

Keepin' It Reel

By Sara Blask

A community of music traders around the world is bringing the spirit of mixtapes back, track by track.

Time to dust off your boombox and replace the batteries in your Walkman. Mixtapes and tape trading are back, man.

The International Mixtape Project is a community of more than 500 people on six continents who exchange monthly mixtapes (okay, CDs) with random and anonymous recipients. Assignments are automatically generated on the first day of every month and mixers have a month to select their music, burn and send.

The project was founded in 2003 by music *bon vivant* Ryan Goldman, who is now 28 and working for an international non-profit in Washington D.C. It began with 25 friends and has grown by 200 percent, mostly by word of mouth, blog mentions, and its MySpace page, myspace.com/mixtapeproject. (An official website is expected this winter). To join, members pony up a USD 10 membership fee to cover administrative costs and are responsible for their own shipping.

IMP devotees exist in more than 30 countries, including places as distant as Guam, China, South Africa, and sound-saturated Iceland. And it's not just the underground music community that participates: there are students, dot.com-ers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, scientists, and professional athletes.

"Mixtaping is one of those things I've enjoyed my entire life," says Goldman, who made his first mixtape at the tender age of 10. "The assumption is that people have been making mixes all along, which we forget about with iPods and online radio. Basically this project is about recontextualizing the music people already love."

As the exact origins of the first homemade mixtape are unknown, it is believed that the first mixtapes appeared not long after the cassette was introduced in Europe by Royal Philips Electronics in 1963. Philips' trademarked "Compact Cassettes" arrived in the United States a year later.

It is reported in an October 1974 article in *Billboard* that "tapes were originally dubbed by jockeys to serve as standbys for times when they were not in personal use of disco turntables." In his 2004 book *Sonata for Jukebox*, poet-essayist Geoffrey O'Brien called the mixtape "the most widely practiced American artform: the personal mix tape of favorite songs that serves as self-portrait, gesture of friendship, prescription for an

ideal party, or simply as an environment consisting solely of what is most ardently loved." Last year, Thurston Moore, one of the founders of Sonic Youth, published *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture* which includes personal stories and essays from more than 80 mix tape followers, including designer Kate Spade and artist Leah Singer.

As the project's name is anachronistic, most people send CDs rather than B-side style cassette tapes. The automatically generated e-mails include only a name and an address, and members are asked to include their e-mail address when they send the mix. Gone are the days of tape decks, at least for the most part, Goldman notes, though he still rocks the deck occasionally, as does Chiansan Ma, an English teacher based in Beijing, who sent his first mix last April. Though Ma sends CDs, he also precisely measures the minutes and includes instructions on how best to record onto either a 60- or 90-minute cassette tape.

With so little information available about the recipient, "the best you can hope to do is get lucky with the song that saves someone's shit day at work or helps lost heartache," Ma writes in an e-mail. "Maybe it just happens to be exactly what someone likes or wants to hear at some particular moment that will elicit appreciation."

The tracks Ma chooses are typically unthematic, but do tend to resonate with his emotional state. An extra challenge: he tries to avoid repeating tracks on more than one mix. "Backlash against when I was a teenager," he explains. "I wanted to make tapes where half the songs were by Radiohead." Ma's most recent mix included a "very sweet Chinese pop song" from singer and actress Wang Faye of 2046 and Chungking Express, followed by "some pretty hard and screamy stuff."

The Internet has been both good and bad for mixtaping, project founder Ryan Goldman says. Filesharing and pay-per-download sites initially seemed to deter interest in mixtaping, though this seems to have changed. IMP itself is, of course, a product of the Internet, and most of its growth has been a result of mentions in blogs and online webzines.

Duncan Nicholas, known to friends and IMP members as "Meatbreak," is a peer reviewer for a psychology journal in Brighton, UK and a music

reviewer for *The Brighton Source*. He has received a total of 15 mixes, ten from the States, four from Canada, and one from Australia. Unlike Ma, he chooses a theme for each mix – his March mix entitled "The Atvian Experience" was "all about the hypnotic effects of repetition and drone," and included ten tracks like "Musikvatur-Purrki Purrk" from múm, "Sheets of Easter" from Oneida, and "Night Falls On Hoboken" by Yo La Tengo. May's mix, he writes on his MySpace page, "is a shotgun blast through electro, dubstep, power electronics, and stuff that simply makes you *danzedanzedanze*."

Meatbreak, like some other members, scrupulously crafts the artwork included with each mixdisc ("mixtapes sounds so much better than mixCDs. Let's coin the phrase mixdisc and get it out there," he says). The anonymity of the project is perhaps intensified by the creativity behind the art. Meatbreak usually creates his covers using elaborate and far-reaching functions in Photoshop. Founder Ryan Goldman once received a track listing from a scientist in New York that was written using a Sharpie on an X-ray slide of someone's mouth.

Most surprising to Meatbreak is that no one – zero out of 15 – has replied to his e-mails acknowledging that he's received a mix. Likewise, no one has ever e-mailed him to say they've received his. "I'm determined to change this," he says, admitting that his e-mail address could turn some people off. Ma has had two short e-mail conversations that grew out of mix thank you notes. Goldman "rarely" receives responses. Evidently, mixing is a solitary art.

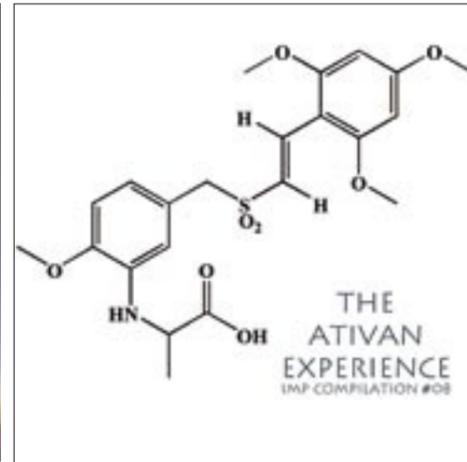
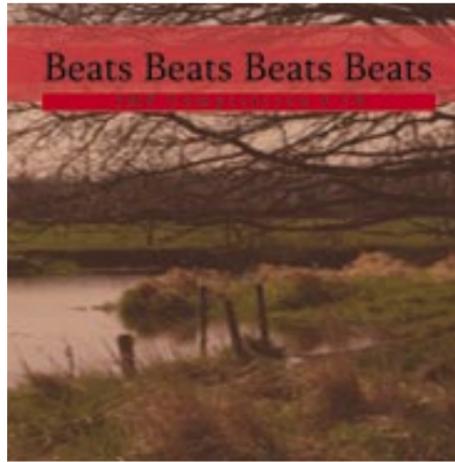
"You just have to assume that the person has received the mix and is enjoying it," Goldman says.

(Continues on pg. 18 »)



ILLUSTRATION BY LILJA GUNNARSDÓTTIR

"And it's not just the underground music community that participates: there are students, dot.com-ers, doctors, lawyers, farmers, scientists, and professional athletes."



BEATS, BEATS, BEATS, BEATS

1. **Venom8888** – “Spray Paint The Walls” (Gut Mix)
2. **DJ Skinhead** – “Extreme Terror”
(Simon Underground & Max Death Kick & Stab Remix)
3. **Black Strobe** – “Deceive/Play”
4. **Bangkok Impact** – “Taboo A1”
5. **Circuit Breaker** – “Gateway”
6. **Computer Rockers** – “Rock Don’t Stop”
7. **Neon Lipstick** – “Hot n’ Sticky”
8. **Services** – “To The Deth Centipede”
9. **Juan Maclean** – “Shining Skinned Friend”
10. **Vex’d** – “Gunman”
11. **Oh No It’s Them!** – “We’re Out Of Control”
12. **Eye-D** – “Fucking Ants”
13. **Enzyme X** – “Post Traumatic Fuck Up”
14. **Onurb** – “Mind Bodies Souls”
15. **Padded Cell** – “Signal Failure”

THE NIGHTTIME ECLIPSE

1. **The Incredible String Band** – “Nightfall”
2. **Tyrannosaurus Rex** – “By the Light of the Magical Moon”
3. **David Grubbs** – “Wave Generators”
4. **Mogwai** – “Summer”
5. **Simian** – “Round and Around”
6. **Antony and the Johnsons** – “Bird Gerhl”
7. **Will Oldham** – “Let the Wires Ring”
8. **Alexander Spence** – “Cripple Creek”
9. **Arab Strap** – “Kate Moss”
10. **Beth Gibbons and Rustin’ Man** – “Tom the Model”
11. **Devendra Banhart** – “Autumn’s Child”
12. **Interpol** – “Hands Away”
13. **Kevin Ayers and the Whole World** – “Lady Rachel”
14. **múm** – “The Island of Children’s Children”
15. **Nick Drake** – “Black Eyed Dog”
16. **Sigur Rós** – “Ný Batteri”
17. **Superqueens** – “Interlude” (Deva Ju)
18. **Susumu Yokota** – “Azukiiri No Kaori”
19. **Songs of Green Pheasant** – “Truth But Not Fact”
20. **Godspeed You Black Emperor!** – “J.L.H. Outro”

THE ATIVAN EXPERIENCE

1. **múm** – “Musikvatur-Purrki Purrk”
2. **Oneida** – “Sheets Of Easter”
3. **Captain Beefheart** – “Mirror Man”
4. **Masonna** – “Beast”
5. **Yo La Tengo** – “Night Falls On Hoboken”



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