

## Bittles's Magazine

Ah, cassettes! I remember them well! My first forays into the wonderful world of music listening was through tapes with the very first albums I bought being *Whitney* by **Whitney Houston** and *Licensed to Ill* by **The Beastie Boys**. Yes, even back then I was an eclectic adventurer and overly pretentious to boot! By **JOHN BITTLES**



I remember getting mix tapes back when acid house was first making its way over to Belfast and hearing DJs that I had only previously heard about and coveted from afar. Sets by luminaries such as **Sven Väth, DJ Dag, Carl Cox** and **Sasha** became my staple listening pleasure. Of course in a troubles-ravaged Northern Ireland the chance of seeing any of these guys live was slim so tapes were a way of attempting to bridge that important cultural gap.

But more vital to myself and many other malnourished Belfast urchins were the mix tapes created by our own favourite local DJs that let us hear all the tracks we loved. They also gave us people we could be proud of that weren't alcoholics or wore balaclavas and carried guns. These were guys who took up the mantle to fill the void in our lives and bring acid house to an appreciative audience that loved every single tune. **Robbie Nelson, Iain McCready, Glen Molloy**, and, of course **David Holmes** became our heroes by playing the tunes that spoke so profoundly to my friends and I back in the day.

And that's the thing with tapes you see! In the late eighties, early nineties times were pretty fucking tough. Belfast had been thoroughly neglected by the Conservative government, and if you didn't work on the docks then you didn't work at all. Most people that were into acid house were 14 to 18 years old. We didn't have enough money to buy the records we adored, or to go out clubbing each and every week, (although we did try). And in the pre-internet days even trying to track down these tracks in a small city like Belfast would have proved impossible for all but the most clued-up of souls. This is why the humble cassette, or mix tape was a life-line! It opened up the music that we loved and made it accessible to all.

Now, on Saturday 7th September 2013 we will see the very first international *Cassette Store Day*. This is marketed as a celebration of the world of the humble tape and will see artists such as **Haim, Deerhunter, The Flaming Lips, The Pastels** and many others release special or exclusive tapes. There will be screaming hardcore, pastoral indie, experimental electronics and maybe even some chugging house. With almost 100 releases to choose from it's fair to say that there should be something for more or less everyone.

Ok, so it may be a complete rip-off of *Record Store Day* which has now gotten so big that someone really needs

to beat it down, and it seems that most people don't even own a cassette deck anymore. Yet, anything that stands proud and says 'we are here to celebrate independent music' should, in my opinion at least, be wholeheartedly applauded and receive a good, manly pat on the back.

But with the cassette apparently making a bit of a comeback into the world's consciousness and special events planned all around the globe there are signs that *Cassette Store Day* may yet prove to be a success. For instance, in *Rough Trade East* here in lovable London there will be a full day event with DJ sets and bands such as **Bright Lights Bright Lights** and **The Proper Ornaments** playing live.

One thing that I have wondered though is what do cassettes mean to people today? And is there still a place for them in the current world of Spotify, Amazon and Soundcloud? As I had always dreamt of one day becoming an investigative journalist I decided to set out (send e-mails, and Facebook messages) to discover what the word is on the street!

The first thing you notice when you nervously bring up the subject of music tapes is that people will instantly fall into a faraway look of nostalgia. They will smile and immediately tell you about their childhood memories and exactly what it was that cassettes meant to them.

For instance, *Milly* reminisces about the clunky feel of a cassette and how you could spool it using your fingers to try to cue it up to exactly the right place, which is something she still enjoys to this day! Similarly *Pauline* remembers having to spend what seemed like hours winding the tape back with a pencil after it had inevitably gotten stuck and 'eaten' by the cassette player. A truly horrible fate!

*Najet's* memories involve listening to her tape of **Aha** every night while fantasising about Morten Harket. So much that by the time she got to school all she would be good for would be falling asleep. She also brings up the fragile beauty of the humble cassette by relaying how her beloved *Violator* by **Depeche Mode** tape was horribly destroyed by an evil little sister even though *Najet* had played said cassette every single day for over a month. Maybe the sister had simply had enough of Dave Gahan's gravelly tones and decided to silence him the only way she knew how.

*Tony's* strongest memory involves customising his tapes by painstakingly creating his own covers which as he says is 'A great little way of putting your own stamp on favourites'. He also remembers making compilation tapes for all his friends and how he would be introduced to lots of great music when they made tapes for him. This can have unfortunate side effects though as I can remember when I was a precocious teen dumping a girl after she made me a 'tape' as the music on there was so sad and lame.

*Lucy* remembers the introduction of 'reverse play' with tapes which will go down as one of the most hideous and annoying inventions of all time. *Chris* meanwhile casts his mind back to his *Americana* tape by **The Offspring** and the many hours of unbridled joy it brought into his life. *Margaret* also remembers her favourite **David Bowie** tapes 'I didn't buy many tapes I don't think. They never had the romance of records. Except maybe when I briefly had a crap knock-off Walkman type device? Mostly **David Bowie** in that case, whose albums I was happy to have in any number of different formats.'

*Jens*, is like me and has rather fond memories of his old mix tapes with one in particular holding a very special place in his heart. To be specific it was a recording of 'the 1live party service from the Turbinenhalle'. Having recently found it while preparing to move house he couldn't bring himself to throw it away even though he no longer owns a tape deck to play it on.

The thing about all these and the hundreds of other replies that I got is how all of them saw cassettes as something of the past. Personally I think this is a shame! Tapes rattle and they hiss, sometimes they even clunk. And in horrible situations they even make a terrible noise that lets you know that your very favourite album is no more. But that brings a rare physicality to the music that has all but been forgotten in the perfect sound waves of the digital age. **Amanda Brown**, head of *100% Silk*, still releases cassettes regularly today that contain some of the most sublime and forward-thinking house today. When asked her views on tapes she replied 'I love cassettes because they're so tactile, they appear like a present, like a lasting object that feels just perfectly weighted and right in your hands. Also they give music a bit of cosy grime, and I like that.' Perfectly said!

I still have many of my favourite tapes even though I admit that I haven't listened to any of them in a while. *Blissed Out* by **Beloved** will always stay close to my heart. As will my *Omen* mix tape by **DJ Dag** and *Vengeance II* by **Dr Oz** and **Cliff McKay**. I first heard **Aphex Twin** on cassette, **Silver Bullet**, **Jane's Addiction**, **Orbital** and many more. I remember getting my friend to buy *Lovesexy* by **Prince** for me in Woolworths as it had a naked man on the cover and I was worried that the sales assistant might assume I was gay.

And I miss those days when you could walk around town with a ghetto-blaster on your shoulder letting everyone around know what impeccable taste you had (it's a bit like iPod headphones today, only a little bit quieter). But who knows, maybe for one day this year we can bring those glorious times back. So, on this 7th of September please join me in dusting off those forgotten tapes in the attic and giving them another little play. Sure some will get eaten and others will have completely given up the ghost, but those that survive will bring back memories and leave a warm fuzzy glow in your heart. It might even make you fall in love with the humble cassette all over again. And what could be the harm in that?

| JOHN BITTLES