

Digital music makes it easy to burn a CD of your favorite songs, but creating a mix masterpiece takes time, dedication, and a penchant for irony. Mixologist Drew Gemmer lends his expert advice on assembling the most distinguished of tracklists.

If there's one thing I'm passionate about, it's making mix tapes. I spend days ruminating over the playlist; sometimes I even let it simmer for months, listening to it in different moods to make sure it still resonates. And in the end, few things give satisfaction like a well-received mix tape.

To begin, a mix CD shall always be referred to as a mix tape, recording format notwithstanding. And now a few rules:

Theme

A unifying theme will score bonus points for the mixer. There are simple and oft-used themes that one may rely on: dance songs, "Happy Summer Jam '05!", love-making music, etc. More advanced themes, however, are involved and can incorporate complicated and effervescent ideas. Appropriately, it takes dedication to create these playlists. As an example, I once made a "Free Trade Mix" which brought together songs about ocean-travel ("When the Ship Comes In" by Bob Dylan, "Paper Boats" by Nada Surf), the rise of the proletariat ("Changes" by 2pac, "Wake Up" by The Arcade Fire), long-distance love affairs ("Across the Sea" by Weezer), and lives destroyed by technology ("Blood on Our Hands [Justice remix]" by Death From Above 1979, "Mr. Roboto" by Styx). As mentioned, these mix tapes are much harder to create, especially because one must sustain a smooth tempo flow from song to song (see Flow below).

Opener

The opening track is extremely important. It must bring the listener into the mix tape by introducing the theme, but it must inexplicably draw the listener into the music as well. I often use something extremely catchy as first track—Ratatat feat. The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Party and Bullshit" has been a recent staple. However, if the theme of the mix tape is something down-tempo like love, then only a down-tempo song will suffice. I have used both The Beatles "I Will" and The Beach Boys "Wouldn't It Be Nice" for such mix tapes (both were wedding presents). My mix tapes are often playful, so I've found that my most oft-used opener has been Liz Phair's "Fuck and Run," a catchy, sarcastic pop ditty masquerading as a down-tempo acoustic set.

Flow

Of all the mix tape's factors, its flow is of the utmost importance. You can't go from hardcore hip-hop to guitar-driven rock; there must be a song between them that matches the tempo and/or tone.

Because of this qualifier, it is fairly hard to incorporate hip-hop into rock-heavy mix tapes smoothly. Similarly, electronica can be difficult to include. There are fairly easy connections between all rock songs—almost every noteworthy band has both down-tempo and speedy songs—but other genres aren't as easy. Instrumentals often make the best connectors when searching for that 'filler' between Jose Gonzales and Justice. A two-minute instrumental will suffice, and it gives the listener an opportunity to breathe between a couple mind-blowing tracks.

Lynchpin

There must be a track that falls at the midway point that serves as the mix tape's lynchpin. In my favorite professional mix tape of all time, Everything but the Girl's *Back To Mine*, an eleven-minute epic entitled "Dc it Now" by Dubtribe Sound System brings the album to a climax, making the mix tape into a story of sorts. It unifies both halves of the mix tape, while bringing it to the next level.

The lynchpin should be the best stand-alone song on the mix tape. If the listener was losing interest in the mix (which means the maker has bad musical taste, or they weren't following some of my rules), the lynchpin should bring them back into focus.

Closer

I believe that the closer of a mix tape should leave the listener breathless and full of emotion. Blame my love for Radiohead's "Motion Picture Soundtrack," but I think that a 79-minute epic needs a closing track that reflects the raw emotion left after 74 minutes of feeling every other sensation known to man. At this point, it's loneliness; it's the existential idea of one's "confrontation with nothingness."; it's true love; it's whatever truths have been learned at the end of one's lifetime. My favorite closers include Bjork's "Hyperballad," Death Cab for Cutie's "Transatlantacism," Radiohead's "True Love Waits," The Streets' "Dry Your Eyes," Sufjan Stevens' "Seven Swans" and David Bowie's "Five Years." You'll notice discovering "the truth" often involves violins or pianos, and it's almost always more than five minutes long.

Content

A truly great mix tape will include songs both new and old, in distinct genres. It should be a foray into musical unknowns. Nobody should know where the hell we got all the music we have on our computer. Break out one of Mom's favorites, burn an absurd song from your nephew's Baby Einstein CD, put the final song from your seventh grade dance on there. Nostalgia and absurdity are great in small doses.

Artwork

The mix tape is one of the last bastions of home made gifts. Now that our favorite photo-sharing websites can customize a calendar with our pictures or personalize a card with a click or two of the mouse, it's no wonder people have stopped cutting and pasting (like, with scissors and glue, not the computer kind) their photos onto construction paper. But mix tapes, since they're "illegal" and all, will never be an iTunes "Customize it!" option. They will always be burned in the privacy of one's own home.

Once recorded, a mix tape is simply a plain, silver CD sitting in a clear jewel case. Is that the best we can do? *Hell no, it ain't.* Colored sharpies, magazines, photos, glitter are all necessities of mix tape artwork. Bring that jewel case to life!

Title

The title doesn't matter, as long as it's not "Random Tunes 2007!". If it's random, give it a random title. (Our existence on Earth is random; there's no need to state the obvious.) If it's a specific type of music, "Hard Rock Hitz" or something comparable will suffice. It's not as fun as "Crescent Freshness," but creative artwork will save a boring title, and descriptive titles can be helpful when senility hits.

Tracklist

Include a fucking tracklist with the mix tape. I'm fucking serious.