

CULTURE

Cooler than thou

// BY LEONARDO CHUNG

People love to say it: “I liked it before it got popular.”

Usually half-jokingly, but not really joking, because no one says it unless they mean it a little. They don’t say it just about music, but also about restaurants, brands, movies, authors and even clothing. The point is always: I found it early. I found it when it was still small. I found it when it meant something different.

It normally sounds pretentious. But the reasons people want what’s niche aren’t so mysterious or unique. It feels good to encounter something that isn’t already being thrown around and handled by everyone else. A song might still feel like yours when it hasn’t been turned into background music at parties or stripped into three different TikTok audios or had a thousand people saying, “this song changed my life!” There is a difference between finding a thing by yourself and receiving it after it has already been certified by the rest of the world.

Less nobly, people like feeling ahead of others. They like feeling that they are quicker-witted or more unique than the rest.

Ever since I began drinking coffee, I was essentially the only person I knew who ordered straight black iced Americanos. At the time, I enjoyed the faint sense that it marked me as somewhat different — it was a preference that was slightly uncommon. Then I visited Korea, where black iced Americanos are everywhere. They are practically the default order at cafés — so standard that they barely register any statement at all. I still ordered my iced Americanos, of course, but the meaning of the choice had changed for me. Evidence of some private specificity in the States turned out to be, in the Korean context, almost generic.

Most people aren’t sitting around consciously plotting how to build their personality or identity through obscure things, but I do think a lot of us enjoy the little charge of having preferences that are specific to us. It is flattering in a way, and it sends the message, “I am not interchangeable.”

I think this must be why people become so weird when their hidden gems become popular — when their favorite piece begins to attract too many people for their comfort. Usually people assert their pre-popularity connection with something as if defending its quality, but sometimes what is really being mourned is exclusivity. The said thing itself did not get worse, but it did lose its ability to make someone feel “rare.” Now, the someone is being grouped into a crowd.

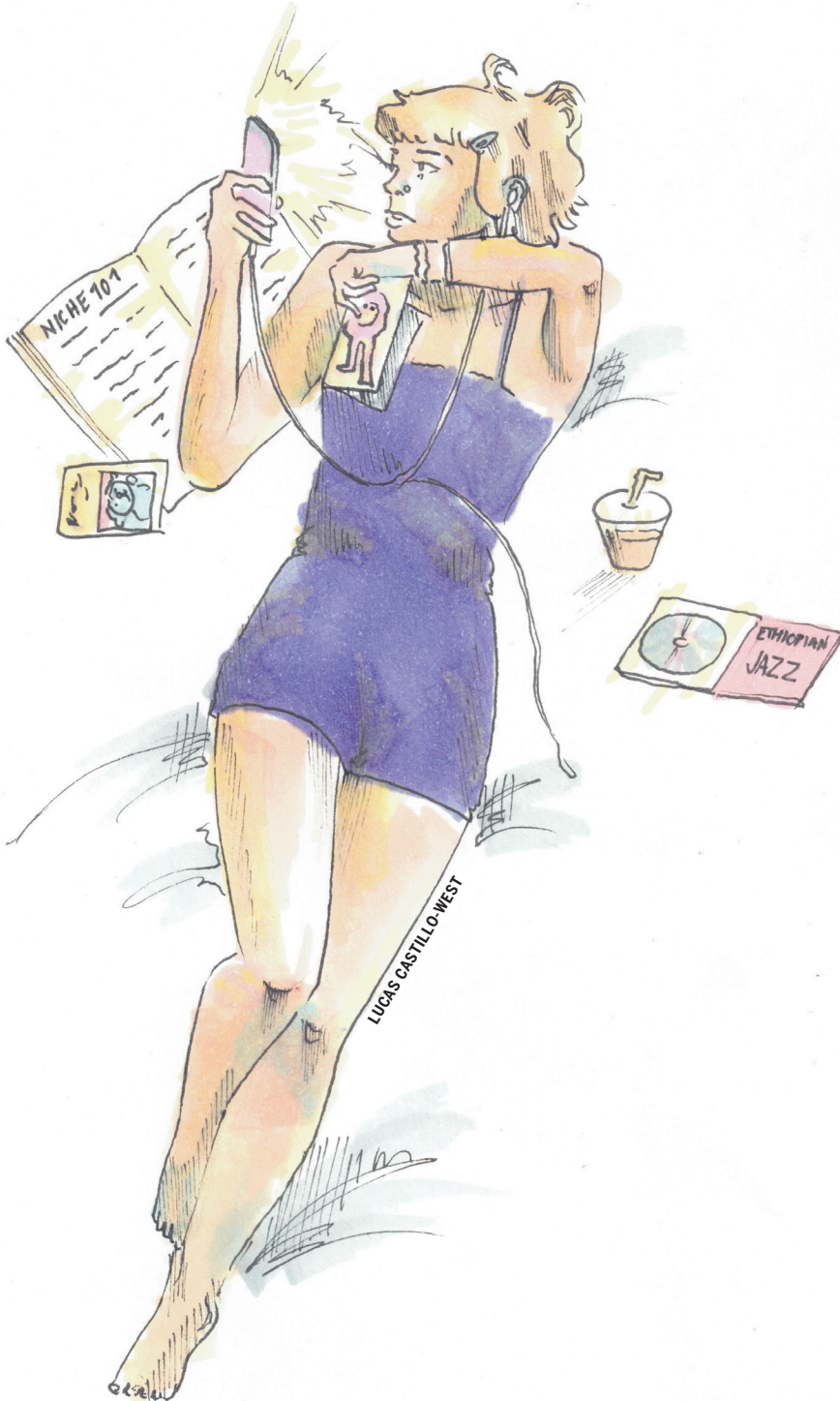
Obviously, people do sincerely love obscure things. Sometimes, less is indeed more. Smaller things really are better — or, at least, they feel less exhausted. There is something quite nice about finding a genre of art before it comes with a whole category of person associated with it. Obscurity can give things room to breathe.

Yet, people are certainly not innocent about taste either. Taste has become one of the easiest ways to signal almost anything besides merely what one likes. Intelligence. Sensitivity. Coolness. Money. Irony. Seriousness. Even goodness. People read others through tiny choices: what you wear on your feet, what kind of olive oil you buy, whether the tote bag you bought is funny on purpose or old enough to prove that you did not buy it for the joke. None of this is exactly deep, but it does cut through the surface into how we are judged.

I think this is why niche taste can become so addictive. It offers a tempting fantasy: If you choose precisely enough, you can make yourself precise. Different from the rest. Pick the right books, the right films, the right musicians, and you can become legible to yourself and unmistakably “you.”

But I don’t think this really works. A person is not automatically deeper because their favorite band has only a few thousand monthly listeners on Spotify. Sometimes popular things are popular just because they are good. Sometimes the honest answer is the boring answer. And sometimes the most secure kind of taste is, well, not obscure at all.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

So I shaved my head

// BY MADISEN FINCH

One of my fun facts, in the eternal game of get-to-know-you, is that I shaved my head. In the context of other icebreakers, the choice seems less consequential. As if it’s just something I did on a whim, comparable to running a 5K or visiting the world’s largest whatever. It doesn’t carry the weight it once did.

In the summer of 2020, I was convinced that I was going to die without having ever done something I was truly afraid of. Hair is something that is both inconsequential — as my military-bald dad would say — and vitally important to self understanding. I shaved my head as a way to check the smallest box on the bucket list of my life.

The pandemic allowed me to hide behind turned-off cameras. I wasn’t hiding out of shame but from the newness of it. The first buzz of clippers on the crown of my head, the first shower and sunburn all exposed me to a side of the world I wasn’t entirely ready for. I hadn’t realized the degree to which my hair had shielded me, physically, from a harsh world. The pinpricks of regrowing hair under my fingertips were a constant reminder of the change.

There is something singular about having no barrier to hide behind. Without strands of hair to pull or twirl between my fingers, my hands had to grow steady. I had always been the only person in my family who could curl or braid hair, but without any styling, my confidence had to come from somewhere other than how I looked. In those first few months, centering around something else — something internal — was the most important.

When the awkward growing-out phase began, so did the discomfort that comes with being markedly different. In small-town Kansas, with the type of beliefs I had — and with my willingness to fight for them — I felt that I had to compensate by fitting in other areas. Returning to school, while the hair I had intentionally scraped away was returning to me, I neglected those social expectations.

What I didn’t realize when I first reached for those clippers — or when I went to the salon because my mom would never let me do it myself — is that a bald head announces something to the world. For me, someone who was able to make the decision without being forced to lose my hair, it meant that I was something to look at. I became a symbol that others desperately wanted to unpack.

So, hair was as central to my identity after I lost it as it was before. I became the odd one out.

What I haven’t told you in these first few hundred words, maybe because I am still the same girl who hid behind those

turned-off cameras, is that shaving my head had something to do with me trying to figure out who I was. It was an act of acceptance, maybe, for the side of myself that would have been punished by the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that was central to my military-brat upbringing.

With every look in the mirror I was trying to find that young girl who figured something out about herself. I was looking for the girl who realized she didn’t always like the guy, the girl who was ostracized, the girl who just didn’t get it. I was looking for that girl when I shaved my head, and with every passing comment or pointed remark, I think she was pushed to the surface like a fractured bone. As a young, queer kid, the shaved head became inner confidence. And self-exploration. And acceptance. To others, it became something to pick at and pull apart.

I wish I remembered more of those growing-out phases. I blanked out the slurs that came with being visibly gay for the first time, that came with being someone so willing to stand out. I blanked out the insults that revealed more of me than the fleshy color of my scalp. Even as my hair continued to grow, brushing my shoulders, the air of difference surrounded me.

I have never been able to write about what happened to me when I had no protection, when I didn’t have the boundary of hair. The bareness of the experience revealed to myself, and others, the corners of myself I hadn’t been able to verbalize.

To this day, when I look in the mirror I secretly fear — hope? expect? — I have a buzz cut again.

I am not certain who I would be if I hadn’t shaved my hair. I don’t think I would be as open with my identity, as confident in the parts of myself that aren’t the way I look. I don’t know if I would have been harassed or outed if I hadn’t shaved it off. I like that it eased the burden of communication — I never really had to tell anyone I liked girls because a buzz cut usually does that for you. But I can’t see that girl in the mirror anymore. The longer my hair gets, the smaller she seems.

Hair is identity, and choice and protection and everything I didn’t understand when I decided to get rid of it. I have never regretted that buzz cut because it allowed me to reveal the pieces of myself I wasn’t ready to show. It made the decision easy because I hadn’t realized I made it.

Two truths, one lie: I had a buzz cut. I am a military brat. I miss it.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
LISTENING TO AN ENTIRE ALBUM IN ONE SITTING