

Andrew Sweet
Written Report - Culminating Experience
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Blocks: The Journey to Becoming An Artist

Description of the Culminating Experience

During this past year at Berklee College of Music Valencia, I have been working on my thesis project, also known as my Culminating Experience. As a producer and DJ, I wanted to tie both of these elements together within the project. Therefore, I chose to do a live performance, as well as compose, produce, and engineer an EP. The third component of my C.E. is a documentary, which highlights the creation process that went on throughout the year as I developed both of these projects.

The first component of my C.E. is a live performance that took place during this year's Spring EnVivo Concert here at Berklee Valencia. During the performance, two of my original productions came to life on the live stage: 'Love In Color', which was co-written with fellow Berklee student Nick Bernstein, and 'Juke Widdit', off of my previous EP 'Basic Instinct'. I worked with Xander Arnold on this project, and he choreographed a dance routine for the performance with two back-up dancers. There were several live players incorporated into the performance, including Electronic Drums, Trumpet, Violin, and Trombone. My professor Ian Kagey helped direct the players as we recorded the backing tracks in the AKSS studio here at Berklee Valencia. During the performance, I was playing a pre-produced sequence in Ableton, while live-mixing custom-made visuals in Resolume. We also had a segment of the performance

where we projected onto Xander. During this part of the performance an electronic scanner made him “come to life”, adding theatrics to the performance.

The second component of my C.E. is an EP, which is entitled ‘Blocks’. It contains four tracks, each with a very different vibe from the next. It is an electronic dance music album, but each track falls into a different category of dance music. Some sub-genres include house, juke, trap, and future house. The E.P. was produced using Ableton Live, Reason, and Pro Tools, as well as various external VST’s. I recorded custom samples for the album, including shakers, chimes, and vocal samples. Some collaborators on the album include producers Kickraux, Vices, and Chudan. The EP is heavily influenced by the styles of music that have influenced me throughout my musical journey.

The final component of my C.E. is a documentary. The documentary features footage entirely shot and produced by myself, aside from two clips which I needed assistance with, as I requested to be filmed. All audio heard throughout the documentary was produced and sound designed by myself. All post-production was done by myself using Adobe After Effects and Adobe Premiere. Some sound design elements were produced in Ableton Live. The interview and narration audio was edited in Pro Tools. The documentary provides insight into my journey throughout the year to becoming an artist. It also highlights some background information on my producer/DJ project, Micetro.

Innovative Aspects of the Work

Innovative components are existent throughout each piece of my CE project. A core purpose for this EP is to merge modern electronic sounds with a diverse range of genres that have impacted my musical journey. I have utilized modern electronic elements in unique ways; taking live instrumentation and recorded sound and manipulating them to create sounds never previously heard. In order to do this, I utilized samplers such as the NN-Xt and Dr. Rex in Reason, and also the Sampler in Ableton Live. I have used a variety of effect chains and external VST effects. I have also used the Ableton Push to create chord progressions and randomize MIDI input as well.

With the live performance, we made sure to incorporate as many innovative components as possible. First off, we composed live versions of two of my songs (Love In Color and Juke Widdit), both of which were solely electronic compositions previous to this performance. The live version included trumpet, violin, trombone, and electronic drums. I was using Resolume to live mix visuals in a unique way, using footage shot with the Cannon cameras here at Berklee. During the medley, I sound designed a “malfunction” in between the two songs, when the music cuts out and a green ray of light is projected onto Xander. The green ray of light then moves up and down his body, as if it were scanning him, along with appropriate sound effects. We wanted it to seem as if he is a robot coming to life. Xander utilized his Mya arm band to manipulate my visuals in Resolume in real-time using his kinetic motion. I was also scratching a record during the performance.

New Skills Acquired

I have acquired many new skills throughout the development of my culminating experience project. As I produced, composed, and engineered my EP, I progressed at things such as mixing, mastering, songwriting, and engineering. I also became much more comfortable with VST's such as Massive and Omnisphere. I learned how to mic instruments, and also use outboard gear. The rate at which I am able to fully produce a song has increased as well. This is a result of improvements to my overall work flow. My aptitude for sound design has also increased.

With my live performance, I have also acquired many new skills. Firstly, I have learned how to schedule rehearsals with a large group of performers. This is important, especially when it comes to things such as working with a team, time management, and organization. I also learned how to use the live-visual program Resolume, which is one of the best visual mixing programs on the market. I learned what it takes to turn an electronic production into a live piece, from tracking backing tracks in the studio to applying it to an actual performance. I learned how to create custom visuals for a live-performance landscape. My scratch technique and showmanship also improved as a result of this performance.

Lastly, the documentary has improved many of my skills pertaining to video and film. I can now fully produce high-quality video productions, anything from music videos to documentaries. I've learned filming techniques and practiced them. Also, my post-production skills have greatly improved. I can use Adobe Premiere and Adobe After Effects to their fullest extent. I've also gained experience in sound design for film, as well as setting up and operating a boom mic during an interview process. My script writing capabilities have improved as well.

Challenges

There have been many challenges along the way. First, I struggled greatly halfway through the year, attempting to figure out what my actual C.E. was going to be. Although an EP and a live performance was my initial plan, I was struggling during the middle of the year. I was trying to think of something completely out-of-the-box, and essentially unrelated to what my natural skill set is. One of the ideas was to create a midi-hat controller. Although I did create a prototype, I am very happy that I came back to my original idea of doing an EP and a performance. I have also lost a laptop and a hard drive during this process. While I am not using this as an excuse, only implying that it was a challenge, I learned from this experience and now possess four back up hard drives. Also, creating the video was a unique challenge in itself. With the program Adobe Premiere CC crashing many times, I had to restart my video from scratch over three times during the past 48 hours. Looking back now, it allowed me to improve my workflow within Adobe Premiere.

Future Plans

For my EP, I plan on releasing it on a record label. At the moment, it is looking like it will be released on an independent record label named Heroic Recordings. It will be a free release. I am still revising some of the tracks, as well as the album art. Performance wise, I plan on continuing to improve my live performance and find a new batch of live-instrumentalists to perform with when I return to Boston. I would eventually like to take the act on tour. Finally, with the documentary, I plan on making some slight revisions and then adding it to my portfolio. With that addition, potential employers and collaborators will be able to see the work I have put in throughout my year at Berklee Valencia.

Conclusion

It's been an amazing year, one that I am very comfortable calling the best of my life. I have learned countless lessons and acquired more knowledge than I could have ever dreamed of. My Culminating Experience is the perfect way to apply all that I have taken away from this year at Berklee Valencia. It has allowed me to put all of the things I have learned to use, and in a way that benefits me both as an artist and as a person. I will take these things that I have learned throughout the creation of these projects, and carry them with me as I re-enter the "real world".