

Music Production, Creativity and the Digital Music Industry

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree, Bachelor of Arts
(Music)

The Colorado College

May 22 2023

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Since middle school, more than anything else, I have wanted to record music. My earliest recording projects were 30-second loops shoddily recorded into an old MacBook using the Blue Snowball USB microphone my parents gave me for my 13th birthday. With time, the length of my loops grew, and finally, I started making full songs in the digital audio workstation, GarageBand. In my senior year of high school, I recorded a five-song EP in my bedroom and performed in a local youth battle of the bands. The EP was bad, and my band did not win the battle of the bands, but I had found a path I knew I wanted to follow. Six years of following that path, and I have finished recording a nine-track album, crafted both in my bedroom and in the CC recording studio, a collection of songs of which I am immensely proud. To call this project a thesis feels wrong to me. It has taken me two years of work, countless hours of guitar takes, synth tones, and MIDI drums - I never wrote these songs with academic achievement in mind. My thesis project, however, is centered on the creation and release of this album: the process of recording these songs and designing my thesis has been intertwined.

I am an independent recording artist, which means I am not signed to a record label. Throughout the process of working on this album, I had a number of doubts: I doubted my ability as a musician, producer, and songwriter, and I doubted that I would ever be able to finish the project. But by far, the most complicated and troublesome doubt I had to grapple with was, "If I finish this album, who will care? Who will listen? Will it advance my career as a musician?" These questions have driven my research for this thesis project.

In the modern music industry, making music is not enough. In fact, it may actually be the least important thing. The phenomenon of social media and the endless appetite for internet celebrity

has changed the landscape of the music industry. The pandemic has made us a more consumption-based online society and has also shut down many small music venues, introducing even more change to the economic world of music. Understanding how to make a living in the ever-shifting world of the music industry and understanding how to make music are two completely different skill sets. As I came closer and closer to finishing the album, a sense of dread developed within me. I knew how to make music, but I had no idea what to do with the completed music to ensure that more people than just my friends, family, and I were going to hear it.

In this paper, I will describe my own creative process and how it has related to the challenges of living in the digital era and the Pandemic. I will explore the ways in which recording artists release music, independently or with assistance from a label, and how the pandemic and internet have changed these practices. I will interrogate how the relationship between music and personal identity informs financial decisions made by artists, labels, and consumers. Of the many ways music is produced and released, I will also try to determine which model best fits my own goals for my music and my creative process.

I will discuss my creative process through the lens of three tracks from the album. All nine songs on the project began simply as guitar parts. I always begin writing with a guitar riff or chord progression, and I develop the song idea on guitar as much as I can before adding any other elements. After the guitar parts have reached a point where I feel satisfied with them, I'll develop a vocal melody by improvising. Then I'll add lyrics. My lyrics are often a product of the way the song idea makes me feel. My personal creative philosophy is that music is a language, and songs have something to say to us even before they have lyrics. My foremost goal in writing lyrics is to

add to what I feel the song is already trying to convey. After writing lyrics, I usually record a demo in Ableton Live, where I add new guitar, synth, and often midi drum parts. These demos serve as blueprints for the final recorded versions of the songs, which I either record with my collaborator Adam Moledina or by myself.

The fifth track on the album is called "The Meteorist." It is a narrative told from the perspective of a distant descendant of the human race who lives in a glass dome on a meteor. The song is based in science fiction and tells the story of this individual as he goes about daily life in total isolation on his meteor. Each year, the meteor passes the old home world of his ancestors, which was terraformed and then destroyed by natural disasters and war, causing the surviving human beings to leave the world on makeshift spacecraft and scatter throughout a nearby meteor belt. The character longs more than anything to return to a world that no longer exists and is unreachable. Most of all, the character desires to be with other people again. I wrote this song in its entirety on February 8th, 2022, when the pandemic was still raging, but the deepest isolation had ended. At first, I saw it as just a fun exercise in songwriting; I made a voice memo of me playing it alone in my bedroom on acoustic guitar and sent it to Adam Moledina, who had moved to L.A. after graduating from C.C. months before. I was not expecting his reaction; he told me it was a song that I needed to take seriously and that we needed to record together. After a few months passed, I planned a trip to L.A. to visit my partner and her family. Adam called me and told me he had a dream about the song and once again asked me to record it. At that point, I was still fairly ambivalent about the song and had even forgotten how to play the guitar part, but Adam was convincing. So, I flew to L.A., and in one 24-hour period in Adam's small apartment

studio, the two of us brought the song to life. The resulting recording is one of the best moments on the album and one of the more emotionally poignant songs to me.

The story told in the lyrics is a stand-in for how I, and perhaps others, felt in the months after the intense covid isolation. During that time, I felt that I had lost the capacity to be social, to live, and make friends in the same way I had in the past. I had been forced by the isolation of the pandemic to turn inwards. I wanted to return to my former self, the one who had lots of friends and went out and wasn't afraid to meet new people. I was so removed from that mindset; I didn't think I could ever go back. My real relationships of years prior had become untenable, unfulfilling digital relationships. These feelings led me to write the song about yearning for a world you can't return to.

The second track on the album is called "Blue Light." Written in the summer of 2022, the song began with a catchy guitar riff that sank its hooks into me for a full day. It had an addictive quality to it, and I couldn't stop playing it. I couldn't decide what to write about. I felt like the riff was fun but didn't have the quality to carry a full song. The riff reminded me of an old Windows computer booting up, but sped up and reversed. I decided to write a song about the internet, but I wanted to approach it with subtlety and nuance. The addictive quality of the riff reminded me of the buzz of scrolling through content designed to keep you on a social media site all day.

The second part of the song is dark, noisy, and distorted, with droning synths, whining guitars, and about 18 different sonic layers. It emulates the anxiety and overstimulation of doom scrolling. The final section of the song is filled with acoustic guitars and vocal harmonies, representing our ability to step away from the internet at any time.

The lyrics of this song were based on a disconcerting interaction I had with a social media influencer. They seemed like an embodiment of niche internet culture, with flashy clothes and regurgitated viral tweets. To me, it seemed as if this person had been hollowed out by the internet and filled up again, losing any discernible personality beyond their relationship to internet culture and humor.

The first line of the song, “Were you filming that? Would you send it then?” conveys people's obsession with documenting life instead of being present and existing in the moment. Another line from the first verse, “I want the car crash sparks all the bitterness, I want blood on me with no political hits,” comments on the internet's obsession with controversy and conflict without deeper political analysis.

The final lines of the song speak to our inability to turn away from the divisive pockets of the internet because, in spite of its negative influence, it has a dark appeal and our modern lives often require us to have internet personas for social or professional reasons.

The value of this song lies in the internal conflict of the character. They feel compelled to engage with social media to an unhealthy degree, sacrificing bits of their own identity for internet popularity while also recognizing the toll that it is taking on them. The character feels trapped because they benefit in many ways from their online fame but cannot ever truly express the extent of their personality for fear of losing their following. They cannot step away from social media because they make money off of it, and their identity has become contorted to be as "for-you-page" presentable as possible, leading to a loss of understanding of themselves and life outside of virtual spaces.

After finishing recording my album, I felt apprehensive about putting my music out into the world. I had released only one project before: a five-track EP created in the summer of 2021 with my band Host Body. Releasing this project, I had the help of my bandmates and even the guidance of a manager. However, that project did not succeed in capturing the attention of very many listeners. For this album, I wanted to maximize the reach of the music and put real effort into the release and promotion of my songs. Therefore, I decided to try to understand the ways that artists, both signed and independent, released and promoted their music. I also sought to understand the legal contours of the music industry, including the relationships between labels and artists, labels and other labels, and artists and listeners.

In the modern music industry, labels hold less sway than they have in days gone by. However, major and independent record labels still form the skeleton of the music industry and are often behind predominant music trends and changes in the industry. In a University of Minnesota research paper titled "Current Popular Trends in the Music Industry," I found information about the operations of major labels and indie labels. Major labels are hit machines responsible for much of the music one might hear on Radio Top 100, but they also own many smaller record labels and utilize their vast endowments to invest in niche musical markets. The four biggest labels are EMI, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Group. These "big four" labels control over 85% of the music recording industry. Most artists who gain acclaim and financial success are directly or indirectly contracted to a major label.

Independent record labels make up the rest of the industry and range from small-scale DIY recording and release set-ups to large businesses with teams of publicists, recording

engineers, and artists. Notable indie labels include Matador Records, Rough Trade Records, and XL Recordings. These labels thrive through discovering artists with niche aesthetics and music which could be widely successful but is unlikely to ever reach mainstream pop success.

Some artists decide to opt out of dealing with labels altogether and instead try a "do-it-yourself" approach. DIY music exists almost entirely outside of the traditional music industry. DIY scenes rely heavily on cooperation between artists and on the support of local venues. These music scenes are generally deeply connected to location: DIY scenes in different cities will prefer different aesthetics and genres and will vary in ideology. DIY music scenes are built on a musical community with a distinctive identity, which usually has nothing to do with mainstream trends.

There also tends to be a strong connection to the concept of musical authenticity: artists who start in a DIY scene and begin to achieve success outside of the DIY community can sometimes be accused of selling out and rejected from the scene. Alternatively, a DIY scene as a whole can begin to receive broader attention if one artist achieves a wider following. Unfortunately, it is hard to research the financial and social workings of DIY scenes because of their outsider status in the music industry. "To date there has been no comprehensive attempt to study and conceptualize the more informal structures of opportunity that exist for young people to engage in in order to scale up their cultural labor outside of the more formalized cultural industry structures" (Bennett, 144). The lack of formal structure is both a strength and weakness in DIY music scenes.

The rise of massive streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Apple Music, has drastically altered the landscape of the recorded music industry. "...streaming has displaced traditional physical sales and even other categories of digital music, representing more than 50% of the whole

business in the case of recorded music, and accounting for more than 75% of recorded music revenue in relevant markets such as the USA and UK" (Arenal, 2). These streaming services are most people's primary vessel for consuming music today, and thus modern musicians, especially small artists who are trying to establish themselves, are required to interface with them to some capacity.

In a paper titled "Giants with Feet of Clay: The Sustainability of the Business Models in Music Streaming Services," researchers investigated the effects of streaming services on the recording industry and on artists. "...various performers emphasized the relevance of playlists on discoverability and how they play a pivotal role within the streaming business model that affects the future sustainability of the creative process" (Arenal, 6). Algorithmic and editorial playlists are a massive driver of artists' success on streaming platforms. For example, Spotify editorial playlists shape the taste of listeners. An "indie" editorial playlist, Lorem, has 1,039,506 saves. This so-called indie playlist features six hours of music almost exclusively made by artists signed to major labels or their subsidiaries. Being signed to a major label affords artists the privilege of preferential treatment in the editorial playlists on streaming services.

AI recommendation systems also play a large role in determining the general taste of listeners who use these streaming platforms. "AI-based recommendation systems allow the matching of supply and consumers' preferences and profile, and in so doing, the creation of value is displaced from creative diversity to customization at the distribution level. The confluence of a loyalty-addressed user experience and an unlimited growing inventory results in additional pressure to generate value through the exploitation of users' behavioral data. A consequence of that, as has been said, is the lack of interactivity in the content experience and the increasing

relevance of editorial content" (Arenal, 12). This quote demonstrates listeners' growing tendency to listen to a more homogenized and curated set of artists. Musical diversity is not encouraged by algorithms and editorial playlists. As a result, artists are feeling more pressure to conform to the predominant generic sounds that comprise these playlists. Musical innovation has been de-incentivized by streaming services, giving way to a smooth user experience and endless playlists of corporate-curated, homogenized music. Small artists, with less access to advanced recording technology, sound-treated spaces, and mix engineers, will likely have an increasingly difficult time competing for placement on these playlists, as even the self-proclaimed indie playlists adopt big-name artists with major labels behind them.

Additionally, the payment systems of these streaming services also favor big artists and labels. "...Because the 'market-centric' model puts all the applicable revenue (i.e., a negotiated contractual definition of revenue that is shared with rights-holders by the service) into a hotchpot divided based on the number of plays, inevitably a user will pay for music they do not listen to" (Arenal, 7). This quote essentially says that big artists make money off of the streams attributed to even the smallest artists, whereas small artists may only see pennies a year, even if a song of theirs blows up. This model also means that listeners and fans get no opportunity to choose how their subscription fees are allocated. Listeners with niche tastes, who may pride themselves on their love of DIY music and support of small artists, are still mostly paying for Drake, Ed Sheeran, and Taylor Swift.

After learning about record labels and streaming services, I felt I had a better theoretical understanding of the inner workings of the music industry. However, I didn't know what it was like to actually work in the industry as an artist. So, I decided to reach out to Genevieve Stokes, a

musician from my hometown who is now signed to Sony's record label and touring nationally while garnering international acclaim. She agreed to have a conversation with me about her life as a working musician. I called her and asked her questions about her creative process, touring, her relationship with her label, her public persona, and the pressures she deals with as a result of her success. The conversation was illuminating.

In line with my previous research, Genevieve explained that her early success was largely due to Spotify editorial playlists and that her label helped her get the publicity she needed to get those playlist placements. She also talked openly about her label contract. She described how the label informs her creative process: in her case, she is allowed to operate freely and create as she sees fit, and her label does not give her direct input about how she should develop her songs and albums. However, they do pair her with producers and other musicians who they feel complement her sound. She recently released an EP called "Chasing Rabbits," which features lush production with drums, guitars, bass, and seamless vocal harmonies. She told me about the process of recording the project while also touring as an opening act. She described her creative process, which is very similar to mine. Genevieve is a vocalist and pianist, and she writes all of her songs with just those two elements as the building blocks. After the song is written, she brings a demo to her label, and they bring in a producer and other musicians who fill the song out.

I also wanted to talk to Genevieve about her relationship as an artist with social media platforms. Genevieve has a substantial following at this point, and last summer, a fifteen-second clip of her song "Habits" was played millions of times over the course of around a month on the video app Tik Tok. Social media success changed Genevieve's connection to her audience. She

began to get more new listeners through social media than through Spotify playlists. Genevieve told me that while this viral success helped her career as a musician, the personal feelings it brought up were more negative than positive. She said, "When the ball's rolling, maintaining that audience and keeping people interested is really stressful, and I think it brought up a lot of feelings of not being good enough... Most of the time I enjoy posting and talking to people; it's just more when there's pressure on you and all of these eyes on you it can feel a lot different" (Curtis). She spoke about the anxiety induced by social media, telling me that some fans treated her more as a product than as a person and could say things online that were hurtful, even if that wasn't their intention. She told me that for a while, she felt a lot of pressure to be online and to interact with fans. This anxiety loomed so large that it was hard for her to focus on anything else. However, she learned to navigate the pressure and anxiety and was eventually able to capitalize on the attention she got on social media. The experience taught her how to balance the professional pressure and her personal time. She said it also revealed to her how important social media can be to an up-and-coming artist. Genevieve now posts on social media multiple times a week to interface with her audience more consistently. She discussed the importance of having an overarching creative vision as an artist, stating that visual content has become an essential cornerstone of her success and how she now thinks of social media as another means of self expression similar to her music videos.

From my conversation with Genevieve, I learned that visual content and social media are likely the fastest ways to connect to a wider audience as a small artist. I did not particularly like this revelation, as I am not an active poster, have no love for self-promotion, and feel that social media is categorically bad for the mind. However, I also learned from Genevieve that there are

ways to use the internet as a tool, to not be consumed by your own online persona, and to block out the noise while still growing an audience.

In my final months at CC, I created two music videos after already making one last summer in Maine. My intent was to develop a visual aesthetic that complimented the music I had created. The first music video was created for track 1 on the album, “Nerv.” The song is about my friends from home and losing touch with them, but knowing the connection I have with them is so deep that even after not speaking for months, we can still see each other, and our relationship remains unchanged. For the video, I wanted to highlight the beauty of the place I grew up in, Maine. I reconnected with a friend from early childhood, Henry Spritz, who is now a filmmaker. In a single day, we created the video, wandering through the Portland downtown, taking a ferry out to an island where all the parties (that I didn’t really go to) happened when I was in high school. We shot mostly at a dilapidated fort, overgrown with plants and covered in graffiti, which we both thought was a good visual representation of the central theme of the song: the decaying effect of time.

The second video was created for track two, “Bluelight.” I created this video with a fellow senior, Augie Voss. Initially, we had grand ambitions for the video, writing out a plot and creating a number of characters. But because it was only the two of us working on the video, we ended up having to scale our vision back a bit. In the end, we decided to keep only a few of the characters we had come up with, and to mostly focus on creating a video that is visually stimulating and interesting to watch, abandoning the concept of having an intelligible storyline. Shooting the video over two days, I carried a fake park bench up flights of stairs, through parks, and even into a river to get interesting shots. For a character, I bandaged my entire head and



spent hours staggering around a parking garage and train station. The video is still being edited, and funnily enough, seeing myself on screen playing characters makes me uncomfortable, ironically considering the lyrical content of “Bluelight.”

The final video was created for track 6, “3 Haun+s”. It was shot by my roommate and friend, Marco Toro. The entire video was shot on corrupted film, which was unusable for actual film projects due to color burn. However, Marco and I liked the way the color burn looked and decided to try to make something using it. Shooting on film is really difficult because there is a definitive limit to the amount of footage you can get. Marco and I planned the video second by second, shot by shot. We developed a ghost story to match the swirling, ghostly currents of the music. My other roommate and friend, Jasmine, played the Ghost. We shot the video in one very long but enjoyable day. We rehearsed each scene before shooting to avoid wasting film. This was the first video in which more than two people were involved, and though I have not seen any of



the footage, as the film is still being developed, I will say it was my favorite to make. Spending time being creative with my close friends on a beautiful spring day was a special experience, a memory which I will cherish forever.

On the week of May 1st, the album finally reached its final incarnation, with the first single being released on May 26th. I feel incredibly excited, and more importantly, I feel prepared to begin a career in the music industry after conducting my research. I learned about the interactions between record labels, artists, and streaming services. I taught myself to record music and refined my creative process to make songs that I am proud of. Additionally, I learned how to release music in a professional capacity as an unsigned artist. I also learned how to

collaborate with artists who work in different mediums to create a more complete artistic vision for my music. I now have a project that can launch the beginning of my career as a musician.

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