

Homebound : *Producing Music During a Pandemic*

An Honors Thesis (MMP 492)

by

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Abstract

Commercial Music Design is a new course within the Music Media Production degree path, jointly taught by Dr. Christoph Thompson, area coordinator of the Music Media Production program at Ball State University, and Prof. Michael Rafter, assistant professor of Music Theatre. The curriculum is designed to expose students to the multiple facets of music production, combining elements of songwriting, composition, beat production, and recording within a fast-paced learning environment. Two projects within this curriculum called for full production from songwriting, to mastering, with requirements for inclusion of acoustic elements in the recording. The two songs from these projects are the central focus of this thesis. Following a brief overview of the concepts and themes explored in the creation of the songs, I provide a comprehensive walkthrough of the production process from start to finish in three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production.

Key words: MUSIC, RECORDING, PRODUCTION

Acknowledgements

My utmost gratitude is extended to the musicians, engineers, and professors who helped bring this music off the page. Collaborating with such elevated levels of artistry and savvy was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I'm fortunate to have taken part in the process.

Process Analysis Statement

Concepts and Themes

Commercial Music Design

As part of the curriculum of the Commercial Music Design course within the Music Media Production program, students were tasked with producing two songs with significant acoustic elements from the ground up. The course was jointly instructed by seasoned recording engineer Dr. Christoph Thompson, and award-winning musical director, Prof. Michael Rafter. Combining two different areas of expertise, Dr. Thompson explored technical aspects of the production process such as beatmaking and recording, while Prof. Rafter explored concepts related to composition and songwriting. Through their concurrent lectures, students were able to observe the comprehensive process of making a commercially viable record, and experiment with wearing multiple hats of different music industry roles that would otherwise have dedicated personnel in a professional setting.

In providing students comprehensive experience surveying two seemingly different schools of music production, the course format elicited exploration into ways beat production and conventional acoustic composition/recording come together. In taking ownership of the production process from start to finish, I discovered valuable methods that combine classical training skills with modern production savvy. For the two songs, I fulfilled the roles of producer, engineer, and studio musician. While the scope of the work proved daunting at times, wearing multiple hats, and actively executing the chain of events that lead to a finished record. In this

document, I provide an outlook of the multifaceted, cocurricular process of producing these two songs which will lay the groundwork for my debut EP, *Homebound*.

Ideating the Music

Considering the socioeconomic climate brought about by the COVID-19 outbreak, there were a wealth of concepts and themes available to draw inspiration from when writing these songs. In my personal experience, one considerable time sink during lockdown was the allure of independent online education. As more user attention shifted to online platforms during social distancing mandates, an increasing number of entrepreneurs, especially those in the media field, shifted their outreach strategy to cater to an audience with newfound time on their hands, as work weeks shifted to remote formats. After indulging content consumption, and going through two cycles of independent online courses, I felt a jaded sense of pessimism towards the modern music industry and self-titled music production gurus. The lyrics of “Breaking Bread” were born as a means of coping with these emotions - wrestling with the internal hunger to constantly produce and show progress as a young adult, as portrayed by other producers on social media, and finding security in one's inherent ability to learn, while resting in gratitude for everything I have already experienced.

“Some Days,” was conceptualized as a blend between two disparately occurring perspectives on time. On one hand, the performer expresses amazement at how quickly summer days pass by, as they’re spent blissfully with a cherished companion/lover. This outlook, however, is juxtaposed against the COVID-19 lockdown in spring/summer of 2020, during which companionship and outdoor activity were put on hiatus - the common thread

between the two separate experiences being, an uncanny blindness to the passage of time. In writing this song, the romantic notion of lost time during past summers reminded me of how quickly days would pass during the pandemic, as daily “homebound” routines would sometimes blur days and weeks together. Other themes within the music include fear of growing older,

Some days, I’m afraid, are burning into older age... (mm. 49-50)

In addition to hope for the future,

Just wait ‘till the sun comes out again. Some days get remade. (mm. 51-54)

One key strategy employed during this stage of production was indiscriminately writing down phrases, words, or ideas that vaguely related to the mood and headspace I was envisioning for each song. In retrospect, the songwriting portion of these projects yielded the most personal growth, as I was able to freely write ideas, almost in a stream-of-consciousness fashion, while mindfully avoiding internal subjective judgements, which have often hindered my creative output in the past. Corrective scrutiny, while necessary in fleshing out musical elements, would be better suited for the latter “production” stages down the road. Capturing authentic feelings to serve as the fertile ground for song lyrics, however, required a meditative, unfettered exploration of mood and emotion.

Pre-Production

Collaborations with professional musicians and producers require high-caliber pre-production to ensure everyone is on the same page when it comes time to hit record in the studio. In most cases, this involves sending instrumentalists half-way produced versions (or

“demos”) of the tunes, in addition to a simplified roadmap of the music in the form of a “lead sheet,” which will be discussed later. In the demo production stage of this project, I utilized Logic Pro X, a digital audio workstation proprietary to Apple products. Logic Pro is often the preferred choice of DAW for beatmakers and producers looking to quickly capture musical ideas, due to its intuitive recording workflow and comprehensive native library of instruments, samples, and loops. Using Logic, I was able to write both songs within a week’s time, producing with a MIDI controlled electric piano, and artificial drummers included in Logic’s instrument selection. Once these demos were fleshed out into a conceivable structure, they were sent to the appropriate musicians to provide a) a reference of style and b) rehearsal material to practice with.

Stylistic Considerations

These tunes were written to be performed by various musicians and vocalists within the Ball State Studio Band. This is what prompted the stylistic settings of the two tunes, as the musical preferences and sensibilities of the Studio Band’s core members were rooted in black music. Our bassist, Trey Campell, finds his musicality in jazz harmony and Thundercat-inspired bass riffs. Deron Jackson, our drummer, draws inspiration from the rhythmic school of hip-hop music. I myself grew up to the music of Prince and Stevie Wonder, and would spend my days in piano instruction procrastinating classical repertoire, and instead transcribing the R&B/soul inspired works of Bruno Mars. Given these predispositions, it is no surprise that elements of jazz, funk, and R&B are apparent in “Breaking Bread,” and more so in “Some Days.”

In the following excerpt from the second pre-chorus of “Breaking Bread,” the F-sharp half-diminished seventh chord is used as a point of dissonance to delay the payoff of the chorus harmony. This use of seventh chords and other extended harmonies throughout this arrangement are central to the mood of this tune and draw from jazz and soul conventions.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff contains a melody with lyrics: "Hu-*stle* boy, bring home the bread, Work 'til the". A "cresc." marking is placed under the first measure. The bottom staff shows a bass line with a few notes. Above the first measure of the top staff is the chord "F# halfdim 7", and above the second measure is "B7".

Example 1: Adam Fonacier “Breaking Bread,” mm 53-54

The arrangement “Some Days” could be compared to a Steely Dan tune, featuring an electric piano sound akin to the keyboard styles of The Funk Brothers, a staple group of musicians that played pivotal roles in the Motown records of the 60’s (Pearse 2014). This tune also makes use of syncopated harmonic rhythm, a prevalent technique utilized in jazz performance and hip-hop production alike. An apparent example of this can be found in the outro of “Some Days,” as shown in the example below. Here, the harmonic rhythm follows the vocal line, which “anticipates” the downbeat by ending phrases on the final sixteenth-note subdivision preceding the down beat of the next measure.

Outro

52 $C\#m7$ $F\#m9$ $B9$ $G\#m7$
sun comes out a - gain... Wa-king up... Nest to you...

55 $C\#m7$ $F\#m7$ $B9$
I'm fee - ling young a - gain. So-me days..

Example 2: Adam Fonacier “Some Days,” mm 52-57

The resulting feel is subjective, but I associate this groove with a light, yet energetic and driving vibe. The technique is contextualized when referring to Justin A. Williams’ article, “The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music,” as he discusses the emergence of Jazz Rap alongside other hip-hop subgenres in the 90’s (Williams 2010, 445). In his discussion, Williams cites musical examples from rap groups such as A Tribe Called Quest and Digable Planets, including this excerpt from the song “It’s Good to Be Here” (1993) performed by the latter collective.

Example 3: Digable Planets “It’s Good to Be Here,” 3:35 (Williams 2010, 449)

In this brief B section towards the end of the track, the music evokes the feeling of a jazz club, featuring a swung keyboard riff paired with ambient audience snaps. As seen in the keyboard part, the E anticipates the downbeat of the next measure together with the ride cymbal.

Though not specifically mentioned within the article’s discussion, I would postulate that this rhythmic motive would fall within the “jazz codes” that Williams analyzes within jazz rap as any references or imagery that evoke the sound or feeling of jazz (Williams 2010, 437).

Incorporation or interpretation of conventions from black music, however common the practice has become in popular music, should be rooted in a) an active awareness of the sociocultural context from which these styles emerged, and b) informed reasoning for its use. In a piece I read as part of class discussing race, Pulitzer Prize winning critic and writer Wesley Morris wrote, “For centuries, black music, forged in bondage, has been the sound of complete artistic freedom. No wonder everybody is always stealing it,” (Morris 2019). This quote, was provided as the summative answer to the article’s title “Why Is Everyone Always Stealing Black

Music?” in which Morris contextualizes the development of black music in America from antebellum minstrelsy to modern day pop.

Based on Morris’ analysis of black music’s suffusion into popular media, a historical cycle of white appropriation of black culture, and black culture’s response to this appropriation, it is my goal to acknowledge these nuanced phenomena when I elect to incorporate elements of hip-hop, soul, and R&B into my own music (Morris 2019). Though lines of genre blur by the day, and sources of musical insight become more unclear - as necessary as it is to cite sources within a research paper - I find it equally important to acknowledge the rich musical traditions built through the trauma and resilience of black folks in America. I agree with Morris’ comprehensive analysis of black artistry in music – a sound of freedom. It is for this reason that I borrow from its conventions, especially within the context of *Homebound*, as during the time of its conception, the typical human experience was locked down in isolation during quarantine. Black music is catalytic, if not foundational to most American styles and genres. Musicians, songwriters, and producers that fail to realize this risk immense folly in their artistic integrity.

Lead Sheets

When writing in rhythmic cues, or any other significant structural elements in a tune, communicating these ideas to session musicians becomes crucial. Lead sheet composition is an often overlooked, yet vital component of a cohesive session in a typical studio band workflow. When multiple musical minds come together to record, printing out a lead sheet for each musician and for the producer works wonders in keeping everyone on the same page. From a musician’s perspective, having a physical copy of music to make notes on and reference

throughout a performance can make the difference between multiple missed musical cues, and a comprehensive, compelling recording. In the course framework, before entering the studio, a lead sheet submission was required before moving on to the recording stages of projects.

As defined by Grove Music Online, the main components of a traditional lead sheet are a melodic line, a harmonic roadmap, and lyrics, if applicable (Witmer 2003). Such notation is appropriate for the contemporary style of performance at hand. With the information provided by lead sheets, musicians have the flexibility to incorporate improvisatory elements during recording sessions, while staying rhythmically concise, harmonically cohesive and supporting the melody. Excerpts of the referenced lead sheets from the two songs can be found in the Appendix. While functioning as a roadmap for the composition, material engraved onto lead sheets is subject to change on the day of recording, as was the case with “Some Days,” which will be discussed later.

Session Prep

Typically scheduled within a week, or as late as the morning of a recording session, session prep is crucial to ensuring. When preparing for overdub sessions, which took place separately from the Studio Band recordings, I made it a point to prepare the Pro Tools session files with the intent of minimizing time spent in the studio, which can get expensive with hourly studio rates outside of academia. This involved...

- A) mapping out the tempo of the tune to a click track
- B) making markers at key structural points in the music, to ensure quick session navigation for punch-ins, comps, etc.

C) editing and routing existing tracks for optimal monitoring

For “Breaking Bread,” session prep consisted of the above steps, in addition to gain staging the electronic instruments for the live drummer to monitor, and routing effects busses for vocalists to monitor during vocal recording. The session file for “Some Days” was prepared by Dr. Thompson in this case, but while prepping the tracked material for overdubs, I made sure to have markers in place ahead of the session, as I knew that the vocalist would prefer recording phrase by phrase.

Setup

Studio time for all the recording sessions in this project was reserved two to four hours in advance of any musician’s call time. This way, the lead engineer and their assistants have time built in beforehand to make a track list, set up microphones, run mic cables, route signal in the studio patch bay, check lines, and test monitoring systems. This process was followed jointly by Dr. Thompson and myself for the Studio Band sessions, and by myself during drum and vocal overdubs. Doing so ensured the best use of everyone’s time when musicians were ready to play, as producing a compelling performance is enough work without having to troubleshoot problems that could have been checked earlier in the process.

Production

Social distancing protocol within the Ball State MMP studios did affect the typical flow of recording sessions for these projects. Vocalists were required to distance within separate isolation booths, away from the Studio Band rhythm section, who were required to wear masks as they played. This format was not too far separated from conventional setup in the studio,

however it did prevent vocalists/wind players from being in the same room as the rhythm section, even for scratch recordings. Production for “Breaking Bread” was done mostly “in the box,” or on one’s computer, as the bass and piano recordings were both programmed MIDI instruments. Drums were rerecorded live, as using live drummers often yields more lively, dynamic results that give the music a more human feel. Shortly before recording, it was helpful to go through the tune’s lead sheet with Andrew Weinert, my drummer for the evening, as we made sure we were on the same page in regard to which grooves correlated with which sections.

Production and tracking for “Some Days” was jointly led by Dr. Thompson and Prof. Rafter, as I served as the keyboardist for the session. Although my input was considered, Prof. Rafter was the primary driver of the session, with Dr. Thompson operating Pro Tools. This session’s roster made for a fast-paced, high-energy environment, especially as liberties were taken outside of the scope of the lead sheet. For example, on one of the latter takes of the tune, I elected to lay into the first down beat with a piano roll, which helped propel the music into Miles’ quick entrance. Dr. Thompson, at one point, advised our bassist, Trey, to incorporate a slap bass figure to fill in space between phrases in the chorus. To my pleasant surprise, we were also able to throw in a tambourine part. These small adjustments, though unplanned and not called for in the original music, became essential to the tune’s vibe, and yielded valuable lessons in taking full advantage of spare studio time while you have musicians and engineers in the room.

Vocal Overdubs

Both songs, following instrumental completion required a separate vocal overdub session after tracking was complete. Although there is something to be said for the energy of recording vocals live with the band, I elected to record vocals separate from the Studio Band recording dates. In doing so, I allowed myself more critical bandwidth to pay close attention to vocal production. During the “Breaking Bread” overdub session, I was able to coach my vocalists, Savannah Rang and Arterus Young, making sure their intonation and harmonies were cohesive with the rhythm section elements underneath. As fortune would have it, Savannah and Arterus’ voices complimented each other well, as Art’s warm tenor tone blended nicely with Savannah’s soprano-alto range. For “Some Days,” I applied a vocal recording concept introduced in one of the latter Commercial Music Design lectures: the mic shoot out. The Music Media Production department has a wide assortment of microphones available for students to use, each varying in design and function, and it would have been a missed opportunity to not experiment and select the best mic for the music.

Miles Jena, a dear friend and lead singer for Cincinatti band, The Wonderlands, served as the vocalist for the “Some Days” overdubs. Miles’ skillful baritone chops, usually applied to an indie rock context, were slightly dialed back for this session, as I was looking for an *In Between Dreams* Jack Johnson inflection for the tune. Such a specific stylistic prescription called for a precise mic selection. For our shootout, we placed four microphones in close proximity to one another in a mid-size isolation booth. The four mics at hand were a) the Rode NTR, b) Blue Dragonfly, c) Blue Blueberry, and d) iFet7, (a U47 clone by Bock Audio). As microphone selection is one variable that can “color” sound, the preamp which the microphone routes to

also produces varied results. Therefore, all mics were routed to identical, transparent preamps within the same unit. Otherwise, I would have risked mistaking nonlinear coloration applied by a vintage tube preamp for a microphone's frequency response.

Bock Audio's iFet7 proved to be the best choice for Miles' voice, as its subtle high-mid frequency boost was preferred over the Blue models' sharp high frequency accentuation (more suited for modern pop), and the dark, unflattering natural response of the NTR ribbon mic (Bock Audio). For the sake of versatility, in addition to the melody of "Some Days," we recorded doubles in addition to added harmonies. The result was a well-supported vocal sound that sat on top of the rhythm section.

Post-Production

Mix Prep

Arguably the most arduous stage in a song's curation, dedicating time for the "grunt work" of mixing helps conserve creative energy and decreases the likelihood of having to backtrack to fix issues later. The mix prep process varies depending on the engineer/producer. For my projects, I tend to group editing, time alignment, comping, vocal tuning, and gain staging within the mix prep process. For "Breaking Bread," most of my mix prep was dedicated to vocal tuning, as the instrumental elements were locked onto the grid. Prepping "Some Days" was a slightly more involved process. Though Trey's bass and Deron's drums were tight and cohesive, I had to make some time adjustments to my own timing as the keyboardist, to match the groove of the drums and bass. Considerable time was also allocated for comping and tuning Miles' vocals, to ensure clean intonation and optimal dynamic control down the line.

Gain staging is a more enjoyable part of the mix prep process, as it involves balancing the musical elements to optimal levels for processing, and for loudness levels. For both tunes, this is a point where I checked tonal balance, monitoring in mono as opposed to stereo. This combines the Left and Right channels of the stereo field, and highlights balance/phase issues that otherwise would not be apparent in normal stereo. Modifying clip gain, as opposed to automating fader levels at this stage, is advantageous for a) sending more even signal through dynamics processing (which yields more transparent compression) and b) allowing for more precise fader movements close to “unity gain” later in the mix, rather than using the fader as a gain knob to reducing the track’s loudness, while having to mix at a level where one increment is equivalent to 5 dB instead of 1 dB.

Mixing

As technically involved as mixing is, it is the most enjoyable part of the process. In my timeline, this is the stage when equalization, dynamics, multiband/parallel processing, saturation, and effects are applied. For me, it's one of the more creative stages in the process, as decisions can be corrective enhancements or musical production. Both are rewarding in my mind, and the line between the two is often blurred. Mixing for “Breaking Bread” began after drums were tracked and was completed after vocals were recorded. I follow a conventional mixing order, prioritizing drums, bass, and vocals, and working the rest of the instruments around that framework.

Mixing a group of experienced musicians is a treat for any engineer, as the musicianship of the performers makes the process almost entertaining. This was the case for “Some Days.”

At one point, I had to stop enjoying the edited tracks on loop and start devising ways to make it better. My favorite element to mix within any genre is usually the drums, and this tune was no exception. Dialing in Deron's grooves, Trey's bass prowess, along with silky electric piano was one of my favorite workdays towards the end of the semester. Outside of subtle subtractive EQ, light dynamics control, and trippy effects automation, I let the performances of Miles, myself, and the rest of the Studio Band speak for themselves.

Both tunes were mixed to a ballpark loudness target of -23 to -20 LUfs to allow substantial headroom for loudness/dynamic enhancements in mastering.

Mastering

As one of the most specialized, precise fields in audio engineering, it would be a mistake to claim any mastering expertise outside of the education afforded to me through the MMP degree. For someone with my level of knowledge/skill related to mastering, iZotope Ozone is a great tool. An all-in-one mastering plugin, Ozone makes a seemingly foreign, mysterious process more accessible. At this stage, I know more of what not to do rather than what to do. Mistakes I have made in the past include a) indulgent use of an exciter, b) over-compressing the life out of the mix, and c) relying too heavily on the limiter at the end of the chain. By staying wary of these past mistakes, and adhering to the original sound of the mix, I brought the mixes up to standard streaming levels, with slight EQ adjustments, light bus compression, and transparent limiting.

Final Recordings

Links to the final recordings mentioned in this project can be found below.

[Breaking Bread](https://ballstate.box.com/s/yqcg6k40fpov1rqoz9ycnsrwc3o2of2y) - <https://ballstate.box.com/s/yqcg6k40fpov1rqoz9ycnsrwc3o2of2y>

[Some Days](https://ballstate.box.com/s/w7a99c9uz8d79t3yw7egt7bi5vwqv38y) - <https://ballstate.box.com/s/w7a99c9uz8d79t3yw7egt7bi5vwqv38y>

Appendix

Appendix 1

Breaking Bread

Intro **Versel**

♩ = 40

Em7 Bm7 CM7 B7 Am7 CM7

Vo. *p* Tell me whats it worth? The price of your

Electric Bass

Em7 Bm7 Am7 CM7 Dm7

Vo. pride, tru - ly? What would be fair trade, for pass-ion of life's true beau -

EI. B.

Bm7

Vo. ty? Com -

EI. B.

PreChorus

F G F E7

mf mo-di-ty an od-di-ty Ce - le - bri - ty, please let me be

EI. B.

Some Days

Adam Fonacier

C $\text{♩} = 96$
Cm **B♭** **Gm** **Fm7** **Gm/C**

Some days I'm a mazed how the days go by, All the co-lors shine in the sum-mer time,

4 **Cm** **B♭** **AbM7** **Gm** **Fm7**

My my star-ry eyes, Oh you look so fine, Take you

6 **Gm/C** **I** **Fm9** **Cm/Ab** **B♭** **Fm/B♭**

out for the night, don't spend a di - ime

10 **V1** **B♭m9** **E♭9** **Ab2** **Fm7**

Blood red haze, Ba - na-na sun-daes, All the things to do... when

14 **G♭M7** **E♭9**

I'm with you Win-ter fades in-to sy-ca-more shade Can we sit down a few? 'fyer

18 **PC** **E♭m/Ab** **B♭m** **Bm7** **B♭m/E♭**

in the mood'cause I can't stop my-self from lo - ving you 'till the sun comes out

23 **E♭m/Ab** **B♭m** **Bm7** **B♭m/E♭**

Time and stuff, for - get To be here now as the flo - wers bloom

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