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An Experiment of Modern Music: An Application of the Modern Production and Distribution of Independent Music

Jesse W. Klapheke
jesse_klapheke2@mymail.eku.edu

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Eastern Kentucky University

An Experiment of Modern Music:

An Application of the Modern Production and Distribution of Independent Music

Honors Thesis

Submitted

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By

Jesse Klapheke

Faculty Mentor

Dr. Joseph Carucci

Associate Chair / Director of Music Industry Studies

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Jesse Klapheke

Dr. Joseph Carucci Associate Chair / Director of Music Industry Studies

The music industry is not what it once was. Currently, there is a much larger burden for the independent artist to bear in regards to producing and marketing their own music, and for many this seems like a mountain too tall to climb. With this thesis, I set out to measure the effectiveness of today's music production and distribution methods and tools by recording a full length audio recording, documenting its inception, production, and distribution by utilizing 21st century 'do-it-yourself' home recording equipment and distribution services, the product of which being the album '50,000'.

The metrics by which the success of these tools and this project as a whole were measured by were the number of streams across all platforms and the general attention the album received whether from peers or others. The album was released on Spotify and Apple Music on March 15th, 2019 and data collected in late April, so there is just over a month of data to use and even with such a short period of time, the results are very exciting. With over 8,000 streams across Spotify, Apple Music, and Soundcloud and after being reached out to by seven music management groups, including Warner Music and Universal Music, I can say this project has so far been a great success.

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Acknowledgements

We are only as great as those we surround ourselves with, and I have had the privilege of being around a group of amazing mentors, academics, and artists. First and foremost, I want to thank my thesis mentor, Dr. Joe Carucci, for guiding me through this process, while also giving me the space and independence that one needs to create. From my freshman year, Dr. Carucci has always had my best interest at heart and has presented me with opportunities that sparked my initial interest in the music business.

I would like to thank my fellow ECU Honors students who have been along with me through the journey that has been the last 3 years. It was in my freshman year honors seminar class that I first proposed the idea of creating an album for my thesis, and I received so much love and support from my fellow students that I never once doubted my decision. Thank you all.

I would also like to specifically thank some of my lifelong friends that have seen the development of my music from its beginning. Conner Hutchison, Ross Smith, Zane Couch, and myself all attended high school together at Harrison County High School and have all supported each other in our various endeavors, and their support for my music has been nothing short of excessive. Conner and Zane are students here at ECU while Ross attends Georgetown College.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank the amazing artists and now friends I have had the pleasure of surrounding myself with during my time here at ECU. Recognized or not, this campus has world class musicians and writers and poets and

actors and it has been the students themselves who have recognized this and have fought tooth and nail for a place for these artists to call home. I have never seen such an open, loving community that cares so fiercely for one another and it has been an enormous inspiration to me as both an artist and a human.

Review of Literature

While this thesis is primarily concerned with the creative process and the results of it, it is also partly scholarly in nature and thus requires a recognition of other scholarly works in the discipline. The articles were mainly focused on gaining a technical understanding of various aspects of the recording process, such as using mixers or how alter sound within a mix to achieve a desired sound.

One of the most helpful articles was “Demystifying Mixers” by Douglass Earl Thompson. This article focuses on the inner workings and utilization of the “mixer” in music production. The audio mixer is a production tool that allows the listener to “combine different electronic sound sources for amplification, recording, or both.” (Thompson 2012). What this means for the producer/listener is that they can listen to multiple sounds or instruments at the same time and manipulate the volume, “pan” (whether the sound is coming from the left, right, or center), and a number of other aspects of each sound in order to reach the desired product.

The main takeaway from this piece was a series of tips given by Thompson in regards to equalization. The tips are as follows: if the voice or sound is “boomy” then you

decrease low frequencies, if the sound is “thin” then you should increase the midrange frequencies, if the sound is “shrill” then you decrease the high frequencies, and if the sound is “muddy” then you decrease the midrange frequencies. These are very direct and applicable tips and nearly all of my production was based around it.

"A Creative Industry in Transition: The Rise of Digitally Driven Independent Music Production" by Brian Hrats skillfully explains the context of modern independent music. This article was a commentary on the drastic changes that the music industry has gone through since the 1980's, mainly due to the widespread use of the mp3 file. Because of music being streamed and not bought, the major music labels lost a great deal of their income and were forced to drop their artists who were not making them significant amounts of money. Lesser known artists were not lucrative enough for the industry to invest in. This created a large pool of independent artists that now had no help from labels in regards to funds, marketing, or production so their success was entirely dependent on their personal entrepreneurial approach.

The article also discusses the major geographic areas for independent music and how artists managed to get attention in lieu of help from record labels. This piece is very helpful in developing an understanding of the history and recent trends of the music industry, so that I could understand what to expect from my album in terms of quality and audience. It also helped me realize the importance of using a distributor like CD Baby, which is the service that I used, because as connected as the internet has made us, it is still very difficult to get your music in front of the right people.

There were a number of other articles with topics ranging from film scoring to music education to working with digital audio workstations (DAWs) and it was all very helpful and I have already highlighted the most pertinent of these.

Alongside this scholarly background, there were other sources of influence for the academic side of this thesis, the most so being “The Saturation Documentary” by music group Brockhampton. Brockhampton is a self-proclaimed boy band that hails from Los Angeles. They contain a number of members including rappers, singers, producers, and photographers, among other things. Over the past four years or so they have been growing in popularity being led by their most famous member, Kevin Abstract. The group had a breakout year in 2017 when they released three albums in one year, titled “Saturation I”, “Saturation II”, and “Saturation III” or better known as the Saturation Trilogy. Along with these exceptional albums, they released a documentary they had made over the span of the year, simply called the “Saturation Documentary”. This documentary showed everything behind the music—the house that they all lived in together, recording and writing sessions, funny, intimate moments—it showed their personality as a group.

Along with showing their personalities, it walked the viewer through the different phases of production of the albums. There was one scene in particular where one of the members/artists/producers, Joba, was detailing his struggles with mixing and mastering one of the albums and he explained in detail what it was he was having to do, which was a strenuous ordeal. They not only produced three quality albums, they documented and showed their methodology which is exactly what I intend to do with this thesis, so needless to say, the documentary was a great inspiration.

Artistic Inspiration

No art exists that is completely uninfluenced. Artists recognize things in other's work that moves or impresses them in some way and then transfer it, whether consciously or unconsciously, to their own work. My music is no exception. I have had the privilege of listening to a number of amazing artists through Spotify and Soundcloud in recent years, as well as through growing up with parents who have a diverse taste in music. My musical voice has certainly been influenced by many great musicians and I am proud to list and discuss the influences that went into the creation of '50,000'.

Many of the artists that I listen to a great deal started as independent artists who recorded their own music, often in their bedrooms. This "bedroom pop" genre is something I love because it is raw and intimate and every artist sounds unique.

One such artists that has had a huge effect on me as a musician is Rex Orange County. Born Alexander O'Connor, Rex is an artist who began his musical journey in England. He released his first album in 2016 titled "bcos u will never b free", independent from a record label. This album mainly consists of piano, synthesizer, guitar, and vocals as the core sound content, which are the same core that make up my album. Thematically, his lyrics center around lost love and a general jaded attitude toward a central muse, which is also similar to my songwriting. Specifically, I found a lot of inspiration for my music in his use of jazz chords, which can be heard in several of my songs, including "Pool Side" and "Moon".

Another bedroom pop artist that influenced the sound of my music is Zack Villere. Villere is an artist from the New Orleans area whose sound is experimental in nature, but

also reflective of his surroundings via his neo-soul elements. He also released his first album “Little World” independent of a record label in 2017 and is now performing in venues in Los Angeles and New York. The aspects of his sound that I admire most are his intimate, vulnerable lyrics and his ability to construct a unique, ambient soundscape.

While I did not employ the latter of these two aspects into my music, I did write lyrics that are very specific to actual events that have occurred in my life. His lyrics give the listener the impression that he is recalling a dream or a memory. This is a technique I enjoy and have tried to transfer to my music. I also took much inspiration from his neo-soul and rhythm and blues approach, elements of which can be found in my album.

‘50,000’ could be classified in the general alternative genre, or specifically, alternative rock in certain songs. This was in a large part due to another favorite artist of mine, Roy Blair. Blair is a Los Angeles based artist who produced his debut album “Cat Heaven”, which was released in 2017. “Cat Heaven” was produced independent of a record label, but with the notable help of Romil Hemnani who is a member of the aforementioned Brockhampton. Blair describes the album as “forever coming of age”. The content he writes about in the album contains many things that are considered part of a coming of age story; love, death, anger, and moving on among other things. I found great inspiration in both the content and sound of this body of work. His heavy dependence on the electric guitar is something that is clearly evident in my music as well. He has a great ability to sing in an effortless manner that almost resembles spoken word, while still carrying a melody. This was another technique I attempted to employ in my album.

The last artistic inspiration I would like to discuss is very far from a bedroom artist, but their influence on my music is too significant to not mention. Frank Ocean is a rap

artist with two platinum albums, “Channel Orange” and “Blond”. Ocean grew up in New Orleans, where he lived until he was 20 when he relocated to Los Angeles. He intended to stay for six weeks but ended up staying for much longer and starting his music career.

Ocean’s most recent and most popular album is “Blond”, released in 2016. It is highly regarded in the popular music community, but did not win any awards as Ocean refused to allow the album to be nominated for them. It is a beautiful body of work that is centered around Ocean’s once-in-a-generation voice and has an experimental but controlled sound that is most easily described as good music. Ocean’s songwriting is centered around intense emotion and storytelling that engages the listener and this is also a technique that I attempted to apply to the songwriting in ‘50,000’. Ocean of course had an enormous amount of resources to record this album, but I still tried to replicate some of his sound via the use of similar chord progressions and the use of variations of chords that are more open, like using major seven chords instead of the regular major.

Methods of Production

While the writing of the songs was no easy task, it was by no means the hardest part of this project. The most difficult part of creating this album was, by far, the actual recording and production of it, and this was due to several factors. Firstly, I used low-quality equipment in comparison to the equipment that is available to studio musicians. Also, and most importantly, this was my first endeavor into recording by myself so I was essentially going in blind and had to teach myself how to mix and master everything based on what sounded good to me, which was not an easy process.

There were four main aspects of my production for this album, which include equipment, songwriting, recording, and mixing and mastering. The equipment I used was very basic and came at minimal cost to me. This included a Squire Bullet Telecaster guitar, an MXL V250 Large Diaphragm Condenser Microphone, Tascam TH-200X studio headphones, and a Focusrite Scarlett Solo USB Audio Interface.

The Squire Bullet Telecaster is a low-end guitar made by a sublet of Fender, one of the largest guitar manufacturers in the world. It has a full fretboard, a volume knob, a tone knob, and telecaster pickups with three way switching. This cost efficient guitar was used to record every electric guitar track on the album. Various apps and plugins were used to make it sound different in every song.

Choosing the right microphone is an extremely important part of crafting a personalized sound. Since tracks can only be edited to a certain extent, the choice of a microphone is of the utmost importance. I began recording the album with a very low quality Rockville microphone that I won in a contest and immediately recognized that in order to achieve the quality of sound I was after, I would need a better microphone. In December of 2018 I purchased the microphone that I currently use and that I used to record the whole album, the MXL V250 Large Diaphragm Condenser microphone.

The term “Large Diaphragm” refers to the capsule that surrounds the actual recording mechanism being larger than $\frac{3}{4}$ ”. Anything less than that is considered a medium or small diaphragm. The advantage to using a large diaphragm versus a small or medium diaphragm microphone is that the large diaphragms tend to have a “big” sound that can be manipulated in more ways than other types of microphones. Condenser microphones are designed for studio recording while dynamic microphones are for live performances.

The condenser microphone has the ability to pick up much more nuanced sound than dynamic microphones, thus making it much better for recording.

For a very long time leading up to my recording the album, I used earphones to listen to my recordings and mix and master them. This was of course not an effect way to do this because I missed out on different frequencies of sound that could not be heard through earphones. Also in December of 2018, I purchased a pair of Tascam TH-200X studio headphones and this is when my production quality increased greatly. With these headphones, I was able to cancel the room noise, to an extent, but more importantly I could now hear more areas of sound, specifically the lower frequencies, which I was not able to hear before. This helped tremendously in my mixing and mastering and was the second most important piece of equipment that I purchased.

The most important piece of equipment that I purchased was the Focusrite Scarlett Solo USB Audio Interface. The dramatic increase in the number of independent artists led to an increase in affordable, high quality music production tools and the culmination of all of these technologies, in my opinion, is the Scarlett Solo. It would have been impossible to produce any sort of quality sound on my album without the use of it. What the Solo does is takes analog sound and converts it into digital sound that can then be edited with sound editing software. So I was able to plug both my guitar and microphone into the Solo, record, and then edit it on my laptop with Garageband, which is the software I used to record the entire album. I was also able to plug my headphones directly into the Solo to listen to what I was recording as I was recording it. The functional importance of this piece of equipment cannot be stressed enough.

The songwriting process for this album varied from song to song. Most of the time, especially for the songs that included guitar as a centerpiece, I wrote the lyrics along with the music so that I did not feel that I had disjointed lyrics and sound. I would usually start with a chord progression and one or two lines that I had thought of and go from there. I often made the chorus first and then would go back and write an intro, verses, and a bridge if necessary to surround it. The only song on the album that was written prior to January 2019 was *Pool Side*, which I had written about a year prior to the album being released, but did not want to release it as a single. The rest of the songs were written and recorded from January to March of 2019, which is not a lot of time to do that.

The recording process was made relatively easy, from a functional standpoint, due to the Scarlett Solo. Every recorded sound went through the Solo and on to Garageband, so from that perspective it was a very simple process. There were a few sounds on the album that were not recorded via microphone or guitar though, like the synths on *The Mountains*, and all of the drums throughout. The actual step-by-step process of recording usually followed a pattern though.

First, I would start with a guitar riff or set of chords that I liked and record a rough version of them, known as a scratch track, so that I could start writing to it or think of more aspects of the soundscape that I should add. I would then block out the song to full length, making room for an intro, verses, choruses, a bridge if necessary, and an outro, so that I could get an idea for how long the song was going to be. Then, after writing lyrics, I would record a first rough take of the lead vocals so that I could get an idea for how I would have to manipulate both the vocals and the sound around it in order to get everything to blend the way I envisioned it, and to further hear what I might want to add

in the soundscape. I would then go back and add background vocals or any other kind of background nuanced sound that I had thought of after I recorded the main vocal, and then edit it to fit the sound of the particular song. Finally, I would re-record almost everything unless I had takes that I was happy with. I always re-recorded the main vocals, just to make sure I got the best possible take.

The most challenging, frustrating, but also rewarding part of this whole experience was mixing and mastering. In simple terms, mixing and mastering is the process of manipulating the sound until you get the desired “mix” of sounds (mixing), and listening to every song and making sure that they all have generally the same volume and tone so that no one song is noticeably louder or produced entirely differently than the rest of the album (mastering). It was a very long and strenuous process, but when I was able to produce the sounds that I had in my head, it was wildly fulfilling.

The mixing process began after I had all of the takes that I wanted to use for the final version of each recording. Because this was my first home recording, this process included experimenting with stereo effects, ceaselessly changing the levels of sound frequencies in all of the vocals and guitar parts, and adding and subtracting different plugins like reverb, multipliers, auto tune, vocal transformers, phasers, and a number of others.

When you have two identical tracks, you can “pan” one of the tracks so it comes out exclusively from the left headphone and the other exclusively the right. This creates what is called a stereo effect, meaning the sound comes from multiple directions and not just the “center” of the mix. I used this technique to pan all guitar tracks and other non-vocal sounds (except for guitar solos) to the far left and far right to create the effect of being

surrounded by the sound. This then created a gap in the center of the sound which is where the lead vocal and other solo parts would lie. This technique helped tremendously in creating a higher quality sound as stereo sound is found in essentially all professionally produced music.

In the article “Demystifying Mixers”, Thompson had a series of tips regarding mixing, and these tips were critically helpful in my production. For lead vocals I would cut the low end up to about 200 Hz, boost the frequencies from 900 Hz to 1500 Hz, and then cut the high end from 1500 Hz and up. This created a clear sound that cut through the mix well.

Garageband and many other digital audio workstations have an option to add plugins to your recordings. Plugins allows a producer to add specific effects to your recordings and have full control over those effects. Some plugins have utilitarian purposes, like a de-esser, which allows one to suppress specific frequencies on the high end that contain syllabance. These are sharp sounds in vocal recordings like “f”s and “t”s and “s”s which are distracting from the main sound of the vocal. The de-esser was used on every vocal recording on the album and it really helped clear the sound up.

Several other important plugins were used in producing this project. Reverb plugins added a short echo and space to the recording. Phasers helped control the volume of recordings while also rhythmically fluctuating the volume. Vocal transformers altered the vocal “formant” on vocal tracks causing the voice to sound deeper or more shrill depending on whether the formant was decreased or increased. These plugins were all included on Garageband.

Some additional plugins were downloaded from the internet. Acon Digital Multiply is a free download that allows one to alter recordings by making it sound like there are more than one of the recording by as many as ten different voices. It also can make the vocals a little brighter, which was the main function for this project. Another downloaded plugin I used was Melda Production MAutoPitch, and this plugin does just what it sounds like it does. I used it heavily on the lead vocal on the first song on the album, The Mountains, but also used it on many of the background vocals throughout the album just to have a different instrument-like sound in the soundscape. The third and final downloaded plugin that I used was iZotope Vinyl. This plugin was centered around making software instruments, specifically synths and keyboards, sound more rustic via sound effects like dust, mechanical wear, and electronic buzz. I used this plugin heavily on the synth in The Mountains in order to make the sound more pleasing to the ear.

Overall, the mixing and mastering process is what has made me the proudest of this album, and in my opinion why it has gotten the attention it has. Going into this project, the production process was the most daunting of all of the parts, but became one of the most rewarding. I now have much more confidence in my production skills.

Distribution

Compared to both production and writing, the distribution process was much less difficult, and that is due to the distributor that I went through. CD Baby is a digital music distributor that focuses on helping independent artists get their music in front of as many ears as possible. This is another product of that large pool of independent artists

referenced to in “A Creative Industry in Transition: The Rise of Digitally Driven Independent Music Production” by Brian Hrats and it was an absolutely vital part of this project.

CD Baby has a number of options for artists who want to release their music through them. There is the free option which puts the music only on the CD Baby online store, but I wanted to get my music onto Spotify and Apple Music so I did not go with this option. There was the Standard Worldwide Distribution package which included selling your music on the CD Baby online store, Global Music Distribution which meant getting your music on over thirty streaming services that CD Baby has partnerships with, and a number of free marketing tools. This is a great option, especially for the price which is only \$29 right now, but not the one I went with as it did not register the music with performing rights organizations or collect royalties from the music. Because of this I went with the Pro Publishing option which included everything included in the Standard option but included registering your music with performing rights organizations and collecting royalties.

There are also features on CD Baby that allow you to track the number of listens and streams on each digital streaming service like Spotify or Apple Music which have been very helpful in tracking the progress of the album. Overall CD Baby was a very helpful and easy to use resource that I would recommend to anyone who is planning on releasing music.

Results

The last and most exciting part of this thesis is the results section. Going into the release of the album, I did not have very high expectations for what was going to come of it. I released an EP on Soundcloud in the summer of 2017 and received attention from my friends and family and even some people who I didn't actually know. The most popular song from that project was Summertime, which now sits at 1,255 streams, and I was very pleased with this considering I did not go through a distributor. I did have a few people reach out to me saying that they liked they music, but nothing really came of it.

'50,000' is a completely different story. Within the first month of the album being released, I was reached out to by Chad Hillard of hillydill.com, an online music sharing community. He said he really liked the album and had shown it to some people and that they asked him to put them in contact with me. I was of course very cautious, but obliged, giving him my email. I was sitting in my music history class when I got an email from Chad and on it were cc'd two other individuals, Ben Persky and Mason Klein. Chad introduced me to them and within a few emails, we had scheduled a phone call for the next day. Ben and Mason were from a company called Mixed Management which I researched intensely between the time of the email and the phone call. Upon looking them up, I found they actually had signed one of my favorite artists who I had discovered in recent months, Dijon, and I was beyond excited and had also just entered into a joint venture with Warner Music.

The phone call came and I told them all about me and my music and they told me all about themselves and what it was that they did at Mixed Management. They said they liked my music and were interested in working together to release my music in the future,

and I was ecstatic. I immediately called my mom and dad and brother and best friends to let them know the exciting news. It wasn't like I had signed a multimillion dollar deal or anything, but to me it was the culmination of all of my hard work. My music had turned ears at a music label in Los Angeles and that was more than enough for me.

Since then, I have been reached to by representatives from Universal, Warner Music, Atlantic Records, Republic Records, Hard8 Working Group, and Artist Publishing Group, all saying they liked my music and wanted to talk about future prospects. This has been nowhere near what I expected and my head has honestly been spinning since the release of the album. In the time since the release, which has been just over a month, I have been having phone calls and sending music back and forth with Mixed Management and a number of individuals from different labels. Very recently, I had a phone call with Mixed Management and in it, they said they are ready to make a rough draft of a deal for me to look at. The proposed deal would be to release five songs with them and they would allocate \$10,000 to marketing and other expenses including video shoots and flying me out to Los Angeles to record.

Needless to say, this is the most exciting thing to come out of the release of this album, and I am looking forward to my future with Mixed Management. In regards to number of streams, across Spotify, Apple Music, Soundcloud combined, the album has about 9,000 streams, which I count as a large success. There have been no sales on the CD Baby online store so far, but that was expected as I did not push for people to do that, and that is just not the way people consume music anymore. All things considered, by all metrics this project was a great success.

Discussion

My main goal with this project was to find out if it was possible to create quality music with very minimal resources in a college setting, and I believe that I have proven that it is very possible. It is hard to determine how much of the success was due to the production quality and how much was due to the quality of my voice in general, the songwriting, or just down right luck. There are a lot of factors that could have had a great impact on why this project succeeded the way it did, but I have documented the process so that it can be replicated. In addition, it could be compared to other similar projects in order to find possible trends.

The amount of time and effort I put into '50,000' is by far the most I have put into any creative work in my life thus far and am very proud of the album itself and what has come of it to this point.

Looking forward, I will likely sign a record deal with Mixed Management to release five songs together and take my first real step into professional music. I have also been collaborating with Artist Publishing Group in regards to becoming a songwriter for them. I am currently working on the first couple of songs they have sent me. The future is very bright and I credit it to this project which I will always look back on fondly.

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