

The Mike Millard Method

Audience recording of rock concerts dates back to the late 1960s. By the mid-'70s, with the advent of high-quality portable tape decks, many major markets in America had at least one intrepid taper. While the Grateful Dead condoned fan recording and even set up a special section for tapers, most bands at the time were ambivalent — and certainly their record labels were dead set against the practice, which made the covert act of taping a concert equal parts risk and devotion.

The most celebrated audience taper of the period, Mike Millard, recorded in and around Southern California beginning in 1974 and continuing into the early '90s. Millard's legend is built in part on the cunning and subterfuge he used to get his 15-pound cassette deck and microphones into venues like the The Forum, Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, and The Roxy. Indeed, the seemingly apocryphal story that for especially challenging concerts Millard would hide his gear in the seat cushion of a wheelchair (Mike was not physically impaired) is absolutely true. It is but one of many ingenious (if underhanded) methods Mike and his friends employed to get his bulky equipment past security.

Though Millard despised commercial bootleggers, he would routinely share among friends his remarkable covert recordings of artists like Led Zeppelin, Rolling Stones, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Linda Ronstadt and Bruce Springsteen. With the penmanship of a comic book artist, Millard designed and meticulously hand drew covers for each tape he gave away, always signing the work with his moniker, Mike the Mike.

Millard's recordings sound excellent even by today's standards, despite the presumed limitations of 1970s cassette technology. Some consider his tapes to be superior to officially released live albums by the same bands. Even Led Zeppelin used a Millard recording on their official live DVD.

For years I have pondered what made Millard's recordings so good, and eventually I had an idea: What if you recorded a concert today with the same equipment Millard used in 1977? Would it sound like his tapes? Would it tap his Midas touch?

The National was kind enough to let us test the Millard Method for two concerts at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley, California last September. These live recordings were made with vintage AKG 451E microphones and a restored Nakamichi 550 cassette deck which are identical to those used by Millard circa 1975-81. The idea was to see if we could recreate what Matt Berninger calls the "juicy sonic magic" Mike the Mike captured in his 1970s field recordings.

What we experienced at the Greek was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. The National had been scheduled to play Berkeley early on the Sleep Well Beast tour in October 2017, but because of unhealthy air warnings caused by the Wine Country fires, those shows were postponed for nearly a year. As a result, the band's Berkeley return was highly anticipated, and

in what was now the home stretch of the tour, they made good by playing back-to-back fantastic shows that shared 32 different songs between them.

Even without needing to conceal our gear in a wheelchair, recording on vintage equipment with permission had its own challenges. Notably, I had forgotten the anxiety created by the need to flip a tape quickly and not miss any music (I did cut a little, but our back-up digital rig provided patches used to complete this release). Then there was the obvious question after going through all the effort: How does the recording sound? Quite appealing.

Not unlike vinyl vs. CD, there's something warm and familiar about the sound the cassettes recorded that evokes the spirit of the great live tapes Millard made. Matt described the sound as "feral and epic," remarking that even though he is in the band, he never hears what the audience hears, which this recording captures. The National's manager Brandon Reid also handled the Front of House mix at the Greek, and the tapes benefit from his great sound at the venue.

Beyond the audio recording, together with my friend and filmmaker David DuBois, we also produced a short documentary about Millard, his recording methods, and our attempt to recreate his work in Berkeley, a venue that is utterly unchanged since the '70s.

The documentary is also an attempt to set the record straight. Mike the Mike has become something of a legend on the Internet, but much of what's written about him is inaccurate. Unflattering speculation about his personal life is surely triggered by the fact that Millard took his own life in 1994. But people who knew Mike well told me he was extremely tight with his family and always attended concerts with a close group of friends with whom he shared a passion for live music. All surviving copies of Millard's recordings come from tapes he gave to those friends.

With the advent of smartphones, thousands of people routinely record part of the performance when they attend concerts. Forty years ago, when nobody would dare do that, one man made it his life's work to preserve legendary concerts on tape.

Erik Flannigan, September 2019