



## Travelling Music: Glory of Cassettes

This article first appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on 15 September 2007.

Don't worry, friends. That wobbling pile of cassettes that you kicked over while cleaning your bedroom closet, hucked into an IGA bag, and emptied into a St. Vincent De Paul receptacle? They're here, sitting lumpen in a shopping bag in the passenger seat of my 1991 Ford Grand Marquis, which is throttling eastward down Highway One, bound for a summer's wedding in Woody Point, Newfoundland.

Everyone needs travelling music and this is mine: 43 cassettes bought en masse for three dollars a shot at Brian's Record Option in Kingston, Ontario, a skunky, redoubtable music depot shaggy with CDs, books and albums, but best of all: tapes. Cassettes are the cockroaches of the musical world. Not even being crushed under floor mats or seat cushions can destroy them. Were these long-players digitally-plattered, they would have cost me \$860. It would have meant selling off all of my tires and hubcaps and spending my summer months in the wet heat of the city, which I'm not prepared to do.

Because I'm driving alone to the Maritimes, the only voices I'll hear will be those squeezed over thimbles of magnetic tape housed in cheap black and white plastic. As I wheel past Clarington -- one hour outside of Toronto, where the highway curves to reveal the first glimmer of the open lake -- I reach into the bag and play *Damn the Torpedoes*, then They Might be Giants' *Flood*, then *Meat is Murder* (which I quickly expunge), then, driving past a Prince Edward County billboard of a young maiden cradling a basket of fruit, Nirvana's "From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah," which ends as I pull into the ferry dock for a stopover on Wolfe Island. Kurt stops screaming and the drinking starts.

\*\*\*

The following day begins with *Nashville Skyline* shunked into the face of the dashboard. It rains during Side One, then the sun cracks through the sky with Side Two. Listening to records in the sanctity of one's sedan is to be chambered away with them; short of lying in the dark wearing headphones, the rhythm of the road and freedom of travel creates an ideal environment for listening, provided one's trip isn't slowed by parades of jackhammers or meddlesome OPP speed traps. Through Dylan, *The Best of Asleep at the Wheel* and a Byrds collection with the picture of a jukebox on the front, I hear things I haven't heard before: the way the tape echo hits Dylan's voice in "Girl From the North Country"; Lucky Ocean's pedal steel in "Miles of Texas"; and the delinquent rhythm guitar that plays behind Roger McGuinn's 12-string at the beginning of "Eight Miles High." Through this run of tapes, I become so drawn inside the music that I forget to notice that I've taken the wrong highway into Quebec.

Listening to Beck's *Mellow Gold*, I grind through Montreal's narrow overpass tangle. Seeking something more tranquil and reassuring, I push an Atlantic Rhythm and Blues Collection -- Roberta Flack, Donnie Hathaway, Aretha -- into the tapedeck. This helps guide me through the

city's traffic snarl until I am released along Highway 40 east towards Quebec City listening to Eddie Van Halen's guitar solo in "Beat It." Michael Jackson gives way to Hot Chocolate who give way to Kraftwerk's *Trans Europe Express*, which proves to be one of the great driving records of all-time, its electronic machinework thrumming along to the grinding beat of the car's engine. Unconsciously, I flatten the accelerator to the floor, propelled by the song's deep motoring trance. To other drivers, I must look like I'm having an impossibly good time.

\*\*\*

Latte'd and baguette'd after an evening in Riviere Du Loup, I head towards Edmunston, New Brunswick. The name "Riviere Du Loup" suits the town's cafes, ice cream shops and winding LaFontaine boulevard, but I prefer the English translation: Wolf River. It makes stopping there seem wilder and more compelling, even though my only feral moment came while trying to order a ham and cheese sandwich in French at a local bakery.

The first tape of my mid-morning drive is *Bandwagonesque* by Teenage Fan Club. I never would have discovered this fine album if it weren't for the devalued cassette. Since most used tapes can be rescued for under five dollars, music lovers can afford to take chances on things they've never heard before. This is the case with TFC, Gilberto Gil's first record, Robyn Hitchcock's *Eye*, and a great album I'd forgotten about -- *Little Criminals* by Randy Newman -- which spirits me through the light Maritime rain towards Fredricton.

Many travellers have grouched about New Brunswick's geographic sameness and the numbing condition it imposes upon drivers. But the drive isn't so numbing as it is comforting in its endless pattern of dark forests and ancient rivers. My hand is guided into the tape bag searching for traditional music to match what I'm seeing through my windshield. I pull out, in succession, John Prine's *Jesus: The Missing Years*, Flatt and Scrugg's *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*, Pat Temple and the High Lonesome Players' *Stone Boat*, some Nina Simone and *Ladies of the Canyon*. Then, as the road turns from black and gray to a deep radiant pink on the way to Moncton, I slide *Rust Never Sleeps* into the machine, its psychotropic bagmen, ghostly thrashers and sad wandering nomads sitting close to my ear. There's an asphalt highway bending. Trying to catch an hour on the sun. Through the weight of Neil's epic continental road essay, the steeples of Sackville reveal themselves as I swoop down Exit 504.

\*\*\*

After an evening at the Marshlands Inn -- which was fine and comfortable and colonial, despite the scary antique doll that watched me from the nightstand as I slept -- I'm carried into the teeming forests of Nova Scotia listening to *The Indestructible Beat of Soweto*, its African guitars and keening violins and thwomping hand drums colouring the day. The African voices are wild and strange, but their exoticism matches the unfamiliar towns that stream past me: Lochaber, Mabou, Monastery, Earltown, Folly Lake, Tatamagouche. Soweto becomes New York City -- *More Songs About Buildings and Food* -- which becomes *Remain in Light*. You may find yourself at the wheel of a large automobile. After listening to Warren Zevon's *Excitable Boy*, I cross Cape Breton Island to Gord Downie singing about shipwrecks and rocky sockets as my dirty-grilled metal beast coasts into the ferry dock, waiting to be shipped to Port Aux Basques.

\*\*\*

It's six o' clock in the morning as I head north through the Codroy Valley towards Gros Morne National Park. Western Newfoundland is like West Africa: wild, untamed, overgrown. The sky is

dense and gray and spitting rain to the early songs of Gordon Lightfoot. The sun peers through the clouds, then retreats, then, hours later, soaks Cornerbrook and Deer Lake before I enter the park with Rocket From the Crypt's *Scream Dracula Scream* slashing and pounding to produce a kind of epic madness that matches the park's roaring, glacial crust. The tape ends as the car rises and falls with the road carrying me closer to Birchy Head, Glenburnie and Woody Point, the glimmer of Bonne Bay and its embarrassment of whales shimmering in the clear morning light. I reach into the tape bag for more, but my arm returns to the steering wheel. For all of the music that's filled the car over four days of technicolour Canadian travel, I also know that some parts of a journey are best left soundless.