge and appreciation of music that I have found successful and that students find challenging but worthwhile.

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