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CREATIVITY AND ORGANIC SONGWRITING: A DECONSTRUCTION OF
ORIGINAL SONGS

By
PRAMUK MOHANLAL-VARGAS

A PRODUCTION PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Music in Commercial Music Performance
in the School of Music
of the College of Music and Performing Arts
Belmont University

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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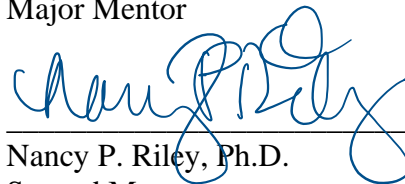
Submitted by Pramuk Mohanlal-Vargas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Commercial Music Performance.

Accepted on behalf of the Graduate Faculty of the School of Music by the Mentoring Committee:

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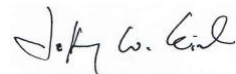


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Contents

Presentation of Material

Introduction.....	1
“Am i?”	7
“Make it to a Paradise”	12
“Wake”	16
“I’ll Say”	20
“Serenade”	24
“Mystery Man”	28
“Hollow Waters”	30
“Black and White”	33
Conclusion	36
References.....	37

Introduction

This paper consists of a deconstruction of original song recordings including the organic methods and creative ideas which led to the end result. Eight recordings are discussed in chronological order and in detail according to the following outline: 1) circumstances which may have influenced the composition or arrangement and production of the work; 2) stylistic and formal information about the composition or arrangement; 3) recording and producing issues and considerations, including any specific techniques or historical production practices; 4) character and meaning of the work; 5) detailed production notes and personnel on each piece and on the entire project; and 6) observations and conclusions. Ideas and songwriting styles of well-known artists who have influenced my writing such as Damien Rice, Hozier, Bon Iver, Passenger, and others are also addressed. The essential musical and ideological components that are mentioned are chromaticism, alternating between fingerstyle and strum guitar, palm muting, dynamics, chord qualities, knowledge and awareness of vocal register and range while songwriting (to capture a mood), timbre, using a capo device for guitar, arranging, and collaboration. These are reoccurring ideas that are used in my personal songwriting, and which serve as foundational tools to build a song organically.

Along with individual and psychological approaches to songwriting, production elements are mentioned, which indicate how the digital world influences the final version of a song. This area relied on collaboration and experimentation while working with an

engineer both inside and outside a studio setting. The essential musical and ideological components which help make the song stand out creatively and organically are included. Production, processing, performance, and arrangement played a key role.

The path of a songwriter is full of discovery and reward. It goes hand in hand with the journey of life in that each individual's story is different based on their situation and circumstance. One example of this comes from Brian Craig's book *Local Dad Rocker: A Memoir of Self-Discovery from Songwriting* which tells a personal story of a singer/songwriter, storyteller, and live music enthusiast opening up about his past, his songs, local music bands, and the balancing act of being a musician while building a career and starting a family. Craig's story reflects the experience of "bouncing back to wholehearted living and cultivating feelings of self-worth and personal development" (2020). Another example of self-discovery and reward through songwriting is presented by Helen Nienhaus Barba in her dissertation *Songwriting and Self-discovery: A Heuristic Study Grounded in the Arts and Supported by the Theories of Carl Jung and James Hillman* in which she states, "As a songwriter, I have experienced these benefits first-hand, though it has taken many years for me to begin to understand the process through which opening to inspiration and engaging in this particular creative act has brought me to a greater psychic wholeness" (2005, 9). These examples also convey that there is a link between maturing as a songwriter and individual human development. Barba mentions, "Songwriting may be the most inherently human and all-encompassing art form we have; inclusive of all communities; fully involving body, mind and spirit; allowing for deep introspection as well as widespread community building" (2005, 109). This also explains why many songwriters experience change and transition in their music through the years;

in many cases, the songs reflect their values or who they are as people. In the case of Sérgio Godinho, a popular Portuguese singer-songwriter, composer, actor, poet and author, subjectivity and self-expression in his music helped to reach people. In the book, *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe: Paradigms, Politics and Place*, the nature of Godinho's writing is addressed in the chapter "Starting Over: Singer-Songwriters and the Rhythm of Historical Time in Post-Revolutionary Portugal" by Luís Trindade. He states, "This entailed . . . a focus on the everyday and a particular sensitivity to social change...by the early 1980s Godinho was able to reassess his work and argue that the reason why his albums seemed less political was because society itself had experienced a process of depolitization" (Trindade 2016, 17).

Creativity and organic songwriting define uniqueness and are the building blocks of artistic self-expression. An example of this is seen in the commercial success of American country music group Trick Pony which was a result of the band's "unique sound and musicianship and not it's look" as mentioned by lead guitarist Keith Burns (Stark 2001, 12). The band formed organically, meeting through mutual friends and various gigs. Their honky-tonk honed sound is "tested, tried and true," drawing heavily from the 1970s sound of outlaw country and country-rock. Unlike many Nashville acts, each member played on their album and have been characterized as affable with an amiable spirit, zealous towards their music and careers, and as not taking themselves too seriously. The three members are Heidi Newfield (lead vocals, acoustic guitar, harmonica), Keith Burns (lead guitar, vocals), and Ira Dean (bass guitar, vocals). Newfield adds that the band had creative control over the project, with the end result being "110% our heart and soul" (Stark 2001). Additionally, authenticity and honesty

poured out in a piece of art is valorized. It is a powerful way in which listeners are able to form oneness with artists and their music. English artist and singer-songwriter Adele's career and the strong connection she creates with listeners around the world illustrates this idea. In J. D. Rockefeller's book *Adele: Best Selling Artist of our Time*, he states the following:

The heart and the passion that she infuses to her own work primarily takes Adele beyond just an excellent pop singer/songwriter. This individuality is the main reason Adele does not even compete with any other star . . . he is the one who has captured the hearts of millions of people all over the world. (Rockefeller 2016)

Adele's artistic and creative success represent the importance of honest and organic songwriting. Another artist who practices authenticity in his writing is the English musician and singer-songwriter, Michael David Rosenberg, better known as Passenger. In an interview with Danny Angove, Passenger talks about the importance of honesty in songwriting, stating "I think that there's a fine line with songwriting. It wants to be honest; it wants to be personal; and it wants to be bespoke to the writer—but at the same time, it also wants to be relatable. It's all about trying to find that magic line" (Angove 2020). Passenger states how his years of busking experience singing acoustic music have influenced him on every level and mentions how living life gives authenticity and meaning to songs. He goes on to state "there's a reason why people love listening to Leonard Cohen and John Prine—they've lived, and you believe them. When they sing something, you're like...I really believe you', you know? I think in this genre it's really important to go out and live a real life before you try to sing about that" (Angove 2020).

Songwriters should stay true to their persona(s) and practice creativity. In his article "64 Reasons To Celebrate Paul McCartney," Ian Leslie mentions one aspect which made McCartney's music creative. He states, "he is more interested in being

multitudinous and multi-vocal than in being himself. He wants to live all the lives, play all the characters, be everyone” (Leslie 2020). However, this can be a tricky route to take to build connection if listeners are looking for authentic identity. Leslie says, “it’s not surprising that in an age when we valorize authentic identity people can find it hard to know quite what to make of him” (Leslie 2020). In addition, creative and organic songwriting is not fundamentally defined by stepping out of the comfort zone and experimenting; it is more so about finding ways to write songs using the methods and tools that are well known to the writer. In the case of Kendra McKinley, DIY singer-songwriter based in California who is making strides into the music business, writing using experimental guitar methods proved to be her most organic songwriting process. McKinley says, “from the beginning, I’d create songs using some strange chord voicing that I’d find (or make up) on the guitar. By discovering different chord shapes without necessarily being aware of what chords were ensured the most organic songwriting process” (Duncan 2013). This led her to experimenting with alternate tunings. McKinley explains, “I was able to find sounds that fit the exact sentiment I was attempting to express rather than using whatever musical devices or vocabulary I had been exposed to” (Duncan 2013). I resonate with McKinley’s organic approach on songwriting since I have also always written songs using experimental guitar methods, discovering different chord shapes and switching between two or more key centers to establish a preferable sound.

There is a benefit to deconstructing the creative building blocks behind original songs. Taking a closer look at the characteristics that shape the original song can reveal favorable and consistent threads of approaching the songwriting process and encourage an alignment with the creative persona. As F. Baker states, “It is not surprising that

creating music within a songwriting process serves to reaffirm or construct identity” (Baker 2016). This production paper unveils the creative and intrinsic nature behind my original songwriting material, examines old ideas and uncovers new ones along the way. The information presented alludes to the value of a songwriter’s individuality, creativity, discovery of their unique voice, and understanding of their personal growth to progress in a way that feels right. Barba suggests in her dissertation about songwriting and self-discovery, “literature on the creative process of songwriting, especially presented from a psychological point of view, is scant” (Barba 2005, 28). Therefore, in sharing my experiences with respect to songwriting and creative methods, this area of literature is expanded.

“Am i?”

In 2018, I took part in a challenge that involved creating any kind of art throughout the month of December. The basis of the challenge was to write songs based on one-word prompts and resulted in sixteen partially-written songs plus a more confident version of myself as a songwriter. Two of the songs that were recorded for this project, “Am i?” and “I’ll Say,” both originated from the challenge. The one-word prompt that was used as a launch pad for “Am i?” was “dashing,” so I aimed to write a song in a fast tempo with a lot of words. This song turned out to be the most creative in terms of pushing the boundaries of my songwriting process by incorporating a total of seven different chords (voicings and inversions), blending genres (Latin rock, ska, and pop-punk), and applying varied types of strumming techniques which emphasize dynamics. It is characterized as a feel-good fast and rhythmically-fun song which was inspired by Maggie Rogers’ freestyle dancing in her “Light On” music video. The lyrics reflect falling in love with someone’s looks while the deeper meaning lies in free-spiritedness. “Am i?” is one of the more unorthodox songs on the project and because of its fast pace, strumming, vocal lines, and chord changes I predicted it to be one of the more challenging songs to record.

In both recording spaces used for this project, Robert E. Mulloy or REM Studios and a Belmont dorm, acoustic guitar was the main instrument that was used to lay the foundation for each song. Having written almost all of my original material on acoustic

guitar, I have experimented with different playing techniques and songwriting methods which have helped me find a creative voice. One of the techniques includes alternating between open and muted strumming and fingerstyle guitar, which was used in the songs: “Am i?,” “Make it to a Paradise,” “Mystery Man,” and “Hollow Waters.” Because I have performed and recorded multiple demos for this song, the sound and arrangement were clear. My vision behind “Am i?” was to put together a four-piece rock and roll band consisting of vocals, bass, and drums with the electric guitar providing the edgy tone, distortion, and vibrato. We started with recording acoustic guitar first, vocals second, electric guitar and drums third (at the same time), and bass last. Some processing was added to my vocals and guitar to help perform the song better and to give me confidence in what I heard back.

Although there were a few roadblocks and imperative procedures we needed to keep in mind, the recording process went smoothly. The factors which made the recording process flow nicely are confidence and preparedness (musically, mentally and emotionally), comfort within the recording space, professionalism and aesthetic of the recording space, communication, friendly collaboration, and overall dedication to achieving objectives. Additionally, clear communication and a good relationship with the tracking engineer both inside and outside the recording studio made a big difference in having a satisfiable final recording. The following paragraphs are a summary of the consecutive steps that were taken for the recording process and will provide closer insight into our approach.

Acoustic guitar and vocals were recorded first. The best recorded takes of both instruments were then compiled into one full recording (this stage is known as

“comping”). Comping had to be done before recording live drums and electric guitar so that the studio musicians could listen to the best performance possible while they record their parts. During the session, Ben Whipple (the audio and tracking engineer for the project) and I gave specific instructions that involved matching the acoustic guitars dynamics and rhythm for each section or Ben would let them know the number of measures they would hear before starting to play.

Once we were in REM’s studio A to record electric guitar and drums, the session appeared to go smoothly and the best recorded takes (as well as options for certain lines in the song) were saved within the digital session. After the session was over, while comping, Ben discovered an issue with the drums sounding out of time with all other instruments because the drummer played loosely to the metronome. He did not notice this issue during the recording session since he was focused on getting a good-sounding recording and paid less attention to the arrangement itself. I didn’t notice it because my focus was more on melodic lines and the overall arrangement, so I paid less attention to compatibility and togetherness of instruments as a whole. Since the drum recording didn’t fit as a whole with the other instruments, we ended up rerecording drums with a different drummer. Luckily, there were no issues with recording bass in Ben’s apartment studio using a direct input. However, there was an issue with the recorded acoustic guitar part sounding unbalanced or closer to the right side of the mix because I either moved off axis before or while playing or the mic got moved, causing the stereo image to not be centered.

After every instrument was recorded, Ben put together the first comped version and sent me the song in full so I could listen to it and make note of any potential edits or

changes as well as think about where vocal harmonies could be added. I chose to rerecord some vocal lines because I felt there was room for more flavor and excitement in the verses and choruses. I also listened to a few acoustic demos I have recorded in the past, paying close attention to vocals, which gave me a good perspective on the way my voice could carry tastefully and energetically throughout the song. We rerecorded lead vocal parts as well as background vocals during the same session in REM studio C, a room designed for overdubbing (a technique used to record new, doubled, or augmented audio tracks over prerecorded tracks). A crucial note we had to keep in mind was that the same microphone which was used during the initial session had to be used to rerecord any new vocal parts.

We used the following gear and techniques for this recording: a Neumann U 87 Ai with a pop filter was setup to record vocals and an SE 440A and SM81 condenser using a mid-side recording technique was setup for acoustic guitar. Ben also added reverb on both vocals and guitar with an additional de-esser and EQ before recording. Two specific techniques were used for recording drums: Blumlein pair technique and spaced pair (wide pattern). A total of thirteen mics were used for live room drums: kick in used a Shure Beta 52a (placed close to the beater for a stronger attack), kick out used a U87 Ai, snare top used a Sm57, snare bottom used a Sennheiser MD 441-U, an electro voice 635a was used as the crotch mic, Sennheiser MD 421 mics were used on toms, the hi-hat used a Sm7b, overhead mics were set up using a spaced pair of U87s centered on the snare, a PZM (omnidirectional) mic for a mono room sound, and two Cascade Fatheads in a Blumlein stereo pair were set for a stereo room sound. For recording electric guitar plugged into an amplifier, two mics were used: Shure Sm57 and Sennheiser e609. Lastly,

bass was recorded using direct input (DI). The SSL (Solid State Logic) studio mixing console was used while recording raw audio tracks and no outboard gear was used since the idea was to leave the song in its raw form so it could be sent to a professional mixing and mastering engineer.

In an interview with Leah Waldo from Berklee College of Music's online program entitled "Building Your Career in Music: Developing a Brand and Funding Your Music," Prince Charles Alexander, professional record producer, audio engineer, and Berklee College of Music professor mentions that the relationship between artist and producer resembles a marriage because the process calls for a constant joining of two forces for however long the project lasts (Alexander 2020). This idea applies to me as the recording artist who is teaming up with Ben, who is the "producer" in this scenario. After listening to the final comped version which included all recorded instruments and vocal harmonies, I knew we were on the right path for the project.

“Make it to a Paradise”

“Make it to a Paradise” is one of the songs on this project that was rewritten and modified to fit my artistic expectations. The lead vocal style and lyrics were inspired by Irish musician Damien Rice and his song “Volcano” and the arrangement was completed during the recording process. Additionally, there are hints of an alternative, folk, and indie-pop sound where each instrument plays an important role. I will expand on these points in the following paragraphs.

This song came to fruition acoustically using vocals and acoustic guitar from one that I pieced together around the start of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. I wanted to rewrite the lyrics and restructure the song because I felt that it was special and knew there was potential for stronger lyricism and phrasing of the vocal line. I also solidified guitar parts using techniques such as fingerpicking and palm muting at the same time while accenting notes.

In 2018, during an interview with Jason Bentley for the Los Angeles-based public radio station KCRW, Damien Rice said, “With music . . . the moment I start thinking I know what it is I’m doing is the moment I start ruining the thing, whereas when I just follow, just sit there and follow, it brings you to a better place than you can bring it” (Rice 2014). Rice expresses that he writes music by following where his improvisation and instincts take him, surrendering himself to full flow. This is a common and shared

psychological method amongst songwriters and has proven to be effective in my writing as well.

The inspiration for lyrics and the guitar strumming heard on the verses in “Make it to a Paradise” was drawn from the song “Volcano” by Damien Rice. Notably, Rice sings with a delicate, slurred, and whispery tone which influenced the way I approached the song vocally, especially in the verses.

The arrangement for “Make it to a Paradise” was fully realized when I brainstormed which instruments could be added alongside acoustic guitar and vocals. Because I had lived with the songs that were recorded for this project long enough, I knew what I wanted for the instrumentation on most of the songs. At times, Ben gave his honest and constructive opinions. For example, he would simply say “this song would work well with background vocals,” “I can definitely hear bass on this song,” or ask me if I wanted electronic drums or live drums for “Make it to a Paradise.” Because he is also an experienced songwriter and producer, it was helpful to listen to his thoughts and questions for each song. He made space for my artistic leadership and followed the vision for the songs I felt confident with in terms of instrumentation and arrangements. The plan for “Make it to a Paradise” was to record the same instruments used for recording “Am i?” which included acoustic guitar, vocals, electric guitar, bass, drums, and background vocals. As was the case for the first song, because an acoustic drum set was a part of the arrangement and REM’s studio A would be in high demand in the coming weeks, Ben booked studio time and we tackled this song as soon as we could.

Stylistically, a mix of indie-pop sounds, folk, and alternative music is formed alongside this live acoustic interpretation. The tempo is 100 BPM (beats per minute) and

the key is D major, which blends well with the use of major and minor chords hinting a sentiment of mixed emotions. The bass guitar starts outlining the root of every chord after the ten-second acoustic guitar introduction and the drum fill, which picks up the second half of the twenty-nine second introduction. Rhythmically, the acoustic guitar laid the foundation for the drums. Solely through adding background vocals, more sound was created as well as intensity, drama, emotion, and energy. These help to uplift the chorus. The electric guitar effects were set using a helix pedalboard with large amounts of delay and reverb, specifically a chamber and cave reverb to create the atmospheric sound or sci-fi ambience.

Recording issues mainly involved setbacks regarding the drum recording. Rerecording had to be done due to the following reasons: 1) the initial drummer was playing very loosely to the metronome, 2) the vision was not captured correctly during the second drum session (I was not present, and Ben did not have sufficient information to dictate my ideas to the drummer) and 3) the beat for the intro, turnaround and outro did not work well for live drums. This made sense because I tried to have the drummer replicate a beat that I made using a loop pedal with acoustic guitar, beatboxing, and a tempo delay effect which proved unplayable by a live drummer.

Both “Am i?” and “Make it to a Paradise” used the same equipment to record instruments and both songs were recorded in the same respective studio space. A Neumann U87 Ai condenser microphone was used to record vocals while acoustic guitar was recorded in a mid-side technique using a SM81 as the center mic, and a sE 4400a mic in bi-directional mode for capturing sound left and right with one side phase shifted opposite from the other.

The character of this work is hopeful, yearning, melancholic, and majestic. Production elements revolved around making sure all instruments played an important role. The melodic guitar lines were crucial in expressing creativity, tonal quality and aesthetic which help illustrate the idea of getting lost in thought and dreaming of nirvana. The guitars (acoustic and electric) captured the motif, the drums added the backbone of the song, and the bass created a fuller and thicker overall sound. For the vocal line, I wanted to capture a laidback and longing emotion that would be as believable as possible while focusing on tone and pitch. The background vocals in the choruses added depth and perspective as well as filled some of the space which had potential for additional parts. Overall, each instrument and effect used had a purpose whether it was simply musical, added to the meaning or supported the lyricism.

“Wake”

“Wake” is a melodically-infused and acoustically fluid song using atypical chord voicings and a linear yet gradual approach in the arrangement and overall composition. Lyrically, I leaned towards descriptive storytelling, emotive phrases, and an expression of strong feelings towards a subject. The following paragraphs describe the shift in recording studios, musical characteristics of the song, songwriting methods and ideas, approach on the arrangement of the song, production notes and issues, as well as the character and meaning of the work.

At this point in the project, songs which had utilized live drums were recorded and scheduling studio time in REM Studio A to use the live room, drum set, and audio equipment was not an issue. There were still some opportunities to book this space, but Ben and I did not want to be restricted (during planning and progressing with the project) by a space we relied on but might not have access to down the line. Because the rest of the songs on the project all mainly included recording acoustic guitar and vocals, the process moving forward was simple enough to record in Ben’s room with the equipment he owns.

I will elaborate on key songwriting, technical and musical elements that shaped the song. Staying true to my personal artistic style, I create a clear correlation between the acoustic guitar and vocal melody. The acoustic guitar is played through fingerstyle

patterns for the entire song except before the turnaround and at the end of the song where the same two chords are strummed using down strokes. I use a capo on the first fret of my acoustic guitar allowing me to play the particular chord voicing in a chosen key, which in this case was F minor. This is a crucial component when I write songs using acoustic guitar—the key should create the sound I want and suit my vocal range appropriately. Vocally, the majority of the notes which are sung are in a mid to high tenor register (heard in the verses and choruses) of A-flat3 to A-flat4 and falsetto is used in the choruses as well as the bridge section with an ascending and descending minor scale: F, G, A-flat, B-flat, A-flat. The lyrics are sung using a smooth, delicate, and breathy tone which helps to carry emotion and add meaningfulness.

Initially, the music and lyrics for each of the songs on the project were written solely by me, having no collaboration whatsoever. Depending on the song that was being recorded, the accompaniment was either already decided (in the years prior to when the project was started) or planned out during the project's timeline. Because this song was relatively new, there was room for additional parts to create a fuller song. The first arranged part that we recorded consisted of high-pitched guitar parts and single lines to add texture to repetitive phrases which sounded bland and had space for accompaniment. Vocal harmonies and background vocals came next which were added to specific parts of each vocal section.

In terms of production, Ben added some layered winds during the intro with cricket noises sampled from Splice. A few different synth pads were also layered to add depth to the mix. During the bridge and final chorus, background vocals (singing “ooo”) were added to bring home the section. Ben also added an upright bass patch in the final

chorus with timpani rolls as and bass drum hits to make the section more climactic. The effects, timpani rolls, and drum hits were all samples from Splice and the patches were stock Logic midi plugins.

Issues during the recording process included having to re-record guitar parts because there was buzzing or errors which were unfit to keep for a final version. More session time was used (with respect to other recording days) to solidify technical guitar parts for “Wake.” The acoustic guitar and vocal parts were all recorded in Ben’s room using a Neuman TLM 102 microphone and a pop filter for the vocal. Acoustic guitar was recorded first and typically set the microphone centered around the twelfth to fifteenth fret. Vocals were always recorded after the acoustic guitar part was in time with the metronome, structured correctly, and minimal to no playing errors. I was positioned at approximately a spread-hand’s distance from the microphone when recording vocals (not too close and not too far). At times, I followed Ben’s guidance and sang with my head facing towards the side of the mic or moved farther back and sang towards the front of the microphone to better capture the room sound. A UAD Volt 476 interface with vintage preamp mode on was used to power the microphone.

As for processing, Ben would generally apply his standard set of processing tools that he uses during recording sessions. However, some of these tools could have changed based on the song being recorded. Acoustic guitar included the following processing: Logic Pro X stock EQ with a high pass filter on, ending at the 150 Hertz (Hz) range, then a wide attenuation around the 200-300 Hz range to make room for my vocal fundamentals. Additionally, a bus send to a reverb was added (the same one used for the vocal). For vocals the following processing was used: Logic stock EQ with a high pass

filter on, ending at the 150 Hz range, as well as a little attenuation around 8k-10k in a lot of the songs that use a very airy tone because it can be a bit too airy at times. A Waves De-esser was added. A CLA-2A compressor emulation was set to keep the vocals sitting at a good level in the mix. Regarding Logic Stock EQ, some type of additive EQ-ing was done. A little bit of air was generally added back in above 10k as well as maybe including some of the fundamental vocal tone in around 200-300 Hz. A Drawmer S73 master processor with vocal enhance on was also set. This generally brightens the vocals and makes them cut through the mix better (comparable to the commonly-used fresh air plugin). Finally, a bus send to a reverb was added, generally the TSAR-1R Reverb. This processing was only used to help me perform the song better and feel confident in what I heard being played back. It was ignored during the mixing and mastering stage.

A calm, melodious, and seamless aesthetic reflects the nature of “Wake.” The guitar and vocal melodies that play together, ambient effects, and nature sounds all contribute to the song’s character. The build—signaled through the effects, timpani rolls, and drum hits, especially for the last two choruses—creates dynamic contrast and dramatizes the song altogether. In its basic embodiment, the song is a mellow ballad illustrating strong sentiments and a request for a latching of faith to a person or thing.

I'll Say"

"I'll Say" dawned from the 2018 songwriting challenge and is my favorite work among the sixteen that were partially written. The song incorporates folk elements of fingerstyle acoustic guitar with added embellishments, melodic writing, a meticulously arranged instrumental accompaniment, descending and ascending chord patterns, poetic lyricism, and catchy intervals. Inspired by the acoustic writing of artists such as Ed Sheeran and Hozier, the song is acoustic-based and includes harmonies along with a cello arrangement which added emotional depth and textural color. The following paragraphs will allude to the background of the work, inspiration behind it, methods and songwriting styles of Ed Sheeran and Hozier, notes on collaboration, stylistic and musical components, character and meaning of the work, minimal issues during the recording process, and observations.

I remember sitting in my mom's old grey office chair in my basement practice room itching to write a song incorporating a pure acoustic singer-songwriter style using fingerstyle guitar like in Ed Sheeran's song "One," which uses these types of minimalist characteristics. Sheeran's artistic image can be characterized as "warm, authentic, down-to-earth, charming, romantic and funny" (Findeisen 2017). His use of the root note, the third (both relative to the key center), and many if not all notes of the major scale are inherent traits in his writing. He also makes an impact on the vocal melody by doubling it an octave above during studio recording, helping the melody cut through to form the

“high point of the song” (Findeisen 2017). This idea can be heard in songs he wrote collaboratively like “Love Yourself” which was ranked by *Billboard* magazine at number thirty-four on their “100 Best Pop Songs of 2016” list and “Shape of You” which was the biggest-selling single around the world in 2017.

Lyrically, “I’ll Say” was written based on the one-word prompt “vein” and influenced by the Irish artist Hozier’s poetic and obscure lyricism. For example, the phrase “red river blue and an ocean of white” and “close in on me like a vein to the leaf” in the first verse have a kind of poetic obscurity and the pre-choruses demonstrate the use of alliteration with the phrase: “likely and lovingly will your love be laid.”

Having previously recorded and released this song, the accompaniment and production were well thought out. I collaborated with Christian Alfonso (who sings and plays the guitalele) and cellist Kaleigh Hanson (who also sings and was the female vocalist for the recorded duet) while living in Maryland. Both Christian and Kaleigh provided accompanying parts on the track I released in August 2021. Although there is no guitalele accompaniment or harmonic and ad lib vocal ideas on the recording for this project, Christian wrote these parts which gave a lovely touch to the song. It was clear to me that the song could have some kind of backing drone or instrumental accompaniment to create a greater dynamic atmosphere which is the reason why a cello part was arranged and added.

The song features indie-folk, alternative, and punk elements. The acoustic guitar and cello intro capture the folk and alternative styles while the vocals reveal an indie and punk sound through note duration, intervals, and vowel sounds. Written in the key of G, the song revolves around the relative minor for the majority of the song until hitting the

home chord at the very end. Shifting along the acoustic guitar's fretboard is a big part of the flow of the song, aligning the overall structure. The descending movement of chords along with the melodic detail are implemented through consistent fingerstyle patterns adding some extra high E and B string notes. The chord progression for the pre-chorus and bridge then ascend, signaling the start of a new section. The dynamic in the cello plays an important role in conveying emotion, using legato playing and gradual crescendos. In the vocal, there is a soft airiness and falsetto in the choruses which contribute to the sentiment expressed in the lyrics.

"I'll Say" is an introspective ballad with intimate vocal lines accompanied by melodic and fluid guitar and cello accompaniment. Along with a new age folk sound, there is warmth, smoothness, and a meditative element. The song depicts an aftermath state of feeling like one could have said something differently or said more to somebody, particularly a significant other.

There were very minimal issues during the recording process. This was due to how comfortable I have gotten with this song and my adoration for it. The comping session gave clear insight into which guitar and vocal parts needed to be addressed and there were parts which were rerecorded to reach a satisfiable end result. Caleb Yang's cello playing stands out and graciously moves the piece along, as was the intention. The pre-production process involved updating the written accompaniment and putting together reference material so that Caleb could get a strong idea of what I wanted him to play. We recorded cello in REM's studio A live room with an AKG C12 VR tube mic to capture room sound, spaced pair of U87's to capture wide stereo image, another U87

(close mic), and an sE VR2 (close mic). For processing, Ben used his standard set of Logic tools before recording acoustic guitar and vocals.

It was interesting to experience recording this song in a different setting and to realize the differences when comparing the recording processes in Baltimore to the one in Nashville. One of the main differences involved the comping process which I was not a part of for the Baltimore recording but was very much a part of for this project. I also did not have my original collaborators with me, so I made all the decisions regarding the accompaniment and takes used for the final version.

“Serenade”

Two years ago, during the end of April, I had been listening to an all-originals album by English singer-songwriter Michael David Rosenberg, better known by his stage name Passenger. His song “Sword from the Stone” on the album *Songs for the Drunk and Broken Hearted* (January 8, 2021) was a key influence on the acoustic guitar composition for “Serenade.” I had watched the live performance on YouTube of him performing the song acoustically with only his voice and guitar while he had a fireplace behind him and an aesthetically-pleasing living room as the background. The fingerstyle and high-pitched guitar meshed soothingly well, and I wanted to have a song that did that. It was a similar case as what led me to write “I’ll Say” in that there was a strong desire to write a melodic acoustic guitar song in a pure singer-songwriter style.

Overall, “Serenade” worked well with vocals and acoustic guitar alone; however, during the production process I had accompaniment ideas involving the use of an instrumental backing drone that could provide more musical interest and richness leading into the chorus. Following this idea, the arrangement includes a string accompaniment which builds into a full orchestra for the final two choruses. I worked with Gabriel Kazz, a producer from Barcelona who reached out to me via Instagram, and we ended up collaborating on the production of the song. Through the time we spent working together, the production and complete arrangement for the song had been brainstormed and included background vocals, piano and strings. Although these production elements

worked well, the recording for this project does not include every detail of the arrangement I worked out with Gabriel, simply due to a time constraint. However, a new idea was added to the introduction to create even more authenticity and “live” feel: eleven seconds of literal movement on a wooden stool (producing a live creaking sound as if I had just sat down) and fiddling of acoustic guitar strings with subtle rain in the background. All parts of the original string accompaniment were recorded by a single cellist (Caleb Yang) which meant we had to apply the use of multi-tracking in which each string part was recorded separately and then placed into a single recording. We also worked with violinist Kay Dietrick who maneuvered the violin section swiftly, adding higher harmony. There were some decisions Kay and I made in terms of which note would suit lines in the final two choruses because we discovered there was room for additional harmony.

The overall nature of the song demonstrates a mellow acoustic, folk, and singer-songwriter style. It could be compared to Hozier’s solo acoustic guitar writing heard on songs like “Cherry Wine” and “Like Real People Do.” The lead vocal’s falsetto, first heard in the opening lines of the chorus, is a high point in the song. Overall, the vocals present a warm, soft, and breathy tone adding to the tranquil nature of the work.

Using a capo when songwriting with acoustic guitar allows me to experiment ideas in different keys while listening for which key sounds the most appealing and unique. The key of the song is E-flat major and was recorded with a click at a tempo of 154 BPM. The string section mainly consists of whole notes that are tied together and played in a mezzo-piano dynamic using legato. At the start of the second chorus, the rhythm in the cello begins to subdivide where accented quarter notes are first played on

every beat, followed by two accented quarter notes, an eighth rest, an accented eighth note, and a quarter rest. More than ten individual string parts can be heard during the climax (third chorus) of the song.

The biggest challenge was recording the string accompaniment of cello and violin because there were numerous parts, requiring multi-tracking. The plan of attack was to start with the simple parts first and the heftier sections later. Pre-choruses and chorus one were recorded first, every string part written for the final measures of the song (mm. 133-137) was recorded second and the final two choruses starting from the topmost line of the chorus two were recorded last.

There were moments where Ben, Caleb, Kay, and I were lost and had to retrace and reorganize the session. I realized during and after recording string parts that it would have helped to make a list of checkboxes to help with keeping track of each recorded part. There was also a redundancy in relying too much on the demo while re-recording acoustic guitar and vocals—this made the recording and comping stage take longer than usual and it should have been a matter of listening to the nature of the recordings themselves to determine a strong enough performance instead of a perfect one.

The cello was recorded using a C12 VR room mic and a U87 (close mic) not adding the VR2 that was used for “I’ll Say” and “Mystery Man” because the warm sound captured by the U87 was enough. Violin was recorded using the following microphones: a KM84 (close mic), a sE4400a (close mic), and a C12 VR (room mic).

As the title suggests, “Serenade” is a serene, smooth, mellow, and lullaby-like ballad encapsulating a captivated state in which strong feelings are revealed for someone. The introduction using a fingerstyle melody and hammer-ons in the acoustic guitar sets

the mood for easy-listening and a peaceful state of mind. The storytelling nature of the lyrics give a personal touch and meaning to the song in phrases like “sitting on your greenery singing out the words that you believe” (verse 2).

“Mystery Man”

This song hits close to home as it was written at a time when I had trouble coping with my personality and social life. As an undergraduate, I had some difficulty in newer social settings and molding into a friend group. Many sides of my character did not fit well with a particular group which left me agitated and caused me to question myself. A sense of dissociation led me to write “Mystery Man.” The guitar melody at the intro was taken from a short clip of me playing the motif recorded on my laptop’s video camera in early 2018. I wrote the cello accompaniment three years ago while brainstorming the production to add color, fluidity, and texture. The following paragraphs will elaborate on musical and compositional elements, character and meaning of the work, the minimal equipment that was used, and observations during the recording process.

The character of the work is elegant, mysterious, and the musical components resemble a stream-like mystique heard in songs like “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” and “Dear Prudence,” both written by The Beatles. The song reflects on coping with individuality and feelings related to dissociation as well as focuses on the importance of knowing that even though one may feel like they do not fit in (or do enough to fit in) and the judgement they get from others echoes in their head, they should not let that stop them from being themselves. Additionally, a humanistic ideology of constant searching, discovery, learning, self-confidence, and growth is a part of the song’s meaning.

The song was written in the key of F-sharp and recorded using a metronome at 138 BPM. The descending chromaticism in the guitar melody creates a mysterious mood and is supported by the up and down motion of the intervals being played by the cello in the instrumental section after the first chorus. The bridge section is a turning point in the song, strengthening the dynamic by switching to strumming muted bar chords in the guitar along with shorter and added notes in the cello, maintaining flow in the structure. The relative minor key is emphasized at the final chorus where instead of fingerstyle guitar, open strumming is used and a Picardy third plays at the final cadence.

There were no issues that arose during the recording process mainly due to the level of preparedness from me, Ben, and Caleb. Acoustic guitar and vocals were recorded in Ben's apartment studio and cello was recorded in REM Studio A's live room on the same session day as "I'll Say" and "Serenade." The mic setup for "Mystery Man" was the same as the one for "I'll Say" which included a C12 VR tube mic (to capture room sound), a spaced pair of U87s (to capture wide stereo image), a U87 (close mic), and a sE VR2 (close mic).

Some observations during the recording process include being aware of dynamics and making sure gain staging (setting the levels to adjust to the loudest parts in the song) is done right before pressing record. Also, critical listening and paying attention to the position of the vocal in soft and loud parts of the song is important in making sure there is nothing off axis and unfit for the mix.

“Hollow Waters”

“Hollow Waters” is a dynamic work which demonstrates a noticeable shift between fingerstyle and strum guitar techniques (similar to “Make it to a Paradise”) and incorporates emotional lyricism and vocal delivery along with vivid storytelling. The vocal style and lyrics depict a conflicted and troubled state of mind where the individual is attempting to salvage a relationship which turned dismissive and disconnected. Lyrically, there is no closure as to whether the relationship is restored or not. The song was written in 2020 while taking part in a songwriting workshop. I will explain its background, compositional elements, the recording process, observations, and recording equipment in the paragraphs that follow.

In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, I took advantage of virtual opportunities for collaborating and participating in songwriting workshops hosted by a networking company for college creatives called Quadio. “Hollow Waters” is one of the songs that was written while participating in the workshop that took place in the fall. The songwriting prompt for the week was “write a song from the point of view of your phone,” so the theme of disconnection where one person in a relationship tries to keep it from falling apart came to mind. Influences included Elliott Smith’s writing which uses constant shifting of chord progressions and the song “Iris” by the Goo Goo Dolls which uses suspended chords for emotional effect as well as a powerful bridge section. Noah Henderson, a songwriter, artist, and producer based in L.A. who also participated in the

Quadio workshop, added effects and additional vocal arrangements to the demo recording. I ended up adding a part of his vocal arrangement to the recording for this project due to a time constraint. During the recording process, a new backing vocal was added to the bridge of the song.

The song is in the key of B major and never settles on the I chord which tends to be used as a passing chord. The vi (which starts the song) and IV (which ends the song) shape the tonal center. The acoustic guitar was recorded using a capo on the fourth fret. A mixture of fingerstyle and strumming were added to create dynamics and a build which starts at the pre-chorus leading into the chorus. The intro melody is repeated after the first chorus, highlighting its role as the motif of the song. The arrangement heard in the recording is solely acoustic guitar and vocals with added background vocals.

The recording process was simple enough since it only included tracking acoustic guitar first and then vocals. At this point in the project, I was used to the recording space and knew how to adjust properly to perform well. Attention to detail in the fingerstyle guitar melody was important during the recording process to fulfill artistic choices. I have come to realize that there are psychological factors that play into a recording session like worrying about the difficulty of a part or playing the right note, dynamics and phrasing of a certain section or even the amount of time spent redoing a part, starting the recording, stopping, and starting it again. It is important to keep a clear and focused mindset, trying not to complicate things and allow the body (in this case, muscle memory) and instrument to do the work. It also helps to be certain about the specifics of a vocal line—what pitch is being sung, the exact notes in a riff, how loud or soft the vocal should be, the balance in volume, and interaction or chemistry with the instrumental. The most

challenging aspect of recording was playing the correct order of notes on acoustic guitar and connecting each phrase cleanly. In terms of recording equipment, a Neuman TLM 102 mic with a pop filter powered through a UAD Volt 476 with vintage preamp mode on was used. We did not come across recording or production issues for this song.

“Black and White”

“Black and White” exemplifies writing in a minimalistic style and caters to a chest-dominant vocal performance. The abstruse lyricism and speech-like vocal style were inspired by the American indie-folk band Bon Iver and the fingerstyle rhythm heard on acoustic guitar is similar to that of “Mystery Man.” “Black and White” conveys sorrow, acceptance, hope, and desire. The use of suspended and added guitar chords such as sus4’s and add9’s create a somber tone while the mid to high vocal lines create emotional conviction. There is no particular meaning to the song but rather, it is more of a statement about fantasizing a desired experience. Indie-folk, acoustic, and commercial elements are heard. I will include the background, Bon Iver’s songwriting style that served as an influence, individual songwriting methods, musical characteristics, issues during the recording process, recording equipment used, and observations in the following paragraphs.

This tune was created as another part of my 2018 songwriting challenge. The assigned one-word prompt was the word, Zebra, and I thought of black and white stripes. Initially, the song was about hardship and abuse in a relationship. However, I stumbled across a similar case with “Black and White” as I did with “Make it to a Paradise,” which involved rewriting lyrics and restructuring the song. I was not happy with the lyricism and vocal melody and I knew there was potential for a smoother structure (outlined by acoustic guitar). The lyrics and most of the vocal parts were rewritten along with some

of the guitar accompaniment since it needed to match the new vocal melody. The lyrics in verse one were influenced by the writing of Justin Vernon, the frontman for the band Bon Iver. Interestingly, Vernon does not focus on good diction and grammar is almost meaningless in his writing, instead focusing mainly on words and cadence. In an interview, Vernon states that his style comes from “allowing the words and the sounds to dictate where [he’s] headed” (American Songwriter).

The song uses a capo on the first fret of the acoustic guitar and is played in the key of B-flat. A minimalist and melodic fingerstyle pattern is incorporated along with single downstroke strums on the last two chords of the first and last chorus. The vocals are predominantly breathy and use the chest register for the entire song except for when a high falsetto B-flat is added in the last chorus. Each section resembles the same fingerstyle pattern and gives the song an overall congruency.

“Black and White” was rerecorded because I initially used a pick to play the guitar parts which did not work as well for a studio recording due to the attack and excessive presence. Ben first heard this while listening to recorded guitar takes during the comp session and mentioned the idea of rerecording without the use of a pick for acoustic guitar. I thought about whether or not I should use a pick before the first recording session and unfortunately made the wrong decision for the song. Additionally, the idea for the vocal in the intro was to record overdubs to sustain the line longer than I naturally could. This ended up sounding strange and unfit to keep for a final version, so a new vocal was recorded demonstrating a natural approach. There were also words with open vowels—“high,” “I,” and “take”—in the last two choruses where I tended to sing louder so Ben needed to adjust the gain so that there would not be any clipping in the vocal. The

recording equipment (a Neuman TLM 102, a pop filter, and a UAD Volt 476) and Logic Pro presets used to record acoustic guitar and vocals on previously recorded songs remained the same.

Preparedness especially for technical guitar parts was crucial. Vocals were, for the most part, straightforward except for songs which made stronger artistic decisions and to a degree, were modified by either comping a different take or re-recording the part. Not all parts of the arrangements were recorded for many of the final recordings due to a time constraint.

Conclusion

This production paper has provided a detailed point of view of my experience with recording eight original songs in a studio setting and provides personal songwriting ideas and descriptions of recorded material based on circumstances which may have influenced the composition or arrangement and production of the work, stylistic and formal information about the composition or arrangement, recording and producing issues and considerations, specific techniques or historical production practices, character and meaning of each work, detailed production notes and personnel on each piece, observations, and final thoughts. As a conclusion for the overall experience of recording an eight-song project, I will summarize the most important aspects that can make or break a recording project. These are as follows: the experience of the production team regarding their roles (includes every active member who played a role for the project), the relationship between active participants, effectiveness of the space in providing enough comfort and acoustics to capture good sound, quality of instruments that are used, audio tools, mental headspace, confidence, having a vision for the song (which helps to smoothen the process and allows for expansion or alteration of existing ideas and can make an impactful difference), preparedness of musicians, and creativity in approach. Playing and recording music is a blessing and sharing this experience with others is a gift.

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