

MIXTAPES

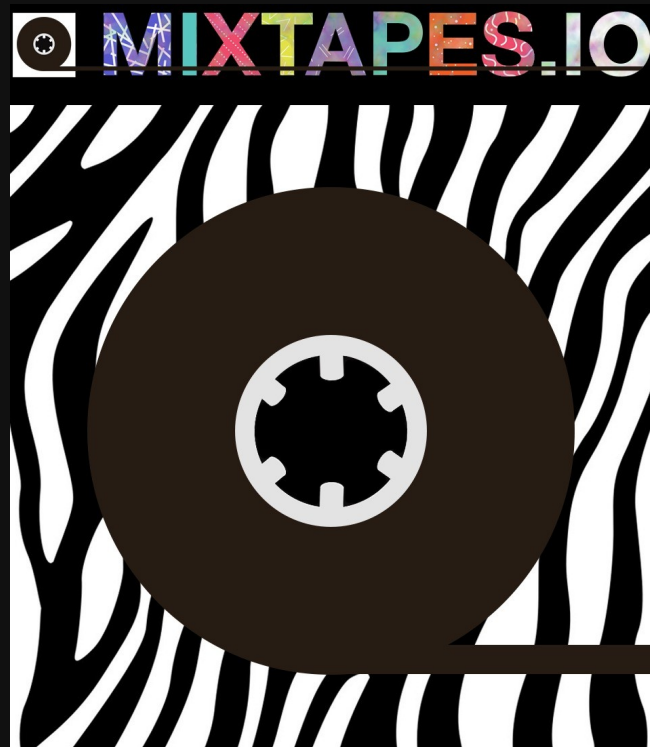
Mashups that make you laugh because they're strange.

A social music game for people who have never opened a DAW. Real stems from real songs, an AI engineer who moves sounds and never makes one, and every room is a link.



Sean Ross · a16z Speedrun application · October 2026

Private demo: mixtapes-demo.vercel.app/?key=stems2026



Pick a room. Talk to the engineer. Roll the dice.

Real stems from real songs

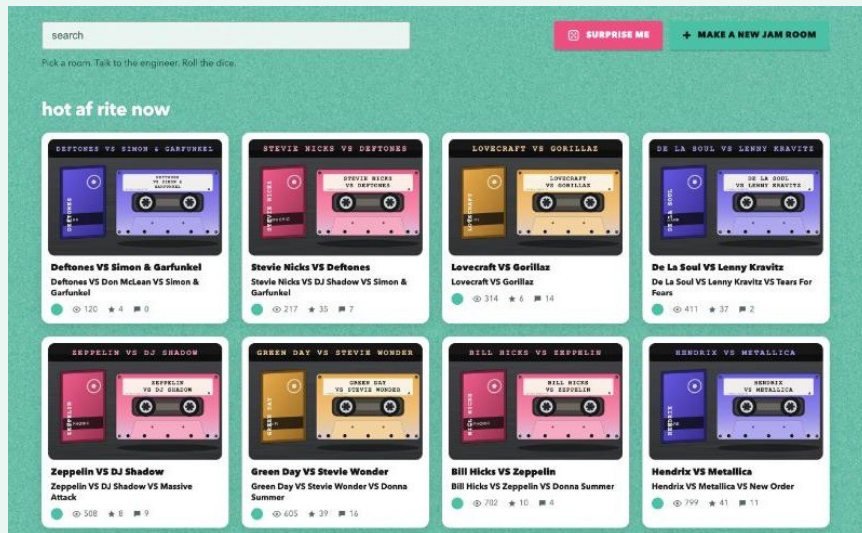
Full length, stereo, served from the cloud. Light a lane and you hear the source; mix lanes from two artists and it is a mashup.

An engineer, not a generator

Type what you want in plain English. The AI moves, swaps, pans, stretches and mutes. It cannot make a sound. Nothing is synthetic.

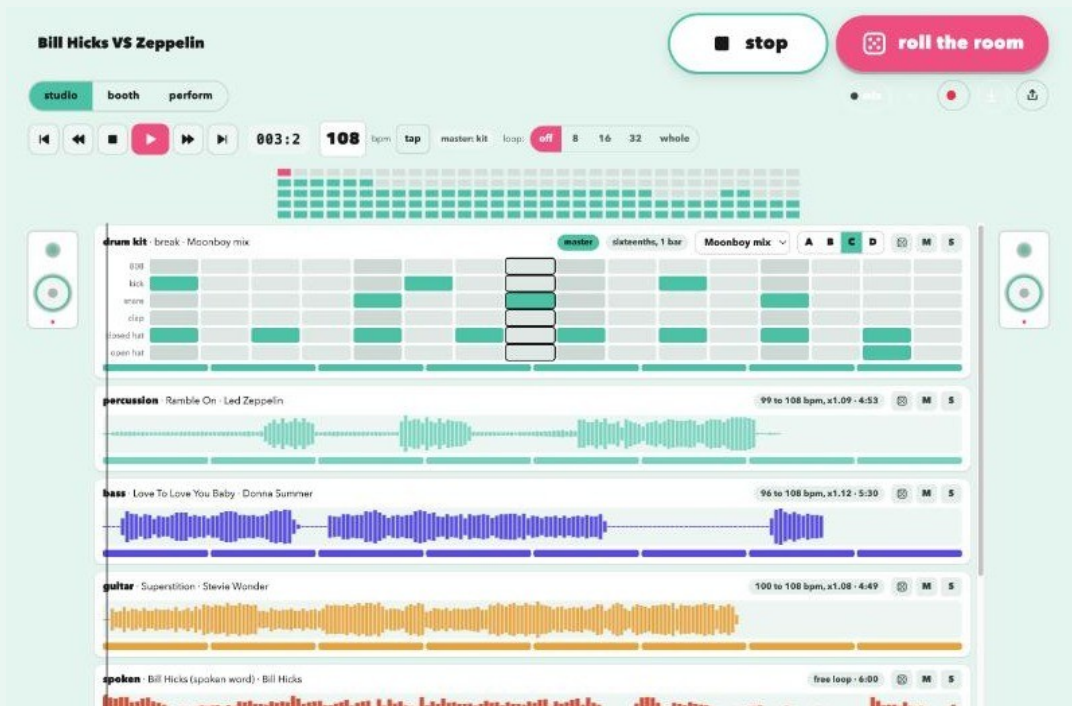
Every room is a link

The whole mix lives in the URL. Send it to a friend, they pick up where you left off. No account, no install, no app store.



The rooms screen of the live demo. Collisions are named X VS Y; the dice pick odd couples on purpose.

The studio: a DAW you play, not one you edit



Bill Hicks VS Zeppelin

A spoken-word stem over a Zeppelin drum break, a Donna Summer bass line, Stevie Wonder guitar. Nobody asked for that. It is just true.

One die per lane, one for the room

Hate the bass? Roll just the bass. Hate everything? Roll the room. Odd-couple rules keep a voice in every room and the stretch inside 0.85 to 1.2.

Transport, tempo, kits

Play-through by default, loop as a switch, tap tempo, four drum kits with grid modes A to D, faders to silence, pan per lane, undo.

The engineer does what you say

you drop the guitar, put a 70s vocal on top, pan the bass hard left, and slow it down to 92



engineer **Guitar out, Donna Summer's vocal in on lane 3, bass hard left, 92 bpm. Everyone stretched, nobody complained.**

Four ops, one turn

Tool calling over the room state: swap, drop, pan, stretch, mute, kit, tempo. It chains them and reports the one tradeoff.

Knows the whole library

Every stem with artist, song, key, BPM, year and mood, plus the current room and the last ten moves.

The rule

AI can move anything. It cannot make a sound. The material is always a real recording by a real artist.

Why now: the labels opened the door in May

May 2026

Spotify and Universal announced AI covers and remixes as a paid Premium add-on: a generative model, opt-in artists, a revenue share. Merlin signed in August. Not launched yet; a research preview is next.

The commercial shape is the one on my site since 2020: opt-in catalog, artists paid, fans pay. They applied it to a model. Mixtapes applies it to the files.

Their model makes the sound. Ours never does.

The behavior already exists

Music is consumed through memes, phones and 15-second clips. Mashups are a folk form; the tools for them are built for producers.

The alternative to AI music

AI music is a model trained on the world's catalogs, making sound nobody played. Mixtapes uses the multitrack files of the catalog itself, the way the underground has for decades, except licensed. It respects the original recording instead of cannibalizing it.

The gap

As announced, Spotify's add-on is a feature inside a streaming app, one fan and one song at a time. Nobody has built the place where people do this together, in the browser, in three minutes.

The same argument since grad school

1

MFA thesis, CCA

What happened to music when it went digital, and what streaming did to independent artists.

2

2018, Mixtapes.IO

The brand, on my site: made-to-order mixtapes from any digital source. Never pitched, never shelved.

3

2020, Stems.IO

The licensing argument published on my site: catalog stems as licensed raw material, artists paid per use.

4

Midival Kniesel: Queen

Prior art. A note-level electronic homage to Queen rebuilt from open MIDI. Catalog material worked without the recording.

5

October 2026, Mixtapes

The demo, built and shipped by me in eight days. Full songs, stereo, a real engineer, a vocal booth.

The first hundred people on a Friday night

Ring one

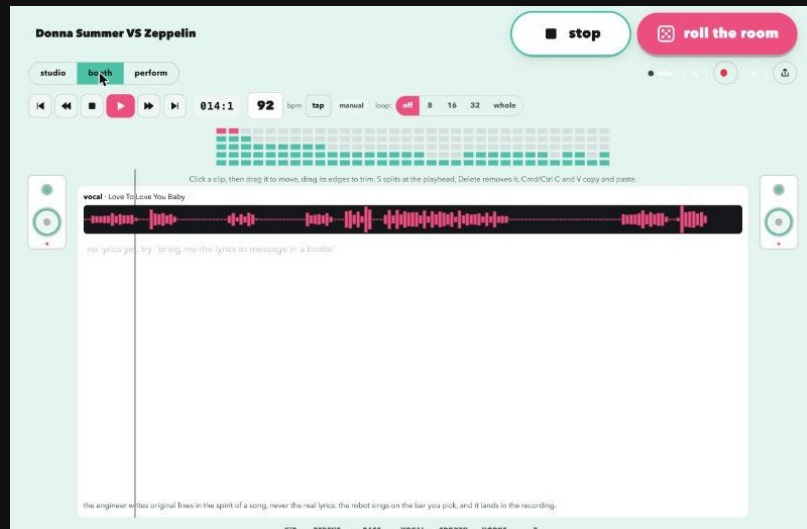
Producers, DJs and music nerds who already trade stems and MIDI, and the friends they pull in because it is fun to watch.

Ring two

Anyone who has ever made a mashup in their head. Mashup culture proves the appetite; the Spotify deal proves the labels see it. Neither has a social surface.

How it spreads

Every room is a link and every link carries the mix. A funny collision is the share unit. Turntable.fm energy, far more graphical, and we studied why turntable.fm died.



The vocal booth: type a line, the robot sings it on the bar you pick.
"Sing about a raccoon who runs a hedge fund."

Licensing is the product

Today

A private, keyed demo for this application and a short list of people. Not public, not a portfolio piece. Commercial stems because recognizability is the whole pitch.

The precedent

Mashups have been a folk form for decades, always unlicensed. Spotify and UMG signed the commercial model in May: opt-in catalog, artists sharing the revenue, a paid consumer tier, for a generative product. Mixtapes is the business case for the stem file as a licensed asset.

The person

John Bolton, who founded Muve Music, ran music and rights at Flipagram through the ByteDance acquisition and led global music licensing for TikTok, is advising on the licensing path.

Pre-licensing

A public launch can run on cleared material: open MIDI (the Queen set), my own recordings, user-uploaded stems, and one small opt-in catalog as the pilot.

One founder who builds, ships and mixes

Sean Ross, founder

- 30 years in design. VP of UX Design at BlackRock through January 2026.
- Employee six and Head of Design at Espressive (2016 to 2018): designed the MVP and the Barista character; the company raised its Series B on it and Gartner named it a Cool Vendor.
- Musician, audio engineer and producer (The Original Magic, 24 albums on Bandcamp). MFA, California College of the Arts.
- Built and shipped this demo myself in code with Claude Code, Tone.js, Vercel and Cloudflare R2, in eight days.

First hire

An engineer, when the product needs one and not before. I build and ship in code with AI tools; realtime multiplayer is the moment that hire makes sense.

Around the table

John Bolton (Muve Music, Flipagram/ByteDance, TikTok global music licensing) advising on the licensing path. Greg Melton (staff engineer, Flipboard), a 30-year friend, in conversation on the build. A small committee of long-time advisors.

The next 90 days

1

Realtime rooms

Presence, turns and live chat in the room: the thing that makes it a Friday night and not a toy.

2

One cleared catalog

A pilot with one opt-in rights holder plus open MIDI and user uploads, so the public launch is clean from day one.

3

Public launch

The first hundred people on a Friday night, by invitation, each room a link. Measure shares per room, not signups.

Demo: mixtapes-demo.vercel.app/?key=stems2026 · designerseanross@gmail.com · seanrosscreative.com