

Growing up in the years between LPs and CDs makes Mark Erelli a member of the cassette generation, a vintage of music fan that fondly remembers the mixtape. Making these homemade compilations required a certain degree of dedication and craftsmanship, with hand-lettered fonts and drawings on the label signifying a personal touch. “Before dragging, dropping or streaming,” says Erelli, “I waited by the stereo, finger hovering over the ‘record’ button, to capture my favorite songs as they were broadcast.” Erelli vividly recalls how the whole process felt like “so much more than just a collection of songs. Working up the courage to give someone a mixtape didn’t just say ‘this music matters to me,’ it also said ‘you matter to me.’”



This joint declaration of appreciation—for both his favorite music and his audience—is plainly evident on Mark Erelli’s 11th album, **Mixtape**, his first collection exclusively of cover songs. “I remember taking my time with mixtapes for some special people back in the day,” Erelli admits, “but this is the first time I ever spent 13 years making one.” **Mixtape** features songs culled from thirteen years’ worth of Erelli and friends’ annual Under The Covers shows, performed each December at Harvard Square’s famed folk mecca Club Passim. The covers show provides a valued tradition for Erelli and regulars like Lori McKenna, Rose Cousins, Jake Armerding and **Mixtape** producer Zachariah Hickman. “It’s the organizing principle of my entire year,” claims Erelli. “The day after each year’s show, I start compiling a new list of potential covers for the following year’s gig.”

Mixtape draws on inspiration from the past 50 years of popular music, covering artists Erelli considers to be fundamental influences (The Band, The Grateful Dead, Richard Thompson) alongside newer favorites like Neko Case and Arcade Fire. According to Erelli, “groups like The Dead were ‘gateway bands,’ because in the process of getting hooked on their music I also got exposed to bluegrass, jazz, early rock n’ roll and so much more.” Erelli’s elegiac take on Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter’s “Brokedown Palace” kicks off the album, with a string prelude that signals he is forging ahead into new sonic territory. By the time Arcade Fire’s “My Body Is A Cage” hits, deep on **Mixtape**’s second side, Erelli’s is howling with abandon, his voice surfing a veritable maelstrom of strings, skittering drums and thunderous, dark piano chords.

“One of the biggest goals we had for this project was to highlight my singing more directly than ever before,” Erelli explains. “Cover songs allow me to approach a melody or lyric without the constraints of my songwriting choices or limited formal

musical knowledge—they unleash me.” It is a testament to Erelli’s experience and maturity that this freedom never translates into bombast that overwhelms the song. Perhaps the best example of such dynamic control is his simmering cover of the Roy Orbison classic “Crying.” “I’ve been singing that song in my live show for 15 years, so I was a little nervous about how to approach it under the microscope in the studio,” admits Erelli. Though lesser singers might feel the need to prove they could hit all the notes in Orbison’s several-octave melody, Erelli’s chooses instead to emphasize the weariness and despair of the lyric right up until its glorious, final climax.

In less experienced hands, a cover song can seem like pointless exercise, especially when the new take fails to bring a fresh perspective or show a classic in a new light. Such pitfalls never loomed larger in Erelli’s mind than when he chose to cover a pair of ubiquitous hits from his 80’s youth. “The only thing scarier than learning to slow dance in middle school” he confides, “is covering the songs that they played at those dances. I guess it’s the folksinger in me that leads me to approach these hits more like texts, as something that isn’t so sacred it can’t be reinterpreted.”

By simply changing the meter of Phil Collins’ “Against All Odds” from 4/4 to 6/8, Erelli reimagines the mega hit as a string-drenched soul B-side, more reminiscent of Marvin Gaye than MTV. On Don Henley’s “The Boys of Summer,” Erelli again demonstrates how thrilling it can sound to extricate hit a song from its original production aesthetic. “Despite it being awash in 80’s synthesizers and drum machines, Henley’s original recording is dark, wistful, and when it shifts to the major key at the end it’s one of my favorite fist-raising anthems,” Erelli allows. Henley’s song has the same tension and catharsis in Erelli’s hands, but the sustained noir vibe and tortured wails at its conclusion give it a tougher edge. “I really connect with the darkness and desperation in that song,” confesses Erelli, “I didn’t even know I had that in me.” Perhaps this is ultimate success of **Mixtape**—to show us facets of our favorite music, and of ourselves, that have been hiding in plain view all along.

Mark Erelli still has plenty of his own songs to sing, and isn’t looking to join any tribute bands just yet. But the joy he gets from covering a song, be it an obvious match or unexpected choice, comes through loud and clear on **Mixtape**. “Even though it’s been a long time since I made an actual mixtape for someone,” Erelli acknowledges, “I still get a real thrill from turning other people on to the music I love.” Perhaps that process will be a two-way street, and fans of Phil Collins, Patty Griffin or Arcade Fire will discover Erelli’s own material in the process. When asked to consider that scenario, Erelli pauses for a moment, then says “I guess that would make this the most successful mixtape of all time!”