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London Mixtape

“Music takes us out of the actual and whispers to us dim secrets that startle our wonder as to who we are, and for what, whence, and whereto.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Ain't no sunshine when she's gone.

It's not warm when she's away."

Hugh Grant dolefully saunters through Portobello Market on a bright summer's day with streets filled with market-goers strolling through stalls peddling antique watches and colorful flower arrangements. The people passing are in no hurry, there to just browse and soak in the great expanse of sun and sky, which suddenly turns into the light pitter patter of rain and then suddenly, the gust of falling yellow leaves into traces of snow that fall with a romantic air of blithe tranquility. And then the celestial blue of spring. The camera spans across a seamless line of a year gone before our very eyes.

"And she's always gone too long

Anytime she goes away."

Hugh continues to reflectively ponder the ground, but you still just want to *be* him. To feel his pensive sway of emotions, to have this quaint stretch of a market to contemplate and brood and have the seasons transform magically mirroring your plight into darkness and your

revival of clarity into spring.

And to have Bill Withers, in all his smoky finesse, sing such sweet, fore-lone melancholy over all of it. Backing your emotions. Validating every contemplative step with esoteric assurance, breathing beauty into your despair and setting up a sonic backdrop of gushing, stark naked soul.

This scene, and my cousin eating all my green sour patch kids before the movie had even started (that bitch), is what resonates most vividly when I think of "Notting Hill." To me, this was London: the quintessential cinematic communion between elegant landscapes and musical brilliance. That *voice*; powerful and lush and filled to the brim with the rough edges of a soul. It made that scene. Lent it a heart, and gave it a voice.

"Anytime she goes away.

Anytime she goes away..."

“To stop the flow of music would be like the stopping of time itself, incredible and inconceivable.”

-Aaron Copland

[music as memory]

Play me the opening lines of the Ludacris song Roll Out and I instantly get taken back to the high school locker rooms of basketball season, comprised of sweat stained jerseys wafting with aromas of Axe Deodorant and puberty, and enough awkwardly forced displays of masculine bravado to last me a lifetime. Likewise, any track off of Whitney Houston's Greatest Hit's compilation and I'm hearing Buddhist monks chanting Japanese sutra's and tasting the donburi and takoyaki of Shibuya street vendors.

In many respects music acts as a chronological time sheet, a snap shot into another dimension of past experiences, journeys and tribulations. Roll Out was the anthemic, pre-game ritual before we hit the courts, blasting at full volume in hyped exuberance through the starting point guard's boom box. Whitney Houston's Greatest Hit's compilation happened to be the only CD that managed to survive my 7th grade flight to Japan, and thus this crack-ridden diva now represents my ethnic discovery through winding roads filled with smoky Pachinko bars and dolled up Geisha's.

With technology like the iPod, this range of sonic snapshots gets expanded through 60 Gigabytes worth of potential remembrances through song. I carry mine everywhere around London as it provides a blanket of reassurance amongst the social isolation and adds a cinematic spark to the mundane. With every great journey lies a soundtrack.

This is mine.

“Music and rhythm find their way into the secret places of the soul”

-Plato

[Broken Social Scene. 7/4 (shoreline)]

Oh my god.

I'm tired. I just got off of an 11 hour direct from Los Angeles, prefaced by a 5 hour flight to Los Angeles from Honolulu and my mind is doing these magnificent cartwheels of sheer exhaustion, tripping in and out of itself in states of minor hallucinations. I am here! Finally! After months and months of flourishing anticipation, the moment has finally arrived and...ok where the fuck is the hotel I need to sleep.

I hail a taxi.

"Royal National Hotel please."

By some magnificent wonder of Apple technology, I manage to have a sliver of battery left on my iPod, flashing bright red. Critical moment: what to choose?

"and it's time

and you want to get away

oh where to go to..."

We pass these anachronistic buildings flowing out into the streets with an elegant air of history and distinction. Sun shines down on cafe's housing terraces with people smoking and sipping their drinks behind oversized sunglasses, cars buzzing by in directions that seem implausible in any structured system of transportation. I see glimpses of cobble stone and get giddy. And pubs, on every street corner, with people drinking and its not even 4 yet!

As we wait at a traffic light I notice the cars passing, one in particular. Suddenly, the person in the- what I recognized as- "drivers seat" bends down out of sight for an extended period of time and all I see are visions of a horrible car crash, the flashing lights of paramedics and crushed cafe-goers. I thought the woman passed out while driving and before I could come to grips with my thoughts and make sense of the situation I yelled, "Oh my God!" in panicked trepidation.

"Is everything alright?" the cab driver turns around and asks in his charming British accent, seemingly unaware of the tragedy about to ensue.

I suddenly realize it was the *passenger* reaching down for something, tying their shoelace, stretching their back.

"yeah, sorry...everything is fine," I mutter.

I can only laugh; one hour in and I'm already caught frighteningly off guard.

"it's a shoreline

it's high speed

it's a cruel world

and it's time"

I can't wait to see what else this city has in store.

“When people hear good music, it makes them homesick for something they never had, and never will have.”

-Edgar Watson Howe

[Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, White Sandy Beach]

It's pouring so I pop into a Starbucks on Queensway to kill time. I actually hate Starbucks for replacing all the cozy mom and pop shops back home with a monochrome of starchy couches and overpriced coffee. I order my latte and sit down with a magazine and sketchbook, staring out into the rain and dimming traces of blue sky, loving the anonymity I assume in London that allows for these moments. I'm relaxed and everything is flowing until I hear it like a sonic slap across the face. I don't believe it so my ears blink as I mentally reconfigure and, yeah, it is:

"I saw you in my dream

We were walking hand in hand.

On a white sandy beach

Of Hawaii."

Bruddah Iz, all 500 pounds of Aloha spirit strumming his ukulele to a cultivated form of 'barefoot music' with that husky, gentle voice coming through the speakers to infiltrate the space with nostalgic remembrances. He passed away ten years ago but his legacy lives on through bums singing on Waikiki street corners, storytellers invoking sovereign tales of Hawaii's past, and apparently, Starbucks coffee houses in London.

Identities and locations compress and I'm not so interested in the rain or my magazine. I manage a smirk and hark back to *home*; lomi-lomi salmon, pork luau, vast expanses of sand-swept beaches shadowed by dripping sunsets, the simplicities of conversation, pidgin speaking locals that chop up their words li' dat and walk around everywhere with rubber slippers, insignias of our hang loose/laid back life style. *Home*, and the irrepressible urge to abandon it for my sanity, to become a romanticized vagabond, to "find", to be "found", and other such poetically maudlin bullshit.

There is no easy "fix" or reconfiguration of identity. I've tried it in New York and I've tried it in the enclaves of London coffee shops where songs pour out of speakers to remind you: *you are still you*. You will always press the snooze button 4 times before getting out of bed. You will always stutter and mutter your well articulated thoughts, and take your coffee with one and a half creams, and sleep with your arms above your head because the blood just seems to flow better, no matter how far you run, how many oceans and bits of land you manage to cross, you can't run from who you were and who you are.

And suddenly I miss home. I miss it. *I am in London goddamnit what the hell?*

It's hard to admit.

"Those high flown summer days

Lying there in the sun

On a white sandy beach

of Hawaii"

But why fight a beautiful thing?

[Tower of Power. The Skunk, the Goose, and the Fly]

Indian restaurant workers desperately vie for our attention with "2 for 1 lunch specials!" and "Free beer! Free beer!" as Jewish bagel shops draw lines of market goers spiraling out the door and around the building. Thrift shops on the left housing crowds of hipsters clad in an amalgam of flourishing fashions. Bangladeshi women in sari's pushing strollers to the sounds of beat bums strumming their broken guitars in front of walls covered with messy street art spilling out onto brick red canvases like artistic warfare. Lost tourists taking pictures, flower shops, Japanese fashion students holding yard sales, the upmarket, artists constructing lines with acrylic stained fingers, scents of nonstop nicotine and exotic food stalls, media types toting laptops, fashion shoots, warehouses, galleries, retro, indie, emo, new school, old school, coffee shops, wafting aromas of marijuana and the spastic chaos that is Brick Lane on a Sunday morning.

I am trying to soak everything in but am getting smacked from all directions by a smorgasbord of conflicting cultures, leaving me overwhelmed and asking myself: *What is this place?* A hipsters dive? A place with really good bagels? A Bangladeshi community with cheap food? A creative hub for emerging artists?

Continuing further down the scattered road it crystallizes under blaring horns and bass heavy electric guitars. The skit-skat scratchiness of a DJ's turntable spinning funkadelic vibrations ricocheting off walls in a celebratory exuberance of difference, bringing the chaos that flourishes around me together in a single note of musical clarity: This is simply a celebration,

plain and simple.

Let's get it going.

“Where words fail, music speaks.”

-Hans Christian Andersen

[Do Make Say Think. Anything For Now]

Seeking refuge from the slushy torrents signaling winters commencement, I get on the 45 bus heading to Tate. I've succumbed to London's cynicism, characterized by a general distrust of people, gloomy cloud formations, social dissonance, plummeting temperatures and money issues, aka bad week. The subconscious musical decisions my thumb makes shuffling through my iPod tells me a lot; purely instrumental, all strumming guitars, light synthesizers and the burgeoning rumble of symbols, visceral and intensely subtle; just waiting for things to pass.

We cross the Thames and I look up at the sky channeling some tragic character in a Sophia Coppola film, noticing a clear division between the dark clouds blowing east making way for lucid channels of sunlight emerging west; allegorical metaphor for a spiritual tug-of-war?

Or mere coincidence.

London has been many different things to me, but mostly it is this bitter-sweet paradigm characterized by darkness and light. What is one without the other? I breathe in deep and take it all in: dark figures shifting in the landscape, an exploration of my individuality, cultural explosions, creative expressions, gloom, isolation, connectivity, a soul raging out passionately all over the streets in amazement of it all.

Above all else, London has been ineffable. So I just sit back and listen, and take it all in one blissful musical measure at a time.