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Mark Mannara

Ju!ce

An Rnb/Hip-hop album that combines Hip-hop, Experimental and Jazz Music into one

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Mark Mannara

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Finding *Ju!ce*

My name is Mark Mannara and I'm fascinated by sound. The very concept of rearranging and manipulating it is my obsession. For this reason, in August of 2013, I enrolled as an Electronic Music major at Bard College. My thesis, or what we call a "senior project", will be in form of an Extended Play (a reduced version of an album) by the name of *Ju!ce*. What makes my musical style unique is its influence: a melodic mix of contemporary hip-hop, experimental electronic music and jazz.

Hip-hop came first in my life. Growing up in Italy, the main genre of music the radio played was provocative American Hip-Hop, which to this day isn't censored (because most Italians don't speak English). Italian radio led me to grow curious about the works of Eminem, 50 Cent, Outkast, amongst others. By age 6, I memorized all of Eminem's most twisted and profane lyrics. My mother was just happy that I was learning English whereas my dad wasn't really paying attention. It was hilarious, but also instrumental in my development as an artist: hip-hop taught me structure.

The repetitions, the loops, the samples; it all felt very mathematical. I started hearing music everywhere. I fondly recall the process leading to my first creation. At

age 15 I was attending New Hampton School in New Hampshire, and it was a cold winter day in biology class. As the teacher was lecturing, my mind began to wonder. Suddenly, I began hearing a melody in my mind and decided to follow it. I started bobbing my head to the rhythm. My classmates were looking at me as if I was insane; but I simply couldn't ignore it: it was invigorating. It felt like a calling, as if something wanted me to share what I heard. At one point the groove took over so I stood up, and ran out of the classroom. Both my teacher and classmates were confused, but I wasted no time. I pulled out my phone, pressed record and began humming the melody: this was something I didn't want to forget. I later put down the melody on software, made a song and posted it online for everyone to listen to. In a matter of 3 weeks everyone at my school was humming the same melody I first heard during in biology class. This experience was empowering in that I realized I could compose music from nothing using the structural knowledge that hip-hop had installed in my brain.

As I started college at Bard I was introduced to experimental electronic music. This genre is a very specific and avant-garde way of looking at sound that many fail to grasp when first hearing it. Unlike hip-hop, this genre had no restrictions or specific organization behind it. At first, I didn't accept or understand experimental electronic music: its simplicity and freedom of structure confused me. I didn't believe in conceptual art because of its banality in presentation. When my teacher first showed me "4'33'" by John Cage I became furious. The piece consisted of the performer opening and closing a piano a couple of times for 4 minutes and 33

seconds, without playing it! I refused to classify *that* as music. I thought I was wasting my time and throwing my education away.

But then I heard “Artikulation” by Gyorgy Ligeti. This piece is a random collection of sounds that the artist produced by following a painted script, where each scribble or symbol represents a sound. I was astounded by the originality of it all and started understanding that the people I was studying weren’t just conceptual artists, but were actually pioneers of modern sound. From this moment onwards, John Cage started making sense. He is considered a pillar of this genre because of his way of thinking about music. He lived in New York City and was known to be an introvert, but what he really loved doing was leaving the window open and listening to the sounds of New York. The traffic, the conversations, the incessant noise. It fascinated him because he considered all sounds to be music. A lot of the techniques these pioneers created are still used in today’s commercial music, and I’ve decided to adopt some of them also. For instance: in my composition “Guilty Escape” (which is going to be included in one of Thurman Barker’s new tracks), I recorded footsteps with added reverb, heavy breathing, whispering nonsense, sirens alternating with each other and sounds resembling R2D2 from Star Wars made using a synthesizer. This genre empowered me by allowing me to break the rules hip-hop bestowed upon me. It allowed my artistic weirdness to flourish.

It is my sincere belief that Jazz and hip-hop were meant to be combined; but few have done so effectively. The problem arises in that most don’t

understand or respect the complexity of the genre. By studying its history, one can learn to appreciate what makes jazz so unique: its spontaneity. Each performance is different and unique. What really makes it stand out to me is how fun it is to listen to, despite its serious connotations: it was used by the oppressed as a form of release. The individual who truly inspired me to dive deep into the history of jazz was my music professor, renowned musician Thurman Barker. Not only a masterful musician in his own right, Professor Barker also collaborated with Jazz legends Anthony Braxton, Sam Rivers and Marvin Gaye. After Professor Barker introduced me to the works of John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker, I grew fond of the sound of the saxophone. The instrument just seemed to speak to me and quickly became my gateway into the world of Jazz.

My first project involving Jazz was a rearrangement of “Moaning” by Charles Mingus. I began by taking the first 30 seconds of the saxophone to create the base line for what would become “Ain’t Gold”. Next, I needed to create a surface melody; which I did by taking other high-pitched saxophone sounds from “Moaning”. After that I had to add my style of hip-hop percussion, which consists of heavy 808’s and a dirty snare. The culmination of this work and varied influences led to a melodic dance between Mingus’s sax and my percussion; unleashing a true New York City vibe mixed with a Californian sound. *I had found my style.* I then tackled Ray Charles, the Platters and the Fisk Jubilee Singers. I finally decided to go completely original.

I called my friend and Bard saxophonist Paul Duhe and asked him to join me in the studio, asking him to improvise for a mere 2 minutes; promising him I'd take care of the rest. Those two minutes are what became *Mightiest Touch*, my proudest work to date.