

Big Circle Little Tour

By Juniper Wolf

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Approved by  _____ Date: May 23, 2023

Ryan Raul Bañagale

 _____ Date: May 23, 2023

Liliana Carrizo

Music has always been the driving force in my life. From a very young age, I was fortunate to be included in communities where musiking and receiving the music of others was a central element of life. This theme of communal music has continued into my now-early twenties. For the past year and a half, I have been playing and performing with my band, Seeking The Sun. We've played at a large variety of venues, spanning from basements to nightclubs. I decided late last year that regarding my thesis for the music major and bonner capstone, I wanted to do something that I really, really cared about that would not only benefit me, but also other artists in my community.

I decided that I would carry out a multi-state band tour and document my experience in the planning and execution of this project. There hasn't been a great deal of research done on the navigation of small and unrepresented artists within the music industry from an ethnographic perspective. My intention was that the members participating in this research (my bandmates) would gain valuable knowledge on how to navigate an ever-evolving music scene as independent musicians in a post-covid landscape. This documentation of trial and error will be very helpful to other small artists who may want to attempt similar projects.

My goal was not just to perform and entertain, but to also give back to the music community that has shaped us. We wanted to create something that would inspire and empower others to pursue their musical aspirations, and to show that it is possible to make a difference in the music industry as small, independent artists. Through this tour, we hoped to cultivate a sense of community and support for emerging artists, and to pave the way for a more inclusive and diverse music scene.

Preparation

Preparation was divided into three distinct phases: research, contact, and fundraising. Having never taken on a project of this scale before, I was out of my depth. I didn't know how to talk to talent buyers or budget meals for large groups of people. Where was I going to get a van? Where would we sleep? What would we do if there were unexpected expenses or changes in the schedule? How was I going to come up with almost \$7000, etc. etc. ? These were all things that I had to learn by trial and error.

For the initial research phase, I chose our route. Initially, I wanted to have the tour be a month long, spanning over winter break. I then decided that driving over the Rockies in the middle of January would be a very bad idea. The tour was pared down to 10 days and set to kick off during spring break. I then had to decide on a route. Originally, I had big plans of going as far as California, but again, confronted with the reality of limited time and budget, decided that staying closer to home would be more appropriate for a debut tour. We settled on a loop starting in Colorado Springs, muddling in Salt Lake City, and ending in Denver.

After the research phase came the more difficult part: contact. I contacted every bar, lounge, and venue in Colorado and Utah and quickly discovered that actually booking gigs at each destination was going to be more challenging than I had initially anticipated. It turns out that at the same time I was planning our first tour, seemingly every other touring band in the United States had already booked out all of the desirable venues months before I attempted to do this. I received countless emails with the phrase "The dates you requested are unavailable" in the tagline. I began looking into the more niche venues, i.e. small underground bars, DIY spots that a friend of a friend had played at once, and even a highschool. Finally, I started receiving messages and emails with the tagline "That sounds great!" This process of sending emails and trying to

book dates lasted until the week before we were supposed to leave on tour. Miraculously, I was able to fill every date that I had planned for.

As mentioned earlier, I figured that the total cost of this endeavor, including meals for five people, transportation (van rental and gas), hotels, and an emergency fund came out to roughly \$7000. In the beginning of this process, I could not have anticipated how much work fundraising would be. I decided that the best way to raise part of the funds would be through a series of diy concerts. This basically meant that we would set everything up in a brave volunteer's house in Colorado Springs and then charge five dollars at the door to come see us play our music. For the first few shows we did this way, I went above and beyond. I quickly realized that many students at Colorado College will complain about a five dollar door fee no matter how much extra you throw into the mix, so for the rest of the shows, I focussed only on curating an enjoyable musical experience. These house shows ended up being very successful, and we were able to raise a few thousand dollars through house shows and merchandise sales alone. While the goal of these events were to raise funds, I also wanted to be aware of the physical and musical environment. We treated these events the same way we would treat a show at any professional venue. We still wanted to put on a great performance while also fostering a musical community with the people we were playing for.

We knew that fundraising through the DIY shows wouldn't be enough to raise the full amount needed for the tour. So, with a bit of guidance, I decided to apply to both the Venture Grant and the Student Seed Innovation Grant. Writing for both of these grants really helped me to solidify my goals for this project and to think about how this project could be used as a tool for others.

Roadblocks:

The first big roadblock came in December when I received an email explaining to me that I had not received the Innovation Seed Grant. I immediately went into panic mode, thinking that this was the end of six months of preparation. After allowing myself five minutes to freak out, I buckled down and started thinking of ways to solve the problem. I decided that I would just have to apply again and wait until right before the tour to know whether or not I had the funds to actually execute this project. Over winter break, I rewrote my grant application and resubmitted it. The week before the tour at the end of March, I was told that my grant proposal had been accepted. I recognize that I am extremely privileged to go to an institution where applying for these grants is an option. Because of the challenge with initially having the grant denied, I also did some research on outside grants for the arts that anyone can apply for if they are looking to fund a similar project.

Networking:

As previously mentioned, the initial booking for this tour posed some difficulty. One way that I was able to navigate this was through the networking that happens while playing shows with other bands. Three of the shows I was able to book were the result of playing with another band once, being kind, and then having that band decide to do us a favor. The music industry often gets a bad rap for being cut-throat and dog-eat-dog, which absolutely can be true, but it is a wonder how far being kind to the people you meet will go. I learned that being kind will get you gigs; being arrogant will make it impossible to book anything.)

Leading up to the tour:

Aside from funding, there were many details to consider. One such detail was how we would get from location to location. For a while, we thought about renting a Uhaul van but soon

realized that it would be a prohibitively expensive route. We considered taking two smaller vehicles. That would have worked, but it would have been more difficult and expensive. Silly me; I had forgotten about Colorado College's fleet of passenger vans. The only problem with this was that we would need an additional person outside of the band to drive. Leo (our guitarist) and I don't have licenses, Casmali was not a certified driver, and Joe was not a Colorado College student. For several months, I tried to find someone who would be able to drive us and almost gave up hope before I realized that a co-worker of mine, Ethan, was driver certified. Not really knowing much about Ethan or even really being friends with him at the time, I asked if he would be willing to play chauffeur. For whatever reason, he agreed. Que the sigh of relief. I reserved a van that day.

Leading up to the tour, I knew that we would need a great deal of advertisement to make people aware of the tour. Instagram, as much as I hate to use it, is a great tool for advertisement when you have virtually no other resources. I ran several Instagram ads leading up to the tour, and it seemed to work. Finally the tour kick-off day arrived.

Our route took us through Dolores, Colorado to Monroe, Utah and then to Mt. Pleasant Utah. From there, we traveled to Salt Lake City Utah and Logan Utah then back to Salt Lake City. Our last leg of the journey took us to Denver, CO, and we ended our tour in Fort Collins, CO. All in all, we played nine shows over the course of ten days.

Notable Shows

I will talk about three of our most notable shows in this paper. The first show I will talk about was our "Fairyland" show. Fairyland is quickly becoming a staple in the DIY scene in Salt Lake City. The venue is situated in a small suburb of Salt Lake City called Millcreek. Kitana, whose home the Fairyland resides in, has fully converted their basement to accommodate both

local and traveling acts. Our show was notable as it was on a weekday, and we had no idea how many people would actually turn out. Given the casual feel to the whole thing, none of us felt that there was much pressure to put on a particularly “clean” show. Ultimately, about 20 people showed up, and we gave a performance that we all felt good about. For us this show felt like we were playing for ourselves rather than trying to put on a show for the audience. Despite the almost claustrophobic nature of the space, it did feel intimate in a way many of the other venues we played at did not.

The next show occurred the following night. We traveled an hour and a half north to a venue in Logan, Utah called the Whysound. For whatever reason, we had determined that this was a very important show. The bands we were playing with were well-established in the local scene and were going to draw a large crowd; we really wanted to make a good impression. We also for whatever reason were feeling a little competitive. We decided that we were going to play our best show yet. That was a mistake. The first band that played was a group called Over Under, and they totally blew us away. We were now even more sure that we needed to play our best and with our best energy in order to successfully follow that band. Because we had blown this show up in our minds so much, I was nervous. Looking back on the show, I am aware that I did not put on a very convincing performance. Not only was my stage presence woefully off, but halfway through our set, Joe (the bassist) broke a string. He had to awkwardly clamber off stage and restring as quickly as he could. This left the others and me to entertain the audience for what was likely only five minutes but might as well have been the whole forty-five minute set. Nothing will humble you faster than having to come up with clever things on the fly to an audience of people who already aren't sure about you. Finally, Joe hopped back on the stage, and we tried our best to continue playing through our set on the little momentum left. At that point, I

had gone fully into auto-pilot to avoid the feelings of embarrassment creeping into the edges of my mind. On our second-to-last song of the set, Joe broke another bass string and at that point had also shredded his index finger used for plucking. Any and all enthusiasm I had for playing fully left my being. In the seconds before deciding to call it quits and take all of that as a sign that we should forever quit music, the bassist for Over Under climbed onto the stage and passed off his own bass to Joe. We were able to finish our set and then left the stage with our tails between our legs.

This show reminded us why building community within the musical landscape is so important. The bass player had no reason to lend us his bass. He had nothing to gain from helping us that night, but it meant so much to us that he did. After the show we all felt terrible and extremely discouraged. We joined in the back alley behind the venue to commiserate and lament the awful and embarrassing experience. Several minutes later the members of Over Under joined us and immediately began to commend our performance. The surprising part was their praise felt entirely genuine. Any walls that were up dissolved as pats on the backs and true appreciation for one another's music was exchanged. As the conversation progressed they explained to us their own trials with being touring musicians. We came to find out that they were veterans in the mishaps of touring. The previous year they had toured with a much larger band called the Backseat Lovers. They said "It always goes that way, where you'll play a killer set to an empty room, and then the next night when the show counts is when everything falls apart." Their bassist talked about the extreme highs and lows that they as a group had endured. He described a harrowing experience where Over Under had attempted to tour after their success with the backseat lovers, and it was an utter disaster. They lost thousands of dollars, and had their tour van break down in Las Vegas. The experience scared him so much that once he and his

bandmates were rescued from Vegas he considered quitting music. He got a desk job at a bank and did not play with the band for 6 months. He said “This life is not for everyone.”

The final show of our Utah leg of the tour was held at The DLC, a small venue nestled in the back of a quirky arcade bar called Quarters. After the disastrous Whysound gig the night before, we were determined to make this show a redemption for our previous misfortunes. Exhausted but eager, we arrived at the venue with a sense of determination. To add to our excitement, a good friend of mine from high school, Mac, was opening the show with his band, pluq. They were deeply embedded in Salt Lake City’s crust punk and skate culture, and had never played at an actual venue before. As we entered the green room, we found pluq lounging on the couches, eagerly chatting amongst themselves. They were nervous, but we did our best to encourage and support them, helping to alleviate any anxiety they had about performing on a stage for the first time.

Finally, it was time for pluq to take the stage. When I looked out into the audience, I was pleasantly surprised to see that a crowd of around 150-200 people had gathered to see them play. Though it took them a songs to appear comfortable on stage, pluq was ultimately able to put on a very authentic set. It was really wonderful to see how supportive the audience was of them and it only encouraged us. When we took the stage after pluq we all knew it was go time. We were ready to put on a great show, and it wasn’t for the sake of being perceived as a “good” band. It seems that without the need to impress anyone, we were able to put on a more authentic and embodied show. We all collectively agree that The DLC was the best show of the tour. We all were able to “drop in” and have fun while still picking up on the musical conversations happening in each part of the set. We felt lifted after the set and the next day when we left we were able to leave Utah on a very high note.

Reflections

In the next section of this paper I will describe a few unexpected things that I learned while on tour. A take-away I had from this experience was that the space and place of a show really does make all of the difference in the way a show feels. In the paper “States of Play/Ing: Sonic Dwellings on a Music Tour” written by Anna Lisa Ramella, one of the important questions that she raised was “How can the experience of playing music—or indeed any such experience—be approached ethnographically if it can neither be observed nor participated in?” (Ramella, 2) As I was an active participant in my own musicking I have been able to combine my own experience with some of her theories and ideas surrounding the act of performance. In an interview with one of the band members she raises this question. The Bassist responds by saying the act of performance is like a flip being switched that washes away the stress and dirt of the day. It’s a reminder for them as to why they continue with the often difficult aspects of touring and being on the road. The performance is the reward. The term “musicking” is brought forward as a concept for not only the act of playing music itself but the physical, spatial, social, and spiritual frameworks that surround the music being made. Another important question that is raised in regards to this idea of “musicking” is “which practices are involved in the preparations of playing music, and which skills does this process require?” (Ramella, 4)

One way in which musicians prepare is through attuning themselves to their surroundings through set up and sound check and creating familiarity. On the road we found this to be accurate. Each venue we played at was drastically different from the last, and having the opportunity before each set to become familiar with the space was extremely helpful for feeling comfortable and preparing mentally for the actual show later in the evening. Once that basis is

set, and the music gets to be actually played, many musicians describe the feeling of the music “taking over.” In discussion with my bassist Joe, he agreed with this statement, saying that “allowing myself to be grounded in the room before playing can make all the difference.” In these moments many musicians say that the second they begin to analyze what they are doing is when they will “lose the groove.” This exact phenomenon was exactly what went wrong with our Whysound show. Because we became too invested in our delivery of the music we lost our own groove and were unable to allow the music to take over. Often it may be better to deconceptualize rather than conceptualize the act of musicking. That is not to say that the act of playing requires one to play mindlessly, but rather to attune their awareness to their intuition and let go of rational thought. Due to this reliance on intuition it becomes crucial that members of a band improvise together, in order to learn the ways in which other players’ intuition might carry them. One might begin to anticipate where another player might go next if they improvise together enough. Almost all of Seeking the Sun’s songs are written during improvised jam sessions. Through these jam sessions each of us has become highly attuned to the way each member improvises. Over time we have each developed a sort of telepathy with one another where we each can intuit the direction the others may go. This can be crucial during actual live performance, especially when things go a bit sideways. It’s always good to know that even if you misplay, you will be able to improvise your way out of a bad set.

Ramella also notes that, “the sonic environments of musicians on tour differ from place to place, but also from time to time. There are different spatial and temporal constellations involved that bring with them different sonic environments” (Ramella, 9). That is to say that as the physical space changes the way musicking is presented also changes. Ramella argues that the

music created itself can also be considered space. She states that “Rather than being secondary to space, the acoustic spatiality of sound is an architecture itself” (Ramella, 9).

The way the stage is set before the band ever arrives also lends to the way sound-space is created and curated. Stage set up is part ritual part curation. It allows the musicians a space for grounding. Ramella observes on such example: “Ben for example has on many occasions also mentioned the set-up of his technical equipment as a process of refinement and habituation that also depends on trusting in the available technical assistance (e.g. by a guitar technician), saving him from a “paranoid state” and thus making him perform better” (Ramella, 12).

This is another reason for the importance of a soundcheck as musicians become “attuned” to a space. Hitting a state of flow and comfortable musical-spacial awareness requires that each musician feels that they will be able to play comfortably given the constraints of any venue. Physical environment also plays a huge role in the way musicians are able to navigate a musical environment. Orientation of the players on stage can make or break a performance. For example if your bassist and guitarist need to be able to make eye contact for certain song cues, but the orientation and set up of the stage does not allow for that, things can go south quickly.

Touring is an exhilarating experience, but also takes a lot of work and energy. As Red Hot Chili Pepper bassist Flea states in his memoir *Acid for The Children*, “touring was a full-body experience. It was a wild ride that left me feeling alive and energized, but also exhausted and depleted. The adrenaline rush of performing in front of a crowd of thousands was like nothing else.” (Flea, #) While Seeking the Sun wasn’t performing for crowds of thousands, we all still felt the highs and lows of performing. Long hours on the road, and sleep deprivation take their toll. However, everynight as we took the stage made all of the difficult aspects of touring worth it.

Flea expands by adding “touring wasn't just about the music and the fans. It was also about the camaraderie and sense of community that developed among us as a band. We spent countless hours together on the road, sharing cramped tour buses, backstage dressing rooms, and hotel rooms. We became a family of sorts, with all the ups and downs that come with any family. There were moments of intense joy and camaraderie, as well as moments of tension and conflict. But through it all, we had each other's backs and relied on each other to get through the long, grueling days of touring” (Flea, #)

There have been many moments playing live when I have looked into the faces of my bandmates and had the acute realization that “This is what it is truly all about. This is IT!” We were moving as a single unit through the space and time of our music. We had allowed ourselves to be conduits for the music to move through us, and not from us.

On top of the physical exhaustion that comes with being on the road, the lack of privacy can also take a toll on a touring musician's mental health. Being constantly surrounded by people, even those you love and respect, can be overwhelming and draining. It's not just the lack of physical space that can be an issue, but also the lack of emotional space. With everyone in close quarters, it can be difficult to have important conversations or deal with personal issues without others overhearing. The constant need to be "on" and social can also be mentally exhausting, especially for introverted band members who may need more alone time to recharge.

To combat these challenges, the members of seeking the sun made sure to create boundaries and find ways to give each other space when needed. Some of us chose to go for solo walks or while others preferred to have some quiet time in the room or take a long shower to decompress. It's important for bandmates to be understanding and respectful of each other's needs for personal space and privacy, even if it means sacrificing some group activities or social

time. Ultimately, finding a balance between spending time together and giving each other space is key to maintaining mental well-being while on tour.

Another thing I discovered through this process is that the people you travel with when on tour are of the utmost importance. One of the most critical skills that the people on tour with you need to possess is effective communication. With the long hours, cramped spaces, and intense schedule, it's almost inevitable that conflicts will arise. If the people on tour with you are unable to communicate their needs and concerns in a productive and respectful manner, it can quickly escalate into a larger problem that can derail the entire tour. The hard truth is that some people cannot deal with the kind of stress that comes with being on the road for days on end. We were lucky that everyone that we were traveling with was able to handle the stress properly and we had minimal hang ups. We were especially lucky to have some friends who were not in the band on the road with us to help us along the way.

Concluding Thoughts

When I reflect on the experience of everything that went into making this tour possible I am first, incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have been able to embark on this journey at all. Without the resources at Colorado College and guidance from members of the music department it is unlikely that this project would have gotten very far beyond its conceptual state at this point in time. Additionally I am very proud of my bandmates and their growth as musicians. I am so grateful to them for trusting me with this project. There was truly no way for them to know if my plan would be successful, and they put a great deal of faith in me and my ability to create a safe way for us all to learn how to tour together. I could not have created this art without them.

Lasty, I am extremely proud of everything I have been able to accomplish over the course of this endeavor. I am far more confident in my ability to plan projects of this scale, my musicianship, and my performance. I now know that I am capable of projects like this one in the future and I know for a fact that I will be touring a great deal more in the future.

Bibliography

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